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MIDDLE ENGLISH LITERATURE

English literature of the medieval period - c.1100 to c.1500.

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Background

The Norman conquest of England in 1066 traditionally signifies the beginning of 200 years of the domination of French in English letters. French cultural dominance, moreover, was general in Europe at this time. French language and culture replaced English in polite court society and had lasting effects on English culture. But the native tradition survived, although little 13th-century, and even less 12th-century, vernacular literature is extant, since most of it was transmitted orally. Anglo-Saxon fragmented into several dialects and gradually evolved into Middle English, which, despite an admixture of French, is unquestionably English. By the mid-14th cent., Middle English had become the literary as well as the spoken language of England.

The Early Period

Several poems in early Middle English are extant. *The Orrmulum* - a 12th-century work of Biblical exegesis, written in early Middle English verse by a monk named Orm. It's a verse translation of parts of the Gospels which is of linguistic and prosodic rather than literary interest. Of approximately the same date, *The Owl and the Nightingale* is the first example in English of the *débat,* a popular continental form; in the poem, the owl, strictly monastic and didactic, and the nightingale, a free and amorous secular spirit, charmingly debate the virtues of their respective ways of life.

The Thirteenth Century

Middle English prose of the 13th cent. continued in the tradition of Anglo-Saxon prose—homiletic, didactic, and directed toward ordinary people rather than polite society. The "Katherine Group" (c.1200), comprising three saints' lives, is typical. The Ancren Riwle (c.1200) is a manual for prospective anchoresses; it was very popular, and it greatly influenced the prose of the 13th and 14th cent. The fact that there was no French prose tradition was very important to the preservation of the English prose tradition.

In the 13th cent. **the romance**, an important continental narrative verse form, was introduced in England. It drew from three rich sources of character and adventure: the legends of Charlemagne, the legends of ancient Greece and Rome, and the British legends of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. **Layamon's Brut**, a late 13th-century metrical romance marks the first appearance of Arthurian matter in English.

Layamon's Brut, also known as the ***Chronicle of Britain*** and often called simply ***Brut***, is a Middle English poem compiled and recast by the English priest Layamon. It is named for Britain's mythical founder, Brutus of Troy. The *Brut* is 16,095 lines long and narrates the history of Britain. The rhyming style is the alliterative verse line style commonly used in Middle English poetry. Layamon's Brut (c. 1215) is a history of England in verse written in a form of Middle English and it remains one of the best extant examples of early Middle English.

Original English romances include ***King Horn*** (one of the earliest Middle English romances which was written in a South Midlands dialect somewhere around 1225 by an unknown poet and which is based on the Anglo-Norman story) and **Havelok the Dane** (a Middle English romance story). Both 13th-century works retain elements of the Anglo-Saxon heroic tradition.

However, French romances were far more influential than their English counterparts. In England French romances popularized ideas of adventure and heroism quite contrary to those of Anglo-Saxon heroic literature and were representative of wholly different values and tastes. Ideals of courtly love, together with its elaborate manners and rituals, replaced those of the heroic code; adventure and feats of courage were pursued for the sake of the knight's lady rather than for the sake of the hero's honor or the glory of his tribal king.

Continental verse forms based on metrics and rhyme replaced the Anglo-Saxon alliterative line in Middle English poetry. Many French literary forms also became popular, such as a moral tale, the animal fable, and the dream vision. The continental allegorical tradition, which derived from classical literature, is exemplified by the Roman de la Rose, which had a strong impact on English literature.

Medieval works of literature often center on the inevitability, sadness, change, loss, and death; and the vanity of human grandeur. A number of 13th-century secular and religious Middle English **lyrics** are extant, but like Middle English literature in general, the lyric reached its fullest flower during the second half of the 14th cent. Lyrics continued popular in the 15th cent., from which time the **ballad** also dates.

The Fourteenth Century

The poetry of the alliterative revival includes some of the best poetry in Middle English. The Christian allegory ***The Pearl*** is a poem of great intricacy and sensibility that is meaningful on several symbolic levels. ***Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,*** by the same anonymous author, is also of high literary sophistication, and its intelligence, vividness, and symbolic interest render it possibly the finest Arthurian poem in English. Other important alliterative poems are the moral allegory ***Piers Plowman***, attributed to William Langland, and the alliterative ***Morte Arthur***, which, like nearly all English poetry until the mid-14th cent., was anonymous.

