

Chapter 1 Literature of Old and Middle English Periods (450—1485)

1. Introduction

English literature has a long history of about 1,300 years up to the present. Chaucer is often described as the beginning of it, but actually it had undergone more than six centuries before Chaucer was born. English literature began with Anglo-Saxon literature. Anglo-Saxon England emerged after the Anglo-Saxon conquest of England about 450 A. D. ①. The language spoken by Anglo-Saxon is called Old English, and English literature in this period is called Anglo-Saxon Literature or Old English Literature. The French-speaking Normans led by Duke William conquered England in 1066. The Norman Conquest marked the ending of Old English Literature and the beginning of Middle English Literature. Modern English, founded on the dialect of the East Midland English, extends from 1500 to the present day. The English language in the transitional stage from Old English to Modern English, through some four centuries from about 1100 to about 1500, is called Middle English, thus English literature in this period is called Middle English Literature. Middle English Literature ended with the establishment of the House of Tudor in 1485 when Henry Tudor was crowned King Henry VII.

The Celts first migrated to Britain about 400 B. C. and may be regarded as the original inhabitants of the British Isles, and their literature continues to the present day in Ireland and Wales②. From 55 B. C. to the year of 1066, the British Isles

① Clayton Roberts & David Roberts. *A History of England*, Vol. 1. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1985:34.

② David Damrosch & Kevin J. H. Dettmar. *The Longman Anthology of British Literature*. New York: Pearson Longman, 2006:4.

experienced several conquests in history, and the conquerors established the Roman Britain (55 B. C. —450 A. D.), Anglo-Saxon England (450—1066), and Norman England (1066—1485).

Led by Julius Caesar in 55 B. C. , the Romans reached Dover and began their invasion of the British Isles. Finally Claudius conquered this place in 43 A. D. and the British Isles became a part of the Roman Empire. During the Roman occupation of Britain till the beginning of the 5th century, the Britons were Romanized, but at the same time survived Roman civilisation, so a Romano-British culture emerged.

The Anglo-Saxon Conquest of England is also called the Germanic or English Conquest. In 449 A. D. Jutes crossed the North Sea and reached Britain; then came Angles and Saxons about 450 A. D. Together they created the Anglo-Saxon England which lasted until 1066. During the Anglo-Saxon period, England was divided into separate kingdoms: Kent, Northumbria, Mercia, and Wessex^①. Beginning from the late 8th century, Danes came to invade England. In the late 9th century led by King Alfred the Great (849—901?) of the kingdom of Wessex, the English people successfully repulsed the Danish invaders and then all the kingdoms in England were united into one.

A significant event in the Anglo-Saxon history was the conversion of the English to Christianity. In 597 Augustine came from Rome and began to convert the Jutes in Kent, while about the same time monks from Ireland were setting up monasteries in Northumbria; within a century all England was Christianised. The Angles, Saxons and Jutes were originally heathen, and believed in German heathenism, a religion compounded of animism and magic. The Anglo-Saxons worshipped trees, wells, rivers and mountains. They felt themselves surrounded by ogres, elves, demons and goblins; and they had their gods, Tiw, Woden, Thunor and Frig; but they had no ethical system, no answer to such questions as concerning life and death, and no cosmology that explained the mysteries of human existence. Christianity did offer answers to their questions. It provided a cosmology of heaven and hell, offered the promise of eternal life, and preached that eternity could be won through belief and obedience. It also offered a social discipline useful

^① Clayton Roberts & David Roberts. *A History of England*, Vol. 1. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc. , 1985:41.

to a settled, agrarian society: the Church opposed violence, condemned sexual license, defended marriage, defined rights of inheritance, and urged submission to one's lot in this world. The kings of England welcomed a church whose scriptures described and whose government illustrated kingship in action. Monotheism fit better with monarchy than did the many gods and the many local shrines of paganism.

