

01. Old English and Middle English

What is British literature? In this course we will be looking at the main trends, authors and texts in what is traditionally seen as the canon of British literature, defined geographically, most of all, as literature produced on the British Isles. Understandably, we will be looking at literature produced in English but we must not forget that English has never been the only language of the British Isles. What has been understood as literature has also varied throughout history, and in this course we will be focusing mostly on works of belles lettres, fiction, poetry, drama and also other texts where the context calls for a consideration of other texts, which is especially the case of Old and Middle English.

The outline of this course reflects the traditional periodization of British literature. Each period will be defined and discussed as we go. Some definition is needed especially for the first period, the so-called Old English, or also Anglo-Saxon literature. Old English period refers roughly to the period between the 5th century and the period immediately following the Norman Conquest of 1066, the era when the British Isles were no longer part of the Roman Empire (Romans withdrew from the Isles at the beginning of the 5th century) but were inhabited by Germanic tribes: the Saxons, the Jutes, and the Angles, who not only defeated the Romans (in mid-fifth century) but also drove the Christianized Celtic inhabitants to the areas of Wales, Cornwall and the Highlands of Scotland.

Texts from this period are written in Old English which differs considerably from contemporary English, to the extent that unless you actually study Old English and learn it as a language you cannot understand the texts. Old English developed from the Germanic dialects of the tribes mentioned (Anglo-Frisian dialects) and itself had several main local dialects. Among the most striking differences between Old English and contemporary English is the presence of declinations and conjugations—it was an inflected language, like Latin or Czech, and the lack of Latin-based and French-based words—those will flood into English massively after the Norman conquest of 1066 through Anglo-Norman, spoken by the upper classes. Latin, however, was present on the Isles even before the Norman Conquest, through Christian missions and Latin translations of the Bible, missionaries also introduced Latin alphabet which eventually replaced the runic alphabet.

Christianity came to the Isles, obviously, through the Roman rule but its presence was weakened as the Romans were unable to hold their positions on the Isles and the Germanic tribes, with their pagan beliefs, prevailed. Nevertheless Christianity was spreading through the work of missionaries, like St Patrick in Ireland (5th century), St Columba who spread Christianity in Scotland (6th century) and St Augustine of Canterbury (6th/7th century) in England.

Manuscripts that survived from this period are of various kinds: besides the larger texts that we will mention in particular – epic, lyrical and religious poems and chronicles, there are also shorter pieces – short legal texts, parts of the Bible translated from Latin, various charms, gnomes or maxims, proverbs, pieces of advice and rhymed riddles. In many of these we find a mixture of old pagan beliefs and Christianity, until throughout the centuries of the Old English period Christianity gradually prevails and we get fully Christian texts, for example sermons. We will now consider some of the representative texts.

Beowulf

The mixture of paganism and Christianity that is characteristic for much of the Old English literature is also reflected in the most famous poem of the period, *Beowulf*. Composed probably in the first half of the 8th century it is the longest of the long poems from the Old English period that we have. The single extant manuscript of *Beowulf* is from the 10th century and it was damaged by fire in the 18th century; there was no transcript at that time and consequently some lines and words have been lost. It is clear from the poem that it was part of a rich and flourishing tradition of heroic poetry and the events that the poem refers to date several centuries before the age of the manuscript; the stories, the traditions

must have been alive in the culture of the Anglo-Saxon tribes, probably both in oral and in written forms. The story that *Beowulf*, a heroic poem itself, narrates goes back to the 6th century.