Pearl

It is a Middle English alliterative poem written in the late 14th century. Its unknown author, designated the "Pearl poet" or "Gawain poet", is generally assumed to be the author of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Patience*, and *Cleanness* and may have composed *St. Erkenwald.*

The poem may be divided into three parts: an introduction, a dialog between the two main characters in which the Pearl instructs the narrator, and a description of the New Jerusalem with the narrator's awakening. The narrator, upset at the loss of his Pearl, falls asleep and begins to dream. In his dream he is transported to a garden. Wandering by the side of a beautiful stream, he becomes convinced paradise is on the other shore. He sees a young maid whom he identifies as his Pearl.

When he asks whether she is the pearl he has lost, she tells him he has lost nothing, that his pearl is merely a rose which has naturally withered. He wants to cross to her side, but she says it is not so easy, that he must resign himself to the will and mercy of God. He objects to the idea that God rewards every man equally, regardless of his apparent due. She responds that God gives the same gift of Christ's redemption to all. She instructs him on several aspects of sin, repentance, grace and salvation. She describes the earthly and the heavenly Jerusalem. She advises him to forsake all and buy this pearl. He asks about the heavenly Jerusalem; she tells him it is the city of God. He asks to go there; she says that God forbids that, but he may see it by a special dispensation. They walk upstream, and he sees the city across the stream, which is described in a paraphrase of the Apocalypse. He also

sees a procession of the blessed. Plunging into the river in his desperation to cross, he awakes from the dream back and resolves to fulfill the will of God.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (c. 1375 - 1400)

Sir Gawain was one of the most popular heroes of Arthurian legend; nephew of King Arthur, a knight of King Arthur's Round Table. He was regarded, particularly in the early romances, as the model of chivalry—pure, brave, and courteous. In later romances, when spiritual purity was valued more than chivalrous deeds, his character deteriorated, becoming treacherous and brutal. Gawain is most famous as the hero of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.

In the tale, Sir Gawain accepts a challenge from a mysterious warrior who is completely green, from his clothes and hair to his beard and skin. The "Green Knight" offers to allow anyone to strike him with his axe if the challenger will take a return blow in a year and a day. Gawain accepts, and beheads him in one blow, only to have the Green Knight stand up, pick up his head, and remind Gawain to meet him at the appointed time. The story of Gawain's struggle to meet the appointment and his adventures along the way demonstrate the spirit of chivalry and loyalty. He sets out to find the Green Knight, and undergoes many trials to his ideals and virtue, as compared with Beowulf who has to fight Grendel and his dam to save his people.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is a Medieval English romance in the Arthurian tradition. The text is thought to have been composed in the mid-to late fourteenth century. The anonymous author is today called alternately "The Pearl Poet," after the poem *Pearl* in the same manuscript, or "The Gawain Poet."

***Gawain* is a verse romance.**

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is written in a North or West Midlands dialect. *Gawain* was first published in 1839, and numerous translations and retellings have appeared since.

WILLIAM LANGLAND (c. 1330 - 1387)

Langland, William, c.1332-c.1400, putative author of *Piers Plowman.* He was born probably at Ledbury near the Welsh marshes and may have gone to school at Great Malvern Priory. Although he took minor orders he never became a priest. Later in London he apparently eked out his living by singing masses and copying documents. His great work, *Piers Plowman,* or, more precisely, *The Vision of William concerning Piers the Plowman,* is an allegorical poem in unrhymed alliterative verse, regarded as the greatest Middle English poem prior to Chaucer.

Piers Plowman

It is the title of a Middle English allegorical narrative poem by William Langland. *Piers* is considered by many critics to be one of the early great works of English literature along with Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight during the Middle Ages. The poem—part theological allegory, part social satire—concerns the narrator's intense quest for the true Christian life, which is told from the point of view of the medieval Catholic mind. This quest entails a series of dream-visions and an examination into the lives of three allegorical characters, Dowel (*"Do-Well"*), Dobet (*"Do-Better"*), and Dobest (*"Do-Best"*).