Anglo-Saxon culture reflected the complex interaction of pagan elements and Christian values. Most English poems composed in the early Anglo-Saxon period, whether the stories were brought over by Anglo-Saxons from their Continental Germanic home or not, carried a keen interest in Bible stories, Christianity and Christian values. The heathen mythology was gradually replaced by the Christian religion, though heathen concepts of nature and the supernatural persisted for a considerable period of time and were often curiously mixed with Christian views and expressions. The earliest and national epic *Beowulf* of the Anglo-Saxons is a typical example to illustrate the conflict between the two traditions. The Angles brought the story of *Beowulf* with them to England in the 6th century. It carries symbolic, religious and mythological values under the apparent simple themes, and mixes pagan elements with Christian colouring. Besides the narrative epic *Beowulf*, there are other narrative verses and lyric poems in Anglo-Saxon Literature which were brought to England by the Germanic conquerors from their continental homes; these poems reflect their experience and adventure—of war and of exile, of the sea with its hardship and its fascination, of ruined cities, and of minstrel life, and express their Germanic tradition—of heroic motives, ideals, endurance and courage in the heroic age. Of the short narrative poems, there are *Waldere* and *The Fight at Finnsburge* based on Germanic legends brought from the Continent. The first deals with events connected with the story of Waldhere in the “Nibelungenlied,” and the latter is about legendary materials in *Beowulf*. Of the lyrics, there are “The Seafarer,” “The Wanderer,” “Deor’s Lament,” “Widsith” and “The Ruin.” “The Seafarer” can be considered a masterpiece in the lyrics in the Anglo-Saxon period. Most of the aforementioned poems were very likely written by some anonymous authors before the entering of Christianity into Britain, and preserved for a time in oral tradition. After the entering of Christianity into Britain, the Christian poets copied and revised these poems and reintroduced

Christian themes and values into them. Thus the poetry of the pagan origin is constantly overlaid with Christian sentiment. There are other verse narratives of later date having to do with battles fought on the English soil, and narrating about the Anglo-Saxon's heroic fighting against the Danish invaders, such as *Brunanburg* and *The Battle of Maldon*. These two stories, which were not brought over by Anglo-Saxon from the Continental Germanic home, also contained the Germanic heroic fighting spirits. Old English Literature reveals at wide intervals of time the outlook and temper of the Germanic mind. Thus the two streams of the pagan elements and the Christian colouring mingled in Old English Literature, and can never quite be separated from one another.

In Old English Literature, more than half of Anglo-Saxon poems concern Christian subjects and these poems are named as religious or Christian poetry.

Two poets should be mentioned. One is the earliest English poet, the first representative of the English Christian poetry, Caedmon^①. The other poet is Cynewulf, who was an Anglican poet, and in the second half of the 8th century wrote at least four poems on religious subjects, into which he ingeniously wove his name by means of runes. Two of these poems, *Juliana* and *Elene*, tell well-known legends of saints. The third, *Christ*, Cynewulf's best known poem, deals with Advent, the Ascension, and the Last Judgment. The fourth, *The Fates of the Apostles*, touches briefly on where and how the various apostles died. There are other religious poems besides these mentioned, such as *The Andreas*, two poems on the life of St. Guthlac, a part of a fine poem on the story of *Judith* in the Apocrypha; *The Phoenix*, in which the bird is taken as a symbol of the Christian life; and *Christ and Satan* which treats the expulsion of Satan from Paradise together with the Harrowing of Hell and Satan's tempting of Christ^②. All of these poems show England in its cultural contact with Rome and being drawn into the general current of ideas on the continent, no longer simply Germanic, but cosmopolitan.

The Germanic tribes brought to England the Germanic language. In Old English there existed dialectal differentiation until the latter half of the 9th century.

① Ifor Evans, *A Short History of English Literature*. Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1978:43.

② Albert C. Baugh & Thomas Cable, *A History of the English Language*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2001: 69.

Alfred the Great, who established an independent Anglo-Saxon kingdom, contributed to an Old English cultural renaissance through his support of learning, and more specifically, through his own English translations of important Latin texts^①. With the effort of King Alfred the Great, their dialect of the West Saxon grew into the literary language standardisation of the whole Anglo-Saxon England. During the Anglo-Saxon period, there were three other languages that made contribution to the English vocabulary and widened the English language. The first was the language spoken by the Celtic population of Britain. The second was Latin which contributed words to Old English. The third was Old Norse, the language of the Danish invaders^②.