It is paradoxical, and important, to realize that at the very beginning of English literature there is a text which does not deal with “Englishmen” and does not take place in England. The poem tells of the heroic deeds of members of two Scandinavian tribes, the Danes and the Geats, and the first part of the story takes place in Denmark, the second part in the south of Sweden some fifty years later. A summary of the events: Beowulf, the title hero of the poem, is a young Geat prince who comes to help the Danish king Hrothgar. Hrothgar and his people are repeatedly attacked by a monster, Grendel, who comes and seizes Danish warriors from their mead hall Heorot. When Grendel comes to Heorot Beowulf wrestles with him with his bare hands and tears off his arm. Grendel flees to his swamp and dies there. There is much rejoicing at Heorot but the following night Grendel’s mother, also a monster, comes to revenge the death of her son, killing one of the men. Beowulf then pursues her and fights with her in her cave at the bottom of a lake and finally kills her with his sword. In the second part of the story we learn of the death of Beowulf’s father Hygelac and of Beowulf’s subsequent peaceful rule of the Geats until much later, when Beowulf is an aging man, his country is attacked by a dragon. Beowulf decides to fight the dragon although he realizes that he will most likely die in the battle. In the fight Beowulf’s warriors flee and only one of them, Wiglaf, stays with Beowulf to assist him. In the horrible protracted fight the old Beowulf manages to wound the dragon but it is only with Wiglaf’s help that the dragon is killed. Beowulf is mortally wounded in the fight and dies shortly afterwards, having named Wiglaf as his successor.

Youtube:

Opening lines of Beowulf in Old English, by Hillsdale College; 1 min

(with OE subtitles)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CH-GwoO4xI>

A reading of the opening lines of Beowulf in Old English, by British Library; 1 min

(with contemporary translation in subtitles)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QT5nja2Wy28>

It is a heroic poem, solemn, elegiac in tone (as much of Old English poetry is). There are many themes which it opens and deals with, and contrasts which make them stand out: the brave and noble deeds contrasted to a lack of courage, the desire for fame and glory in the face of destruction and decline, youth and old age, faithfulness and friendship contrasted to loneliness. Importantly we also find a mixture of paganism and Christianity in the poem. There are many specific biblical references in the poem—God the creator, Grendel as the son of Cain, references to hell and the devil; interestingly there is no reference to Christ. At the same time much of the poem’s power comes from its being set in a different order of society, the old Germanic code of honor, vengeance and “wergild” (“manprice”)—the system in which a compensation was demanded by the relatives of a killed person: it was financial compensation, or the death of the slayer. Another important code that the poem relies on is that of loyalty to one’s lord: warriors swear loyalty to their lord and are expected to stay with him always, are proud of fighting for him; in turn their lord treats them with love and friendship and bestows generous gifts. So in *Beowulf* we can think of Christianity as being the religion of the poet, a sort of framework which he gives to his story, but the story itself is firmly rooted in the older pagan traditions of the Germanic tribes. Fate, rather than God’s will, is the ultimate reference, and the ending of the poem confirms the pagan nature of the story, when Beowulf is given not a heavenly reward in a Christian afterlife but pagan immortality in becoming the hero of his tribe’s legends.

Let us note some of the characteristics of Old English poetry. First of all, it is not based on a regular meter but on heavily accented syllables, sometimes emphasized by alliteration: words beginning by the same letter. Although alliteration gradually weakened as a poetic device it still

persists, and the feeling for alliterative sound is still strong in the English language until today—much more so than in Czech. Rhyme enters English poetry after the 8th century through Latin influence, but alliteration was the Old English poetic device.

In an Old English poem we typically find four stresses per line. Lines are divided into two halves—“half-lines,” each with two principal stresses, and separated by a pause, “caesura.” The stressed syllables, or at least one in each half-line, are typically connected by alliteration. Example: closing lines of *Beowulf*, praise of Beowulf:

cwaédon þæt hé waére wyruldcyning
manna mildust ond monðwaérust
léodum líðost ond lofgeornost

They said that of all the kings upon the earth
he was the man most gracious and fair-minded,
kindest to his people and keenest to win fame.

(translation Seamus Heaney)

Secondly, Old English poetry does not use metaphors, similes or metonymies in the way we are used to. Instead it uses poetic description, periphrasis—“kenning,” a device common to Old Germanic poetry: a sort of metaphor, but formalized, conventionalized. So the sea would be referred to as the “whale road,” or the king would be called the “ring giver,” sword would be the “battle torch.”

Other poems that survived from the Old English period include lyrical poems focused on a female character (*The Wife's Lament*, *Wulf and Eadwacer*).