The poem begins in the Malvern Hills in Malvern, Worcestershire. A man named Will falls asleep and has a vision of a tower set upon a hill and a fortress in a deep valley; between these symbols of heaven and hell is a "fair field full of folk", representing the world of mankind. In fact, he has different visions, which he describes, and in which he exposes the corruptions of society, the dissoluteness of the clergy, and the allurements to sin, with considerable bitterness. In the early part of the poem Piers, the humble plowman of the title, appears and offers himself as the narrator's guide to Truth. The latter part of the work, however, is concerned with the narrator's search for Dowel, Dobet and Dobest. It is both a social satire and a vision of the simple Christian life. The poem consists of three dream visions: (1) in which Holy Church and Lady Meed (representing the temptation of riches) woo the dreamer; (2) in which Piers leads a crowd of penitents in search of St. Truth; and (3) the vision of Do-well (the practice of the virtues), Do-bet (in which Piers becomes the Good Samaritan practicing charity), and Do-best (in which the simple plowman is identified with Jesus himself).

The works of **Geoffrey Chaucer** mark the brilliant culmination of Middle English literature. Chaucer's ***The Canterbury Tales*** are stories told each other by pilgrims—who comprise a very colourful cross section of 14th-century English society—on their way to the shrine at Canterbury. The tales are cast into many different verse forms and genres and collectively explore virtually every significant medieval theme. Chaucer's wise and humane work also illuminates the full scope of medieval thought. Overshadowed by Chaucer but of some note are the works of **John Gower.**

Geoffrey Chaucer (c. 1343 - 1400)

Geoffrey Chaucer (c. 1343 - 1400) - is considered the greatest poet of the Middle English period. He's well-known for "The Canterbury Tales." He has been called "the father of English poetry. With his knowledge of Latin, French and Italian literature, he transformed the world of literature. Chaucer's greatest work was his "Canterbury Tales," a collection of stories told by pilgrims on their way to Canterbury

Birthplace: London, England

Chaucer (the name is French and seems to have meant originally 'shoemaker') came into the world probably in 1338, the first important author who was born and lived in London, which with him becomes the centre of English literature. About his life, as about those of many of our earlier writers, there remains only very fragmentary information, which in his case is largely pieced together from scattering entries of various kinds in such documents as court account books and public records of state matters and of lawsuits. His father, a wine merchant, may have helped supply the cellars of the king (Edward III) and so have been able to bring his son to royal notice; at any rate, while still in his teens Geoffrey became a page in the service of one of the king's daughters-in-law. In this position his duty would be partly to perform various humble work in the household, partly also to help amuse the leisure of the inmates, and it is easy to suppose that he soon won favour as a fluent story-teller. He early became acquainted with the seamy as well as the brilliant side of courtly life; for in 1359 he was in the campaign in France and was taken prisoner. That he was already valued appears from the king's subscription of the equivalent of a thousand dollars of present-day money toward his ransom; and after his release he was transferred to the king's own service, where about 1368 he was promoted to the rank of esquire. He was probably already married to one of the queen's ladies-in-waiting. Chaucer was now thirty years of age, and his practical sagacity and knowledge of men had been recognized; for from this time on he held important public positions. He was often sent to the Continent - to France, Flanders, and Italy - on diplomatic missions; and for eleven years he was in charge of the London customs, where the uncongenial drudgery occupied almost all his time until through the intercession of the queen he was allowed to perform it by deputy. In 1386 he was a member of Parliament, knight of the shire for Kent; but in that year his fortune turned - he lost all his offices at the overthrow of the faction of his patron, Duke John of Gaunt (uncle of the young king, Richard II, who had succeeded his grandfather, Edward III, some years before). Chaucer's party and himself were soon restored to power, but although during the remaining dozen years of his life he received from the Court various temporary appointments and rewards, he appears often to have been poor and in need. When Duke Henry of Bolingbroke, son of John of Gaunt, deposed the king and himself assumed the throne as Henry IV, Chaucer's prosperity seemed assured, but he lived after this for less than a year, dying suddenly in 1400. Chaucer was buried in Westminster Abbey, becoming the first to occupy what is now called Poet's Corner.