The Old English period was the period of the creation of English literature, and instability of the society was often reflected in the literature of this period. The foreign invaders came to England together with their religion, culture and language. However, the most important influence on the creation of English literature came from the working people, for most of the subject matters of the English literature were collected from their daily lives.

In the year of 1066, William, Duke of Normandy, claimed the Crown of England, raised a powerful army, transported it across the English Channel, met King Harold and defeated him decisively. William's conquest of England in 1066 gave an abrupt turn to the path of English history, changed the whole course of the English language, and marked the ending of Old English Literature and the beginning of Middle English Literature. During the Middle English period, England experienced terrible internal turmoil and instability in the Hundred Years' War between England and France (1337—1453) and the Wars of the Roses (1455—1485) between the two dominant aristocratic houses, the Yorks and the Lancasters. In 1485, Henry Tudor, Earl of Richmond, defeated the York King Richard III at Bosworth Field and was crowned King Henry VII (1485—1509) and ended the Middle English period.

The conquerors from the Normandy were the descendants of Scandinavians

① Jay Ruud. *Encyclopedia of Medieval Literature*. New York: Fact On File, Inc., 2006; 16.

② Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. *Adventures in English Literature*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985; 30.

who had landed on the north coast of France a century and a half before. Nominally subjects of the French king and speaking the French language, the Normans whose name derived from "Northman" comprised virtually an independent state, with territorial ambitions and a Viking joy in war^①. After more than 100 years in France, the Normans adopted many French customs and had their own variation of the French language, Norman-French. The coming of the Normans to England was not a hit-and-run raid, but a full-fledged invasion and occupation. The occupation was imposed systematically. There was an inventory and seizure of property; martial law was put into effect. A strong central government was set up with lines of authority clearly defined.

After the Norman Conquest, Roman Catholicism, French culture and French customs were gradually brought into England by the Normans in the following 300 years. For 200 years after 1066, there existed together in England native English, Norman French and Latin. The common people and the lower-middle class people generally spoke the Anglo-Saxon Old English, whereas French was spoken in the palace, court and universities, and Latin was used by many scholars and monks. The situation was well described, about the year 1300, by the author of a chronicle entitled *Robert of Gloucester*:

Thus came, lo! England into Normandy's hand.
And the Normans didn't know how to speak then but their own speech
And spoke French as they did at home, and their children did also teach;
So that high men of this land that of their blood come
Hold all that same speech that they took from them.
For but a man know French men count of him little.
But low men hold to English and to their own speech yet.^②

Only in the 14th century was English once again generally adopted by everyone. Much of the polite literature of English until a generation or two before had been in French, but now writers seemed to feel the call of justifying their use of English.

① Frank Kermode. *The Oxford Anthology of English Literature*, Vol. 2. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980: 5.

② Albert C. Baugh & Thomas Cable. *A History of the English Language*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2001: 111-112.

Middle English Literature was firstly influenced by the French literature in the Anglo-Norman period, and then obtained its own national identity as English literature in Chaucer's age, and lastly entered the period of rise and growth of English plays. For the about 400 years, English poetry, prose and drama changed and developed into their own styles, and laid a good foundation for the development and prosperity of English literature in the Renaissance period.

Questions

1. Discuss the influence of Norman Conquest on English language and culture.
2. Most Anglo-Saxon poems are concerned with Christian subjects. Discuss how Christianity was introduced to Britain and then influenced the Anglo-Saxon Literature.

Further reading

1. Ifor Evans. *A Short History of English Literature*. Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1978.
2. Clayton Roberts & David Roberts. *A History of England*, Vol. 1. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1985.

2. Old English Period: 449—1066

The main expressions of Old English Literature are in the forms of poetry and prose, in which *Beowulf* and *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* represent the summit of achievements and have their positive influence on the creation of English literature of later generations.