Here is the text of **Wulf and Eadwacer**, a poem in which a female speaker laments her separation from Wulf, probably a man she loves, and her forceful union to the warrior called Eadwacer.

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/159110/wulf-and-eadwacer-636eaf9d0772d>

in OE:

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/159108/wulf-and-eadwacer>

There are also Old English elegies spoken by a warrior exiled away from his lord (*The Wanderer*, *The Seafarer*). *The Seafarer* attempts a religious reflection on the passing of temporal things, and there are other Old English poems which are explicitly religious: *Caedmon's Hymn*, dating before the year 700 and so one of the oldest texts in Old English which have survived. Caedmon is the first English poet whom we know by name; he and his school are behind several religious poems.

Nu sculon herigean / heofonrices Weard

[Now must we praise / heaven-kingdom's Guardian,]

Meotodes meahte / and his modgeþanc

[the Measurer's might / and his mind-plans,]

weorc Wuldor-Fæder / swa he wundra gehwæs

[the work of the Glory-Father, / when he of wonders of every one,]

ece Drihten / or onstealde

[eternal Lord, / the beginning established.]

He ærest sceop / ielda bearnum

[He first created / for men's sons]

heofon to hrofe / halig Scyppend

[heaven as a roof, / holy Creator;

ða middangeard / moncynnes Weard

[then middle-earth / mankind's Guardian,]

ece Drihten / æfter teode

[eternal Lord / afterwards made --]

firum foldan / Frea ælmihtig.

[for men earth, / Master almighty.]

Now we ought to praise the Guardian of the heavenly kingdom,
The might of the Creator and his conception,
The work of the glorious Father, as he of each of the wonders,
Eternal Lord, established the beginning.
He first created for the sons of men
Heaven as a roof, holy Creator;
Then the middle-earth, the Guardian of mankind,
The eternal Lord, afterwards made
The earth for men, the Lord almighty.
(translation Elaine Treharne)

The next poet whom we know by name is Cynewulf and his school, and it is to them that one of the most beautiful religious poems in Old English is ascribed, *The Dream of the Rood*, preserved in a 10th century manuscript but dating probably back to the 8th century. It is a dream vision of Christ's crucifixion in which the cross is personified and the cross itself becomes the speaker in a part of the poem.

Among the more folksy texts from the Old English period are, as mentioned, various riddles, maxims, and charms. Here is an example of one: Charm against a Dwarf.

Against a dwarf one shall take seven little offerings, such as one has worshipped with, and write these names on each of the offerings: Maximianus, Malchus, Iohannes, Martimianus, Dionisius, Constantinus, Serafion. Then afterwards one shall sing the charm that I say hereafter, first in the left ear, then in the right ear, and then above the top of the man's head. And then a maiden must go and hang it around his neck, and do so for three days; he will soon be well.

Here he came in walking, in spider form.
He had his harness in his hand, he said that you were his steed,
he put his traces on your neck. Then they began to travel from the ground;
so soon they came from the ground, then their limbs began to cool.
Then came in walking the beast's sister;
she put an end to this then and swore oaths
that this would never harm the sick one,
nor that one who might find this charm or knows how to recite it.
Amen. So be it.

(Translation David E. Gay)

Dwarfs were most likely believed to cause some kind of sickness, most likely sleep problems or nightmares. The text consists of instructions and the spell itself. The charm blends Christian legend (seven sleepers of Ephesus – a legend of seven Christians who hid in a cave and magically slept through a period of persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire in the 3rd century) and liturgy (reference to the wafers of the Eucharist) with pagan beliefs. It is a metrical charm, found in a codex which dates to the end of the 10th/beginning of the 11th century.

There are of course also Old English texts in prose but it is necessary to realize that many long prose works were also written in Latin, like for example *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* by **Bede the Venerable** (turn of 7th/8th century), in which, by the way, we learn of Caedmon's miraculous calling to become a poet: Caedmon was a simple, uneducated cowherd in a monastery in north-east England who couldn't sing. One night he had a dream; he saw a man, possibly an angel, who told him to sing. When Caedmon replied that he couldn't, the man told him to sing about the creation of all things. And immediately Caedmon started to sing and celebrate God the Creator. This skill stayed with him after he woke up and he was able to create more songs based on biblical stories told to him by the monks. Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* was then translated into Old English under the rule of King Alfred the Great (9th century), who not only protected England from Viking invasions but also supported cultural and educational activities and had a number of books translated into English.