Early Works

Chaucer's literary activity is often divided into three periods. The first period includes his early work (to 1370), which is based largely on French models, especially the Roman de la Rose and the poems of Guillaume de Machaut. He drew inspiration from the rich French poetry of the period, which was produced partly in France, partly in England.

Chaucer experimented with the numerous lyric forms which the French poets had brought to perfection; he also translated, in whole or in part, the most important of medieval French narrative poems, the thirteenth century *'Romance of the Rose'* of Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meung, a very clever satirical allegory, in many thousand lines, of medieval love and medieval religion. Chaucer's chief works during this time are the ***Book of the Duchess***, an allegorical lament written in 1369 on the death of Blanche, wife of John of Gaunt, and a partial translation of the ***Roman de la Rose.***

Italian Period

Chaucer's second period (up to c.1387) is called his Italian period because during this time his works were modelled primarily on Dante and Boccaccio. It dates from his first visit to Italy in 1372-3, where at Padua he may perhaps have met the fluent Italian poet Petrarch, and where at any rate the revelation of Italian life and literature must have aroused his intense enthusiasm. From this time, and especially after his other visit to Italy, five years later, he made much direct use of the works of Petrarch and Boccaccio and to a less degree of those of their greater predecessor, Dante, whose severe spirit was too unlike Chaucer's for his thorough appreciation. The longest and finest of Chaucer's poems of this period, *'Troilus and Crisside'* is based on a work of Boccaccio. It's one of the great love poems in the English language. Here Chaucer details with compelling power the sentiment and tragedy of love, and the psychology of the heroine who had become for the Middle Ages a central figure in the tale of Troy. Chaucer perfected the seven-line stanza later called *rhyme royal.*

Major works of the second period include poems: *The House of Fame*, recounting the adventures of Aeneas after the fall of Troy; *The Parliament of Fowls*, which tells of the mating of fowls on St. Valentine's Day and is thought to celebrate the betrothal of Richard II to Anne of Bohemia; and a prose translation of Boethius' *De consolatione philosophiae*.

Chaucer's third period, covering his last fifteen years, is called his English period, because now at last his genius, mature and self-sufficient, worked in essential independence. Among the works of this period are the unfinished *'The Legend of Good Women,'* - a series of romantic biographies of famous ladies and the prose fragment *The Treatise on the Astrolabe,* written for his son Lewis.

The Canterbury Tales - portrait of real people.

To Chaucer's final period, in which he achieved his fullest artistic power, belongs his masterpiece, *The Canterbury Tales* (written mostly after 1387) - a poetic collection of stories widely regarded as the beginning of English literature. This unfinished poem, about 17,000 lines, is one of the most brilliant works in all literature in which he draws us into a very down-to-earth world. The poem introduces a group of pilgrims journeying from London to the shrine of St. Thomas à Becket at Canterbury. To help pass the time they decide to tell stories which are bawdy, comical and pious. Chaucer himself is among the pilgrims in the tales. Together, the pilgrims represent a wide cross section of 14th-century English life.

By chance, 29 other pilgrims come trooping into the tavern, also headed for Canterbury. Chaucer chats with all of them, becomes part of their group, and decides to leave with them early the next morning. Chaucer then tells us all about the group he's joined: who they are, what their station in life is, even what they're wearing.

He proceeds to give us detailed descriptions of almost all of them, starting with the Knight, the highest-ranking member of the group.

The Host has a plan - he proposes that each pilgrim should tell two tales on the way to Canterbury and two more on the way back. Whoever tells the

best tale-the most morally instructive as well as the most amusing - gets treated to dinner by the rest of the gang on the return trip (at the Host's inn, of course). Chaucer's description of each character tells us something about the character's personality. We'll also learn something more about the character based on the story he or she tells. Chaucer tells us much about each pilgrim, not only by telling us what they do for a living, but also through description of their clothes, attitudes, even their bodies. Chaucer's list of attributes often parodies the standards set for a given rank, turning some descriptions into great comedy. Through Chaucer's superb powers of characterization the pilgrims—such as the earthy wife of Bath, the gentle knight, the worldly prioress, the evil summoner—come intensely alive.