The features of Old English poetry are exhibited in three aspects. Firstly, Old English poetry does not conform strictly to any rhythmic pattern like iambic pentameter or dactylic hexameter. Its typical feature is the use of alliterative metrical form, as in *St'seap St'anlitho-St'tge n'earwe* (*Steep Stone-slopes-paths narrow*). A special form of alliteration in Old English poetry is vocalic alliteration, which depends not on the likeness of initial vowels but the absence of initial consonants; any two stressed syllables beginning with vowels are considered

sufficiently alike to alliterate with each other, no matter how similar or different the vowels may be. Typical examples are "Caedmon's Hymn" (Line 4), where *ece dryhten*, alliterates with *or asteald* ①. The second feature of Old English poetry lies in its use of poetic vocabulary, synonymous repetition, and combination of words to express new or complex concepts, such as *feorh-hus* (*life-house*). The third feature, which can be regarded as the chief guiding principle in the construction of Old English verse, is contrast, as in *Beowulf*, where the contrast between the hero's youth and age provides a structure for the poem.

With the development of English society and literature, Anglo-Saxon prose emerged after the verse. The prose in Anglo-Saxon period had hardly any tradition to follow. Some early Old English prose appeared in some law documents. The oldest laws were written at the beginning of the 7th century, but the better sentences were written towards the end of the 7th century. The earliest prose in Anglo-Saxon England was in the pattern of Latin, known sometimes as Anglo-Latin writings. Among the early writers of Latin prose should be mentioned Aldhelm or Ealdhelm of the second half of the 7th century (650? —709), of Wessex, and Alcuin of the second half of the 8th century (735? —804), of Northumbria, and the giant among them, the Venerable Bede (or Baeda) of Jarrow in Northumbria in the last years of the 7th and the early half of the 8th century (673? —735). In the early stage of the Anglo-Saxon period, in the 7th and 8th centuries, English culture and learning flourished in the north, particularly in Northumberland, with Bede and Alcuin in the lead; but in the later centuries, the 9th and the 10th, the centre of learning shifted to the south, to the Kingdom of Wessex, where King Alfred the Great did great contribution to the Old English cultural renaissance. Alfred supported learning and translated many important Latin texts into English himself. Thanks to his efforts, English prose developed its own style, thus he himself is regarded as "The Father of English Prose." After King Alfred the Great, Aelfric ("the Grammarian"; 955—1012) was the most important prose writer of the Old English language②. Aelfric's important works are 100 sermons, published as *Catholic Homilies* in two volumes. The prose in the

① Pope & Fulk. *Eight Old English Poems*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000; 4.

② Jay Ruud. *Encyclopedia of Medieval Literature*. New York: Fact On File, Inc. 2006; 7.

Old English period is generally in two styles: One is the mannered prose of Aelfric; the other is the simple prose of the compilers of King Alfred's *Chronicle*.

2.1 The Venerable Bede and Caedmon

To know something about the history of the Anglo-Saxon England, one can read the Venerable Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* (*Ecclesiastical History of the English People*) which tells about the Anglo-Saxon conquest, the vicissitudes of the petty kingdoms that comprised Anglo-Saxon England, and also English literature in that period.

Bede (673—735) or Baeda was first called "Venerabilis" during the 9th century. By the title "the Venerable Bede" one can infer that he was known to posterity. He was a historian and diligent teacher and scholar of Latin and Greek; he had many pupils among the monks of Wearmouth and Jarrow. Although he might never have travelled beyond the boundaries of his native district of Northumbria, he achieved an international reputation as one of the greatest scholars of his age. Writing in Latin, the learned language of the era, Bede produced many theological works as well as books on science and rhetoric, but his most popular and enduring work is *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* (completed in 731). This work has earned for Bede the name "The Father of English History," and, with its achievements in prose writing, has made him popular as the most important and outstanding prose writer during the late 7th and the early 8th centuries. *Historia* tells the history of Britain from the time of Julius Caesar's conquest of the British Isles through the Saxon invasions to the arrival of Saint Augustine, the first Roman missionary in 597, and the squabbles of the petty kingdoms of Saxon England. The main theme of it is the spread of Christianity and the growth of the English churches.