Translations from Latin were also created later by Aelfric, a representative of the Benedictine reform which brought a new cultural impetus to England at the beginning of the 11th century; Aelfric was the author of many sermons and homilies. A famous example of a late Old English homily is the text by **archbishop Wulfstan**, written in Old English but called in Latin *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos* – Wulf's sermon to the English (beginning of the 11th century), calling them to repentance in the face of Viking invasion and pointing out, in an emotional way, the various problems and sins of the English society.

Middle English

The period of Middle English begins in the 11th century after the Norman Conquest in the Battle of Hastings in 1066, a decisive event that changed the course of history on the British Isles, when Norman Duke William conquered the Anglo-Saxons and proclaimed himself English King, bringing with him large numbers of Norman noblemen, implementing a strictly feudal system and making Anglo-Norman the language of the ruling classes on the Isles. The new language brought far reaching changes because it was not only a new language but also a new culture and a new literary culture. English survived as a language of the lower classes until a renewed interest made English flourish again and poetry, inspired by courtly poetry of the French tradition, was written. Latin continued to be used as an international language of science and divinity.

Extant English literature of the early middle period reflects the marginalization of the English language. There are some poems and some religious texts, particularly holy legends and homilies, and also some secular poetry. The most important text from the early Middle period is a rhymed chronicle called *Brut*, written around 1200 by a priest by the name of Layamon and inspired by a French chivalric chronicle by the same name and by several other chronicles. **Layamon's Brut** is a creative synthesis of these sources. Its name refers to a mythic character *Brut* who escaped from Troy when it was conquered by the Greeks, sailed to England and created a kingdom there. But the central hero of Layamon's chronicle is the English King Arthur and we learn of his heroic deeds and military conquests, of his marriage to the beautiful queen Winawere (Guenevere), of the magic events surrounding his life, of his invention of the round table when his knights fought over the most honorable seat, of the treachery of his nephew Mordred who rises against him, of his wife's unfaithfulness and of his dying journey to the mystical land of Avalon and the promise of his coming back to Britain. Layamon's chronicle then goes on to tell of other stories, for example of King Lear and his three daughters, a theme that was picked up, famously, centuries later by William Shakespeare. But King Arthur as a character grew to have a life of its own, so to speak, and became a hero of countless other stories and artworks by subsequent authors.

Layamon's *Brut* is an important piece of literature because it merges many different cultural aspects: old Celtic myths, Anglo-Saxon elements and aspects of the chivalric code of the Normans. In many instances Arthur acts like a heroic warrior of Old English poetry, like Beowulf, with heathenish vengeance and even cruelty, but there are also instances when romantic love is introduced—a new theme, coming through the influence of French courtly poetry—and attention is paid to love and to passion; and Christian motifs also surround Arthur, making him, in some ways or to some degree, a representative of the courtly knight.

In terms of composition the chronicle is also a kind of bridge between Old English poetry and the newer kind of courtly poetry. Layamon still uses the half-line structure with four stresses per line and a caesura in the middle, but in a looser form, and he also introduces rhyme to his text. The language of *Brut* is still very close to Old English so you would need to read it in translation. Layamon's text was an expression of patriotism; the priest wrote it to support the "Englishness" of his people at a time of pervasive French influences.

The French influence brought a distinctly new kind of literature: the courtly or chivalric romance, in English literature called "metric romances." These existed in several cycles and were spread and shared across Europe in the 12th and the 13th century, so that various characters exist simultaneously in literatures of several nations. King Arthur is not only an English character but is the hero of an earlier work by the French Chrétien de Troyes; the Arthur legends lived on and in the mid-15th century became the subject of a prose retelling by **Thomas Malory**, called *Le Morte d'Arthur*, given a French name but written in English and published by the first English printer, William Caxton, in 1485. Malory's original name for the book was *Sir Thomas Malory's Book of King Arthur and of His Noble Knights of the Round Table*. In Malory's version the Arthur legend is modified to suit its time: it is set much more to the standards of the chivalric code and courtly love, the supernatural aspects are played down and instead there is more attention given to the political dimensions and to the portrayal of Christian virtue. It is a text which already anticipates Renaissance literature.