This literary form--a collection of disconnected stories bound together in a fictitious framework--goes back almost to the beginning of literature itself; but Chaucer may well have been directly influenced by Boccaccio's famous book of prose tales, *'The Decameron'* (Ten Days of Story-Telling). Between the two works, however, there is a striking contrast, which has often been pointed out. While the Italian author represents his gentlemen and ladies as selfishly fleeing from the misery of a frightful plague in Florence to a charming villa and a holiday of unreflecting pleasure, the gaiety of Chaucer's pilgrims rests on a basis of serious purpose, however conventional it may be.

The pilgrims' tales include a variety of medieval genres from the humorous fabliau to the serious homily, and they vividly indicate medieval attitudes and customs in such areas as love, marriage, and religion. Chaucer was a master storyteller and craftsman, but because of a change in the language after 1400, his metrical technique was not fully appreciated until the 18th cent. Only in Scotland in the 15th and 16th cent. did his imitators understand his versification.

Chaucer was among the first to use English to create a great work of poetry, in an age when courtly languages like Latin and French were typically favoured for poetry and stories.

John Gower (c. 1330? - 1408) - English poet.

Gower, John was the best-known contemporary and friend of Chaucer, who addressed him as "Moral Gower," at the end of *Troilus and Criseyde*. Apparently he was a Kentish landowner who lived in London until his last years, when he became blind and retired as a layman to the priory of St. Mary Overey. In the 15th and 16th cent. Gower was frequently paired with Chaucer as a master of English poetry. He is remembered primarily for three major works, the ***Mirroir de l'Omme***, ***Vox Clamantis***, and ***Confessio Amantis***, three long poems written in French, Latin, and English respectively, which are united by common moral and political themes. Gower's first work was *Mirour de l'Omme* (*i.e*. **Mirror of Man**) (written before 1381), an allegorical poem in French meditating on the fall of man and the effect of sin on the world. Gower later changed the title to *Speculum Meditantis* to fit with the titles of his later works. is an allegorical manual of the vices and virtues; Around 1381, Gower began work on *Vox Clamantis* (*i.e*. **The Clamoring Voice**), an essay in Latin elegiac verse. Like the *Speculum Meditantis*, it too treats of sinfulness, and criticizes the corruption of the society.

It also provides a contemporary view of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381. Gower's moral and philosophical writings were highly praised by his peers. In 1385, Gower's good friend, Geoffrey Chaucer, dedicated the *Troilus and Criseyde* to him, giving him the epithet "moral Gower."

Confessio Amantis, (i.e. **Lover's Confession**) Gower's masterpiece (written c.1390) is a collection of stories that illustrate the Seven Deadly Sins. Unlike his previous works, Gower wrote the *Confessio* in English at the request of Richard II who was concerned that so little was being written in English. It is a collection of tales and exempla treating of courtly love. The framework is that of a lover complaining first to Venus, and later in the work, confessing to her priest, Genius. *Confessio Amantis* made an important contribution to courtly love literature in English. Some of the stories have their counterparts in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, and one of the stories later served as the source for Shakespeare's *Pericles*, in which Shakespeare had Gower appear in the Chorus. Gower revised *Confessio Amantis* in 1393, replacing the praise of King Richard II with a dedication to Henry of Lancaster. In return, Henry presented Gower with an ornamented collar.

Next, Gower composed a series of Latin poems. Among his minor works are ***Cinkante Ballades,*** which are love poems in French, and ***In Praise of Peace,*** a poem in English.

Old and blind, John Gower died in 1408, leaving a considerable estate. He was buried in St. Mary Overies, now Southwark Cathedral, where his tomb can still be seen today.