Caedmon, according to Bede's *Historia*, was author of the first Christian poem in English, and had been an unlearned herdsman who received suddenly, in a vision, the power of song, and later put into English verse passages translated to him from Latin scriptures. Bede tells:

Heavenly grace had especially singled out a certain one of the brothers in the monastery ruled by this abbeſs, for he uſed to compoſe devout and religious ſongs. Whatever he learned of holy Scripture with the aid of

interpreters, he quickly turns into the sweetest and most moving poetry in his own language, that is to say English. It often happened that his songs kindled a contempt for this world and a long for life of Heaven in the hearts of many men. Indeed, after him others among the English people tried to compose religious poetry, but no one could equal him because he was not taught the art of song by men or by human agency but received this gift through heavenly grace.^①

In Bede's *Historia*, Bede tells the story of Caedmon's inspiration, which includes a nine-line poem known as "Caedmon's Hymn" and demonstrates Caedmon's adaptation of the form and structure of Old English alliteration poetry to a new Christian subject matter. "Caedmon's Hymn" uses the style and metre common to Germanic heroic poetry, with each line containing two half-lines or hemistiches, but substitutes the heroic themes for the subject matter of Latin Christianity ^②.

2.2 King Alfred the Great

The honour of the representative of Latin writers in the 9th and 10th centuries England should be given to King Alfred the Great (849—899). He is called "The Father of English Prose" because of his translation into and writing of prose in Anglo-Saxon English.

King Alfred the Great was the king of Wessex from 871 to 899. He successfully defended his kingdom from Danish invaders and even expanded his holdings at the expense of the Danes. However, beyond preserving an independent Anglo-Saxon kingdom, there was greater ambition in his mind: he wanted to restore his country to the heights it had reached prior to the Viking invasions, to restore the churches of England to their former glory, to change his people's fatuity and the impoverished situation of his country, and to educate his people with books in the vernacular. He gave the country its first new law code in a century, performed Christian conversion, established a nunnery at Shaftesbury and a monastery at Athelney in order to make his new monastery a true centre of learning to help revive letters in his kingdom, and imported scholars from other parts of Europe and also encouraged them to translate Latin texts into English. Owing to

① Alfred David & James Simpson. *The Middle Ages*. Stephen Greenblatt, (ed.). *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* (8th edition), Vol. A. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006: 25.

② Jay Ruud. *Encyclopedia of Medieval Literature*. New York: Fact On File, Inc. , 2006: 102.

King Alfred's support of learning, his pursuit of cultural and educational reforms, and his own translation of important Latin texts into West Saxon texts, the Old English culture revived and a substantial corpus of Old English prose was produced. Amongst the most important texts of Alfredian era are *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, Alfred's translations of *Cura Pastoralis*, Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy* and Orosius' *Historia Adversus Paganos*, and Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*. For the first time there were long continuous passages of Old English prose in Alfredian prose style; these writings represented English people's first attempts at a written literary prose style. On phonological and morphological grounds, Alfredian texts belonged to West Saxon dialect, which became the standard literary language of the whole England in Old English period^①.

Alfred's contributions to English literature take the form largely of translations. Alfred's translation of *Cura Pastoralis* is a manual for the spiritual education of the clergy, containing a preface composed by Alfred decrying the decay of English scholarship. Alfred notices, "So general was its decay in England that there were very few on this side of the Humber who could understand their rituals in English, or translate a letter from Latin into English"^②. In the preface Alfred also expresses his determination to improve that situation. He writes, "When I remembered how the knowledge of Latin had formerly decayed throughout England, and yet many could read English writing, I began, among other various and manifold troubles of this kingdom, to translate into English the book which is called in Latin *Pastoralis*, and in English *Shepherd's Book*"^③. Alfred's translation of Orosius' *Historia Adversus Paganos* is a history of the world structured as a series of annals. It is extended by Alfred with up-to-date accounts drawn from contemporary voyages into the far north by Wulstan and by the Norwegian Ohthere. Alfred's best-known translation is Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*,

① Richard M. Hogg *The Cambridge History of the English Language*, Vol. 1. Beijing: Peking University Press, 2002: 16.