A few more words on Middle English literature. Besides the long romances and cycles there existed also rhymed short stories, the so-called "fabliaux" and ballads. **Fabliaux** were humorous, satirical stories focused on the life of the lower classes and they were often openly erotic. **Ballads**, like fabliaux, were stories focused on single events but tragic by nature, dealing with murder, jealousy or ominous supernatural phenomena. And then there is secular **love poetry**, influenced heavily by the French tradition of love poetry, exchanging the stresses and alliteration for regular meter and rhyme as the basic organizing principle. Typical imagery of Middle English love poetry connects images of nature, especially of spring and new life, with love. An example of this is the mid-13th century poem *Alysoun*, in which a speaker celebrates his admired and beautiful lover Alison, or *The Cuckoo Song*, a piece of nature poetry celebrating the arrival of spring. The traditions of love poetry also leave traces in

medieval religious poetry, and especially the poems ascribed to the Virgin Mary sometimes rely on the tropes and imagery typical of love poetry.

Sumer is icumen in,
Loude sing cuckou!
Groweth seed and bloweth meed,
And springth the wode now.
Sing cuckou!

Ewe bleteth after lamb,
Loweth after calve cow,
Bulloc sterteth, bucke verteth,
Merye sing cuckou!
Cuckou, cuckou,
Wel singest thou cuckou:
Ne swik thou never now!

Summer has come in,
Loudly sing, Cuckoo!
The seed grows and the meadow blooms
And the wood springs anew,
Sing, Cuckoo!
The ewe bleats after the lamb
The cow lows after the calf.
The bullock stirs, the stag farts,
Merrily sing, Cuckoo!
Cuckoo, cuckoo, well you sing, cuckoo;
Don't ever you stop now,
Sing cuckoo now. Sing, Cuckoo.
Sing Cuckoo. Sing cuckoo now!

YOUTUBE

Sumer is icumen in - sung with all 6 voices and original manuscript notes

By IPMusic, 2 min

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fxx7ZIfJqr4>

There would be many more texts that would be worth mentioning, like for example the religious allegorical poem *The Vision of Piers Plowman* (mid-14th century) or the courtly poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (mid-14th century), another story of the King Arthur cycle, telling of the adventures of Sir Gawain, one of King Arthur's knights, who beheads the monstrous Green Knight who in turn picks up his head from the ground and invites him to meet again for revenge. A year later Gawain sets out to meet his enemy one more time but before the meeting resists the seduction by a beautiful lady and receives from her a magical green girdle that will protect him. It turns out that the husband of this lady is none other than the Green Knight himself and after a fight with him Gawain returns almost unharmed to King Arthur's court. The poem uses both alliteration and rhyme.

It is especially in the works of **Geoffrey Chaucer** that the Middle English period reaches its climax. Chaucer (cca. 1343-1400) was born in London to a successful wine merchant, he was of common origin but in his adult life he lived and worked in the high circles of noble society for whom

he worked in a variety of roles, served at the royal court and was married to a court lady. He traveled to continental Europe as part of diplomatic missions several times and these trips were crucial for his artistic development. His trip to Italy was especially important; in England Chaucer was exposed to the influence of French and Latin literature (and his first poems were written in the style of French courtly poetry; he also translated a famous French work called *Roman de la Rose*). In Italy he probably became acquainted with the works of Dante, Boccaccio and Petrarch (Boccaccio and Petrarch were still alive at that time), and it was especially Boccaccio's *Decameron* that became an inspiration for Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Boccaccio's influence is also in Chaucer's long love poem called *Troilus and Criseyde* (completed around 1385), a reworking of the tragic love story of the two famous figures of Greek antiquity. What comes as novel and surprising in this work is something like a realistic portrayal of the characters; Chaucer is willing to go beyond the stereotypical representations (for example woman as a seductress, or woman as the object of courtly love, or woman as an unruly being who must be simply kept under control) but he probes into the complexities of the characters' psychology and actions.