SIR THOMAS MALORY (c. 1405 - 1471)

Malory, English author of *Morte d'Arthur*. It is almost certain that he was Sir Thomas Malory of Newbold Revell, Warwickshire. Knighted in 1442, he served in the parliament of 1445. He was evidently a violent, lawless individual who committed a series of crimes, including poaching, extortion, robbery, rape, and attempted murder. Most of his life from 1451 on was spent in prison, and he probably did most of his writing there. Malory's original book was called *The Book of King Arthur and His Noble Knights of the Round Table* and was made up of eight romances that were more or less separate. William Caxton printed it in 1485 and gave it the misleading title of ***Morte d'Arthur*** ("The Death of Arthur"). This work is generally regarded as the most significant accomplishment in English literature in the two centuries between the works of Chaucer and those of such masters as Spenser and Shakespeare. The last medieval English work of the Arthurian legend, Malory's tales are supposedly based on an assortment of French prose romances. The *Morte d'Arthur* is noted for its excellent dramatic narrative and the beauty of its rhythmic and simple language. It remains the standard source for later versions of the legend.

"Le Morte Darthur" was written in English and consists of eight tales in 507 chapters in 21 books, so arranged by Caxton, for clarity of understanding. It is the basis of most modern tellings of the Arthurian story and was the inspiration for Tennyson's "Idylls of the King." *Le Morte Darthur* is undoubtedly the last definitive interpretation of the Arthurian myth before the dawn of the English Renaissance.

King Arthur - Legendary Character / Royalty

King Arthur is one of the great mythic figures of English literature. Dozens of legends and romantic images have grown up around him: the knights of the Round Table, Merlin the wizard, and the Holy Grail, to name a few. According to the main Athurian legends, the king wielded a magical sword, Excalibur; lived in a glorious kingdom called Camelot; was helped by the wizard Mordred; and was married to the beautiful Queen Guinevere (who in many legends falls for Arthur's knight Sir Lancelot). Many of our modern-day stories of Arthur are based on *Le Morte d'Arthur* ("The Death of Arthur"), the collection of Arthurian tales published by Sir Thomas Malory in 1485. Historians can't decide whether anyone like Arthur ever existed, though most now accept that the legend is *very* loosely based on a real historical figure; he may have been a 5th or 6th century ruler name Arturus or Riothamus.

The Fifteenth Century

The 15th cent. is not distinguished in English letters, due in part to the social dislocation caused by the prolonged Wars of the Roses. Of the many 15th-century imitators of Chaucer the best-known are **John Lydgate** and **Thomas Hoccleve**. Other poets of the time include **Stephen Hawes** and **Alexander Barclay** and the Scots poets **William Dunbar**, **Robert Henryson**, and **Gawin Douglas**. The poetry of **John Skelton**, which is mostly satiric, combines medieval and Renaissance elements.

The miracle play, a long cycle of short plays based upon biblical episodes, was popular throughout the Middle Ages in England. The morality play, an allegorical drama centering on the struggle for man's soul, originated in the 15th cent. The finest of the genre is **Everyman** (a 15th century English morality play).

Everyman is the best surviving example of the type of Medieval drama known as the morality play. Moralities evolved side by side with the mystery plays, although they were composed individually and not in cycles. The moralities employed allegory to dramatize the moral struggle Christianity envisions universal in every individual.

Everyman, a short play of some 900 lines, portrays a complacent Everyman who is informed by Death of his approaching end. The play shows the hero's progression from despair and fear of death to a "Christian resignation that is the prelude to redemption." First, Everyman is deserted by his false friends: his casual companions, his kin, and his wealth. He falls back on his Good Deeds, his Strength, his Beauty, his Intelligence, and his Knowledge. These assist him in making his Book of Accounts, but at the end, when he must go to the grave, all desert him save his Good Deeds alone. The play makes its grim point that we can take with us from this world nothing that we have received, only what we have given.

The play was written near the end of the fifteenth century. It is probably a translation from a Flemish play, *Elckerlijk* (or *Elckerlyc*) first printed in 1495, although there is a possibility that *Everyman* is the original, the Flemish play the translation. There are four surviving versions of *Everyman*, two of them fragmentary.

WILLIAM CAXTON AND THE INTRODUCTION OF PRINTING TO ENGLAND, 1476.