② David Damrosch & Kevin J. H. Dettmar. *The Longman Anthology of British Literature*. New York: Pearson Longman, 2006: 130.

③ David Damrosch & Kevin J. H. Dettmar. *The Longman Anthology of British Literature*. New York: Pearson Longman, 2006: 131.

a vastly popular argument for the uses of adversity in human life. In all of his translations, Alfred uses a style of “idiomatic translation,” by which he tries to render the sense of his source into idiomatic and vivid English, rather than aim for a word-for-word imitation of the original. In the preface to his translation of *Cura Pastoralis*, he declares his principle of translating clearly in these words: “sometimes word for word, and sometimes according to the sense”^①. Thus Alfred is also regarded as the earliest great translator in the history of English literature.

Alfred's another contribution to English literature is the creation of *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, influenced by the structure of his translation of Orosius' *Historia Adversus Paganos*. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* survives in seven complete manuscripts and one fragment. The writing of the original core text of *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* began with Alfred's encouragement during his reign in 891, and continued after his death until two centuries later during the reign of King Stephen in 1154. *The Chronicle* refers not to a single text but to a group of anonymous texts written in Old English prose compiled in various places around England and all derived ultimately from an original core text. *The Chronicle* has been the chief written source for the history of Anglo-Saxon England, particularly from the reign of King Alfred the Great to the Norman Conquest. For example, it records the event in 1066 thus:

Then Count William came from Normandy to Pevensey on Michaelmas Eve, and as soon as they were able to move on they built a castle at Hastings. King Harold was informed of this and he assembled a large army and came against him at the hoary Apple-tree. And William came against him by surprise before his army was drawn up in battle array. But the king nevertheless fought hard against him, with the men who were willing to support him, and there were heavy casualties on both sides. There King Harold was killed... and the French remained masters of the field. ^②

The chroniclers followed the examples of the earlier Easter tables and Latin annals for the years up until 449; but beginning with that year, and the arrival of Hengs and Horsa, the first Saxon invaders of Britain, the chroniclers began to

① David Damrosch & Kevin J. H. Dettmar. *The Longman Anthology of British Literature*. New York: Pearson Longman, 2006; 131.

② David Damrosch & Kevin J. H. Dettmar. *The Longman Anthology of British Literature*. New York: Pearson Longman, 2006; 135.

record more substantial entries. The entry for 755, relating the story of Cynewulf and Cyneheard, has been called the first “short story” in English. The entries concerning Alfred’s wars against the Danes from 893 to 897 are very important as a historical source. The most significant entry of all is the memorable Old English heroic poem called “The Battle of Brunanburh,” which serves as the entry for the year 937. The entries extended more than 1,000 years from the beginning of A. D. to the 12th century about the politics, economy, culture, religion, war and different events which happened in England. Linguistically, it is important also because it is written in the vernacular rather than Latin. Its language is concise, fluent and clear, and its contents about the 11th century to 12th century mark the transition of the language from Old English to Middle English.

The significance of Alfred’s own translation and writings, and the translation and writings under his patronage also lies in the use of his own kingdom’s language, the West Saxon dialect, which grew into the unified English literary language.

2.3 *Beowulf*

The greatest Old English poem is *Beowulf*, which was composed some time between the middle of the 7th and the end of the 10th centuries, in the language that is today called Anglo-Saxon or Old English^①. It is a heroic narrative with 3,182 lines of alliterative verse; best-known and best admired, it is the first English epic, standing as one of the foundation works of poetry in English. The name of its author is unknown.

Beowulf, which concerns the deeds of a Scandinavian prince called Beowulf, has no scenes set in England. The events in the poem are set in Scandinavia, in a “once upon a time” that is partly historical. The structure of *Beowulf* can be divided into two parts: the first part describes the young hero, Beowulf, the biggest presence among the warriors in the land of the Geats, a territory situated in what is now southern Sweden. Early in the poem Beowulf crosses the sea to the land of the Danes in order to rid their country of a man-eating monster called

① Seamus Heaney, (trans.). *Beowulf* (A Norton Critical Edition). New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002; 23.