This attention to the complexity and ambivalence is characteristic also of *The Canterbury Tales*. The *Tales* were an ongoing project for Chaucer. He started writing the stories probably in 1386 and continued for the rest of his life, never finishing them, so that not only the collection is unfinished but even some of the individual tales are unfinished. His busy career obviously did not give him much time to write poetry so he managed to write only 24 of these tales although he planned to have a hundred or more.

What are *The Canterbury Tales*? It is a collection of stories within a story, told by various characters: a group of people who have randomly met on their pilgrimage from South London (they start at the Tabard Inn) to Canterbury to visit the grave of St Thomas Beckett. That is the general framework for the story which we gather from the book's opening section called The General Prologue and which surfaces again between the individual tales. As the pilgrims get ready and go they tell each other stories, so each story has a different narrator. The variety of characters represents the varied society of 14th century England, and we get a full range of them: the Knight, the Squire, the Yeoman, representatives of the Church (Prioress, Nun, Monk, Friar); then the middle class: the Merchant, the Clerk, the tradesmen: the Carpenter, the Weaver, the Wife of Bath (a widow with a trade), the Student, and then a group of reprobates and frauds: the Reeve, the Miller, the Pardoner etc. It is the innkeeper Harry Bailey who comes up with the idea that the pilgrims will tell stories on the way and whoever tells the best story will get a free dinner at the Tabard Inn when they return. The scene is set and the characters are introduced in the General Prologue by the narrator-poet who speaks in first person singular; he is one of the pilgrims himself. Then as the characters begin their stories-within-a-story the narrative voice changes; each character is the narrator of his or her tale, and then we also get the direct speech of the characters in the individual tales—so there are several layers of narrative distance, if you will; Chaucer as the author is distanced from us as readers by these several layers. It is precisely the variety of characters and the variety of their voices as narrators of their stories, and their choices of the themes of their stories, that is so remarkable about *The Canterbury Tales*, and in this richness and complexity Chaucer is a truly unique author of his times.

The variety of characters brings in interruptions and deviations from the overall structure of the *Tales* in that the characters sometimes quarrel, sometimes interrupt each other. Most narrators introduce their tale with a prologue of their own. The tales reflect the status of their narrators and also of the social role that Chaucer assigns them: the Knight tells a high story of the courtly kind, going back to ancient Greece and dealing with serious issues of friendship and love and the vanity of life. In stark contrast to the Knight's tale we get the Miller's tale, when the Miller, who is already drunk, jumps in, doesn't let the Monk speak (although it is the Monk's turn) and tells a bawdy story of the young and pretty Alison, her old jealous husband, a carpenter, her young student lover Nicholas and her unsuccessful admirer Absolon, a parish clerk, and the tricks that Alison and Nicholas play on Alison's husband and on Absolon. In stark contrast to the high ideals of the Knight's chivalric tale

what we get here is a low comedy, full of lewd jokes, making fun equally of erotic desire and of religion.

In both of these tales, contrasting as they are, Chaucer is drawing on the existing tradition of stories that would have been common knowledge to his readers: the chivalric romances that are in the background of the Knight's tale, the various fabliaux and medieval mystery plays that are the referential framework for the Miller's tale. Other literary references of the other tales would include holy legends of the saints, medieval animal fables, moral exempla, folktales or even sermons.

The Miller's Tale creates a contrast to the Knight's Tale which precedes it. After the Miller finishes the story everyone laughs but one of the travelers who is a carpenter by trade feels offended by Miller's story because the carpenter is depicted as a cuckold in the Miller's Tale. So in revenge, the next speaker, the Reeve (a bailiff), a carpenter himself, tells a story in which two students trick a miller. Other speakers' stories vary from animal fables (The Nuns' Priest's Tale), a sullen recital of tragic events (The Monk's Tale), fairy-tale-like stories (The Pardoner's Tale). One of the especially known stories is the one told by the Wife of Bath who tells a version of one of the Arthurian legend and introduces her tale with a prologue in which she decries celibacy and talks lustfully of her five marriages.

