



**Filiere: English Studies**

**Semester 3**

**Module: 19**

**British Culture/ US Culture**

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## **Lecture 2: Medieval England**

--William the conqueror had three sons. The eldest, Robert, became duke of Normandy. William, the second son, became king of England. Relations between the two brothers were not good at all. From 1089 to 1096, there was war in Normandy between Duke Robert and William the second. The latter strongly believed that he should control and get hold of all his father's possessions. William the conqueror's strict and rigid policies of centralization and subjugation were implemented and pursued in England by William the second. Later on, when king William the second was killed by a stray arrow in a hunting accident in the year 1100, Henry the first succeeded his brother as king of England.

-From the outset, Henry the first had trouble with his brother, Duke Robert of Normandy. The two brothers met in a battle at Tinchebrai in 1106. Robert was put in jail in England until his death in 1134. At Tinchebrai, the Englishmen fought for Henry the first. This, of course, is the first sign of identification and sharing of interests between the English people and the Norman kings. Henry; the first was then the ruler of both England and Normandy as a result of his victory at Tinchebrai. Henry the first was a powerful ruler as he both implemented policies and enforced the law with the help of a team of judges and set up the Exchequer to supervise monetary and fiscal matters.

-Henry the first had one son, William who passed away in 1120. This tragedy automatically meant that the succession to the crown was in dispute. Henry the first had a daughter called Matilda, who married Geoffrey, count of Anjou. She was an outstanding and powerful ruler but as a woman, she was not accepted by the barons who did not want her to rule or to govern the country. Consequently, in 1135 when Henry the first passed away, Matilda was rejected and pushed aside by Stephen. Matilda was out of the country when Henry the first passed away. Stephen's brother, Henry, Bishop of Winchester sought the support of the church to give some high credit to Stephen cause. As a result, Stephen was appointed as a king from 1135 to 1154. Throughout this period of time, there was no political stability in England and a civil war was launched between the two until 1153. Then, by the Treaty of Winchester, it was finally agreed that Stephen ought to rule the country until his death following Prince Henry's counsel and advice. On the death of Stephen, it was agreed then that Henry the second should become the king.

-Henry the second got hold of the country when he came to the throne in 1154. He became the master of a great empire. In 1150, he had become duke of Normandy and a year later he became count of Anjou, Touraine and Maine. Still, in 1152, Eleanor of Aquitaine, queen of Louis the seventh of France, married Henry the second. Consequently, large parts of southern France were brought to him and became under supervision and control. In 1154, on Stephen's death, Henry the second became officially the ruler and the master of England.

-Henry the second was a powerful ruler and got hold of the entire British land. In England, he re-established the authority of the center after the weak government of Stephen's rule or reign. One of his achievements was the creation of the common law system, according to which every freeman had the right to plead in the royal courts even against his feudal lord.

-Henry the second also renewed or remodeled the Exchequer; which was actually at the center of the royal family, and which was responsible for the collection of taxes.

-Henry the second power was challenged by the kings of France, who were alarmed and disappointed to see the major part of France under English control. In addition to this, the royal authority was also challenged by the church. In the Middle Ages, there was continuous conflict between the rulers and the church. The church was at the center of the British life, so much so that it claimed that the appointment of the bishops was actually its own job and its own exclusive right. Kings; however, thought that they ought to appoint church leaders as they enjoyed a great deal of authority in the state.

-In the year 1162, Henry the second decided to appoint his friend, the chancellor Thomas Becket, to the vacant archbishopric of Canterbury. Henry the second thought that in this way he would have a peaceful relationship with the church. Becket immediately showed his loyalty to the church before his loyalty to Henry the second. Becket condemned Henry the second for his action against the church. As a result, in 1164, Henry the second exiled Becket. When the latter returned to Britain in 1170, he condemned the archbishop of York and six other bishops, who seized his absence and appointed Prince Henry, the heir, at Henry the second's request. The archbishop of York and the six bishops escaped to Henry in Normandy and told him of Becket's actions. This latter was killed in the Canterbury cathedral.

-Henry the second was also exposed to threats from his four sons, Henry, Richard, Geoffrey and John. After the death of Henry the second in 1189, his second son Richard became king of England. Richard the first was a great soldier. He set off for the holy land in order to join the third Crusade against the Moslems. Richard the first decided to entrust the British government to William Longchamp. Prince John, Richard's brother was very jealous of the power of Longchamp as well as of his brother's authority in England. Later on John gained the friendship of the French king Philip Augustus. Both decided, then, to work together against Richard the first. The latter spent the remaining years of his rule abroad defending his own interests and possessions and finally perished in this struggle in 1199.

-Richard the first was, then, succeeded by his brother John. The latter was exposed to three main problems which were: the power of the English nobility which was increasing, the difficulty of defending the English king's interests and possessions in France and the authority of the church, which in fact, was eager to gather into its hands as much power as possible.

-The English nobility had actually become tired of the ruler's policies. The war with the papacy and the French war meant that John had imposed very high taxes on people and that his main concerns were to collect the money by any means. In such a situation, John's opponents obliged him to agree to the terms of Magna Carta, or the Great charter. The year 1215 was an important date in English history as it marked the barons struggle to limit the king's powers and to share it with him.

-Magna carta was a document which clearly stated the rules that a feudal king had to follow. It stated the abuses the king had committed and the remedies to correct or to rectify the ills. The significance of Magna Carta resides in the fact that it has increased the importance of the barons (the feudal aristocracy) and the need for the king to work with them if his government were to succeed.

-During the medieval era, parliaments had been established as a regular form of government by the provisions of oxford in 1258. Parliaments were basically meetings of the most important men in the country in order to exchange views and give or offer advice.

-The thirteenth century was an interesting and exciting era of change as no dramatic events took place. England acquired great institutions: courts and universities. The parliament started with an important charter of rights written by the nobles in order to share the power with the king. This was called Magna Carta. The century also witnessed the birth of nationalism under Edward I, one of the best kings in England who actually believed in nationalism and respected the lower social classes. He allowed the peasants to take part in the great council and especially the sons of peasants who attended Cambridge and Oxford universities.

-The fourteenth century also witnessed a number of changes which affected society. Two main events took place: The Black Death and the Farmers' Revolt. The Black Death (1348-1349) and (1356-1361) refers to the plagues that broke out in England and which could not be cured. It killed an important number of the British population. Still, this had some bad consequences on the feudal system in general as the land was available while the people were not. So the farmers started asking for more rights as they were badly affected by the taxes

imposed on them by the government to pay for the costs of the war. Still; the fourteenth century was marked by the farmer's revolt in 1381 which was a failure but at the same time a challenge to the ruling power. In this century, people started criticizing or attacking the church. One of the main figures who did that in his writings was Chaucer.