Grendel. From this expedition which involves him in second contest with Grendel's mother he returns in triumph. The second part narrates the heroic deed of the aged Beowulf of confronting a fire-breathing dragon who begins to terrorise the countryside. In a final climactic encounter, he does manage to slay the dragon, but he also meets his own death and enters the legends of his people as a warrior of high renown.

Beowulf presents its protagonist Beowulf in three great battles against monstrous foes. The first two great battles are concerned with Beowulf's heroic deeds to defeat two monsters, Grendel and his mother for his relative, Danish king, Hrothgar, who builds Heorot, the greatest mead hall ever seen. Here the order of civilisation reigns, and the scop or bard, sings a song of creation. But in the outer darkness, Grendel, a monster of the dark and the chaos, is maddened by the song of the scop. Grendel attacks Heorot at night. He kills 30 of Hrothgar's warriors, and makes the mead hall a place of fear for the Danes. 12 years later Beowulf, a young warrior of the Geatish nation in southern Sweden, hears of Hrothgar's troubles and comes with a band of warriors to win fame by ridding Heorot of the monster. Over the drinking of mead, his credentials are challenged by the Danish retainer Unferth, but Beowulf makes his *beot* (his boast or vow) to destroy Grendel. That night, Beowulf and his men sleep in Heorot. The monster skulks in and devours one of the sleeping Geats, after which Beowulf, scorning to use armor against a monster that has no knowledge of such things, battles Grendel hand-to-hand. Ultimately Beowulf overpowers the monster and tears off his arm. Grendel slinks home to die, and the Danes make a great celebration of Beowulf's victory. The Danish scop composes a song in praise of Beowulf, and Grendel's arm is hung up in Heorot as a sign. Grendel's mother learns about her son's tragedy. Seeking to avenge her son, she attacks Heorot that night and kills one of the Danes. Beowulf must seek the new monster in the dark mere where she lives. He swims under the surface in full battle gear, tracking her to her home in an underwater cave. His sword proves useless against her, and he is nearly killed as she pins him to the ground and brandishes a knife, but he finds a magic sword hanging in the cave and kills the monster. He also finds the body of Grendel, and cuts off the monster's head and brings it back to Heorot. Beowulf bids farewell to Hrothgar, who gives him many gifts and much advice, and he sails back to Gealand

and reports his activities to his own king, Hygelac, Beowulf's uncle. Beowulf's final battle occurs 50 years later to protect his own people from the attack of a fire-breathing dragon. By this time, Beowulf's uncle, Hygelac, the Geatish king and his heirs have been killed, and Beowulf has become the Geatish king. A fire-breathing dragon, who has been stirred to vengeance after sleeping for hundreds of years, is threatening his kingdom. Though already of an old age, Beowulf says he will fight the dragon alone. In the ensuing battle, Beowulf, aided by his young kinsman, a certain Wiglaf who has run off to the woods, manages to defeat the dragon, but is mortally wounded himself and burned by the dragon's fire. He dies of his wounds, and Wiglaf chastises the Geats for leaving their king at the critical moment, predicting that they will now be destroyed by neighbouring tribes because of their failure to support their gold-friend^①. The poem ends with Beowulf's burial.

Beowulf represents Anglo-Saxon ideals of conduct; it also expresses the allegiance to lord and king and the love of glory as the ruling motive of every nobleman's life, and the belief in the inevitability of fate. This first great English epic has its own brilliant features. Firstly, *Beowulf* belongs to Germanic culture, a combination of Germanic history and myth. The name of *Beowulf* is probably interpreted as a kenning, which is a native Germanic form of metaphorical periphrasis, meaning "bee-wolf," where the wolf or foe of the bee is the honey seeking bear. Another interpretation of the hero's name is not *beo* "bee," but *Beow*, a pre-Christian god. But in the epic, the image of Beowulf is described as "The Father of the People." His people praised him. "They said that of all the kings upon earth /he was the man most gracious and fair-minded, /kindest to his people and keenest to win fame." (*Beowulf's Funeral*, 3180-3182)^② Firstly, the image of Beowulf represents not only the old Anglo-Saxon's praises and support of and their loyalty to the heroic king, but also the grandeur achievements of people to encounter the mysterious natural force represented by the monsters. Secondly, as the story of this epic was brought by the Germanic races to England, it contains the

① Jay Ruud. *Encyclopedia of Medieval Literature*. New York: Fact On File, Inc., 2006: 68-69.

