

The beginnings of English Literature

ANGLO-SAXON LITERATURE (450-1100 A.D.)

Historical Events

There may have been writings in and about England during the times of the Romans, but these are considered Roman Literature, not English.

English literature begins with the arrival of the English (Angles) and Saxons and Jutes from Germany and Denmark. The Germanic invaders set up many small kingdoms and fought among themselves for 250 years (600-850 A.D.)

Danes attacked in the late 9th century and took over all north and central England. King Alfred the Great (871-899) stopped them from taking all of it

In the middle of the 11th Century, the country was united under an Anglo-Saxon king.

Just after that happened, in 1066, Normans (French-speakers from Normandy) conquered England.

The Anglo-Saxon or Old English language

You almost wouldn't recognize it as English. The grammar and vocabulary are different. There are examples in Parts 1 and II of your text. It's wonderful to read if you take the time to understand the language and very beautiful to listen to.

THE MEDIEVAL PERIOD (1100-1500 A.D.)

The Middle English Language

For 300 years after 1066, England had French-speaking kings. French became the official language and the old Anglo-Saxon language merged with Norman French. Overall, though, there were many more speakers of English. By the time of **Geoffrey Chaucer**, 1340 -1400, English looked fairly recognizable. You can look at pages 45- 56 in your text to get an idea. Again it's wonderful but the language is so different it requires some time to understand and enjoy it.

Apart from Chaucer, many **Romances** - the stories of knights and their adventures - come from this time. One became one of the first printed books in English, thanks to William Caxton who set up a printing press in London in 1476. As everywhere else, this changed the nature of literature from a predominantly oral entertainment to a quiet one.

Also very important are the **Folk ballads**, sung by local minstrels (performers).

The Folk Ballad

The anonymous folk ballad (or popular ballad), was composed to be sung. It was passed along orally from singer to singer, from generation to generation, and from one region to another. During this progression a particular ballad would undergo many changes in both words and tune.

Primarily based on an older legend or romance, this type of ballad is usually a short, simple song that tells a dramatic story through dialogue and action. The familiar stanza form is four lines, with four or three stresses alternating and with the second and fourth lines rhyming. For example:

**It was ín and abóut the Mártinmas tíme,
When the gréen léaves were a fálling,
That Sír John Gráeme, in the Wést Countrý,
Fell in lóve with Bárbara Állan**

“Bonny Barbara Allan”

More than 300 English and Scottish folk ballads, dating from the 12th to the 16th centuries survive.

Ballads, however, cannot be confined to any one period or place; similar subject matter appears in the ballads of other peoples. American ballads deal mainly with cowboys, folk heroes, the mountain people, the Southern blacks, and famous outlaws.

During the mid-20th century in the United States there was a great resurgence of interest in folk music, particularly in ballads. Many popular singers of the time sang old ballads. (Names to check are Joan Baez, Pete Seeger, Woody Guthrie, Bob Dylan.)

Poets, musicians and song writers still use the ballad form today.

Ballads also appear all through English literature.

The ballad:

- simple rhyme schemes
- narrative (= tells a story)
- may be about anyone: kings or poor people
- dramatic
- regular rhythms
- passed down through the generations orally
- often sung so needed to be easily memorable
- often contains dialogue
- simple but powerful