Malory's book is the first great English classic which was given to the world in print instead of written manuscript; for it was shortly after Malory's death that the printing press was brought to England by William Caxton. The invention of printing, perhaps the most important event of modern times, took place in Germany not long after the middle of the fifteenth century, and the development of the art was rapid. During the year 1476, just a century before the first theatre was to be built in London, Caxton returned to England and established his shop in Westminster, then a London suburb. During the fifteen remaining years of his life he laboured diligently, printing an aggregate of more than a hundred books, which together comprised over fourteen thousand pages. Aside from Malory's romance, which he put out in 1485, the most important of his publications was an edition of Chaucer's 'Canterbury Tales.' While labouring as a publisher Caxton himself continued to make translations, and in spite of many difficulties he, together with his assistants, turned into English from French no fewer than twenty-one distinct works. From every point of view Caxton's services were great. As translator and editor his style is careless and uncertain, but like Malory's it is sincere and manly, and vital with energy and enthusiasm. As printer, in a time of rapid changes in the language, when through the wars in France and her growing influence the second great infusion of Latin-French words was coming into the English language, he did what could be done for consistency in forms and spelling. Partly medieval and partly modern in spirit, he may fittingly stand at the close, or nearly at the close, of our study of the medieval period.

The Medieval Drama

The drama of the whole medieval period - though it did not reach a very high literary level, was one of the most characteristic expressions of the age.

In England the **folk-plays**, throughout the Middle Ages and in remote spots down almost to the present time, sometimes took the form of energetic dances. Their characters gradually came to be a conventional set, partly famous figures of popular tradition, such as St. George, Robin Hood, Maid Marian, and the Green Dragon. Other offshoots of the folk-play were the 'mummings' and 'disguisings,' collective names for many forms of processions, shows, and other entertainments, such as, among the upper classes, that precursor of the Elizabethan Mask in which a group of persons in disguise, invited or uninvited, attended a formal dancing party. In the later part of the Middle Ages, also, there were the secular pageants, spectacular displays (rather different from those of the twentieth century) given on such occasions as when a king or other person of high rank made formal entry into a town. They consisted of an elaborate scenic background set up near the city gate or on the street, with figures from allegorical or traditional history who engaged in some pantomime or declamation, but with very little dramatic dialog, or none.

TROPES, LITURGICAL PLAYS, AND MYSTERY PLAYS.

All these forms, though they were not altogether without later influence, were very minor affairs, and the real drama of the Middle Ages grew up, without design and by the mere nature of things, from the regular services of the Church.

The list of plays thus presented commonly included: The Fall of Lucifer; the Creation of the World and the Fall of Adam; Noah and the Flood; Abraham and Isaac and the promise of Christ's coming; a Procession of the Prophets, also foretelling Christ; the main events of the Gospel story, with some additions from Christian tradition; and the Day of Judgment.

THE MORALITY PLAYS.

The Mystery Plays seem to have reached their greatest popularity in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The Morality Play probably arose in part from the desire of religious writers to teach the principles of Christian living in a more direct and compact fashion than was possible through the Bible stories of the Mysteries. As compared with the usual type of Mystery plays the Moralities had for the writers this advantage, that they allowed some independence in the invention of the story; and how powerful they might be made in the hands of a really gifted author has been finely demonstrated in our own time by the stage-revival of the best of them, 'Everyman' (which is probably a translation from a Dutch original). In most cases, however, the spirit of medieval allegory proved fatal, the genuinely abstract characters are mostly shadowy and unreal, and the speeches of the Virtues are extreme examples of intolerable sanctimonious declamation. Against this tendency, on the other hand, the persistent instinct for realism provided a partial antidote; the Vices are often very lifelike rascals, abstract only in name. In these cases the whole plays become vivid studies in contemporary low life, largely human and interesting except for their prolixity and the coarseness which they inherited from the Mysteries and multiplied on their own account. During the Reformation period, in the early sixteenth century, the character of the Moralities, more strictly so called, underwent something of a change, and they were--sometimes made the vehicle for religious argument, especially by Protestants.

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THE INTERLUDES.

Early in the sixteenth century, the Morality in its turn was largely superseded by another sort of play called the Interlude.

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THE LATER INFLUENCE OF THE MEDIEVAL DRAMA.

The various dramatic forms from the tenth century to the middle of the sixteenth at which we have thus hastily glanced--folk-plays, mummings and disguisings, secular pageants, Mystery plays, Moralities, and Interludes-- have little but a historical importance.