② Seamus Heaney, (trans.). *Beowulf* (A Norton Critical Edition). New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002: 78.

colour of paganism though it is added to the elements of Christianity. Thirdly, the style of *Beowulf*, which belongs to the tradition of Germanic verse in the Old English period, is an oral narrative poem written for “the ear, not for the eye”^①. The beauty of the iambic rhythm is achieved by the paired half-lines of alliteration on the stressed syllables, as in the g-sounds of “Grendel gongan, Godes yrre boer”^②. In the poem the use of repetition not only reinforces the understanding but also gives the effect of beauty of sound, such as the repeated use of three different descriptions of Beowulf’s heroic grandeur of killing the dragon. In addition the use of habitual phrases, figurative words, the epithets and understatement or negative affirmation (meiosis or litotes), also belonging to the Germanic tradition in Old English Literature, is achieved with dignity, amplitude and lyrical stylistic effect. The Germanic traditional style, the sublime tone of the poem, the sustained epic grandeur and the power of its presentation of a characteristic hero of Anglo-Saxon heroic age all serve to make *Beowulf* the most important poem in Old English and the first major poem in a vernacular European language.

Questions

1. Discuss the style of English prose in Anglo-Saxon England.
2. Discuss the contribution of Venerable Bede to English literature.
3. In what way is *Beowulf* called “a national epic”?

Further reading

1. Albert C. Baugh & Thomas Cable. *A History of the English Language*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2001.
2. Alfred David & James Simpson. *The Middle Ages*. Stephen Greenblatt, (ed.). *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* (8th edition), Vol. A. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006.
3. Richard M. Hogg. *The Cambridge History of the English Language*, Vol. 1. Beijing: Peking University Press, 2002.

① Constance B. Hieatt, (trans.). *Beowulf and Other Old English Poems*. New York: Bantam Books, Inc., 1983: 33.

② Seamus Heaney, (trans.). *Beowulf* (A Norton Critical Edition). New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002: 16.

4. John C. Pope & Robert D. Fulk, (eds.). *Eight Old English Poems*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company. , 2000.
5. Jay Ruud. *Encyclopedia of Medieval Literature*. New York: Fact On File, Inc. , 2006.

3. Middle English Period: 1066—1485

The main expressions of Middle English Literature are in the varied forms of poetry, prose and drama, in which the greatest poet, Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* represents the summit of achievements. Chaucer is often called "The Father of English Poetry" because of his *The Canterbury Tales* and other verse romances. Chaucer's works have an important impact on the English works in the following renaissance literature.

As can be expected, the English language had changed a great deal in the 700 years since the time of *Beowulf*; it is much easier for modern readers to read Chaucer than to read anything written in Old English. The old alliterative line was still in use in Chaucer's time, though was not used by him. *Vision of Piers Ploughman*, mostly by William Langland, is a poem in alliterative verse. The alliterative metre is used in several other poems, including *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (1360?), one of the stories of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table.

"The prevailing style of Middle English poetry is impersonal, down-to-earth, general, and practical... it can be analysed into three fairly distinct categories—low, middle, and high—each with distinct uses."^① The low style is a simple type, which uses the current idioms of standard speech; the middle style often employs straightforward statements; the high style often includes impressive, smooth, ornate words and emblematic praises for religious poems. These features are well reflected in the Middle English lyrics. Romance and folk ballad occupy a very important position in the Middle English Literature. They will be discussed in detail in the following sections.

^① Maxwell S. Luria & Richard L. Hoffman. *Middle English Lyrics*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002: 280.