Two more things that are important to remember about *The Canterbury Tales*. First of all, the opening of the General Prologue with its spring imagery, so characteristic for medieval love poetry and religious poetry too.

When the sweet showers of April have pierced
The drought of March, and pierced it to the root,
And every vein is bathed in that moisture
Whose quickening force will engender the flower
And when the west wind too with its sweet breath
Has given life in every wood and field
To tender shoots, and when the stripling sun
Has run his half-course in Aries, the Ram,
And when small birds are making melodies,
That sleep all night long with open eyes,
(Nature so prompts them, and encourages);
Then people long to go on pilgrimages,
And palmers to take ship to foreign shores,
And distant shrines, famous in different lands;
And most especially, from all the shires
Of England, to Canterbury they come,
The holy blessed martyr there to seek,
Who gave his help when they were sick.
(David Wright translation)

Whan that April with his showres soote
The droughte of March hath perced to the roote,
And bathed every veine in swich licour,
Of which vertu engendred is the flowr;
Whan Zephyrus eek with his sweete breeth
Inspired hath in every holt and heeth
The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne
Hath in the Ram his halve cours yronne,
And smale fowles maken melodye⁷⁷

That sleepen al the night with open yē—
So priketh hem Nature in hir corages—
Thanne logen folk to goon on pilgrimages,
And palmeres for to seeken straunge strondes
To ferne halwes, couthe in sondry londes;
And specially from every shires ende
Of Engelond to Canterbury they wende,
The holy blisful martyr for to seeke
That hem hath holpen whan that they were seke.

YOUTUBE:

General Prologue of the Canterbury Tales (Premiere), start at 5:20; stop at 6:18

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nMsp8xHkRnA>

In 1922 TS Eliot will famously make an allusion to Chaucer's opening lines in his modernist masterpiece *The Waste Land*. Chaucer opens the *Tales* with an image of April, sweet spring showers, birds singing, the sun shining mildly, everything rejoicing in the living force of nature and people stirred by this awakening of life and on the move. Eliot will open his *Waste Land* by saying: "April is the cruellest month / breeding lilacs out the dead land."

The second important thing about *The Canterbury Tales* is its poetic form, for it is Chaucer who most significantly developed and used the "heroic couplet"—rhymed iambic pentameter. This will leave a lasting influence on English literature and will be used in the following centuries, and flourish again particularly during Classicism.

The Canterbury Tales became one of the founding texts of English literature, for several reasons. The first one is obviously their literary quality and power, the richness and scope of human experience depicted in the *Tales*, the variety of language that corresponds to the characters and their stories, his use of colloquial English as well as words of French origin, and he even tried to capture some of the different English dialects. By happy coincidence, moreover, Chaucer wrote in a dialect of English which later became the basis of Modern English, and this certainly helped to make his work more easily accessible to later generations.

Bibliography

- Abrams, M. H. (gen. ed.) *The Norton Anthology of English Literature. The Major Authors*. 5th edition. New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1987.
- Carter, Ronald and McRae, John: *The Routledge History of Literature in English*. 2nd edition. London and New York: Routledge, 2006.
- Chaucer, Geoffrey. *The Canterbury Tales*. Translated and with an introduction by David Wright. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Ford, Boris. *The New Pelican Guide to English Literature*. Volume 1. 2nd edition. London: Penguin Books, 1991.
- Gay, David E. "Anglo-Saxon Metrical Charm 3 against a Dwarf: A Charm against Witch-Riding?" *Folklore* 99, no. 2 (1988): 174–77. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1260455>.
- Heaney, Seamus. *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation*. New York, London: W. W. Norton, 2001.
- Sanders, Andrew: *The Short Oxford History of English Literature*. 3rd edition. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Translated and with an introduction by Brian Stone. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1965.
- Stříbrný, Zdeněk. *Dějiny anglické literatury*. Volume 1. Praha: Academia, 1987.