

THE PRE-RENAISSANCE PERIOD IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

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Annotation: This article gives a brief overview of the development of English literature during the Pre-Renaissance and the writers and their works that contributed to its development, as well as examples of folklore.

Key words: The London dialect, Catholic Church, poor priests, rich bishops, “Piers Plowman”, a long poem, contact with French literature, twenty-four stories, sum up all types, folk poetry.

Introduction. In the 14th century the Norman Kings made London their residence. It became the most populous town in England. The London dialect was the central dialect, and could be understood throughout the country. The protest against the Catholic Church and the growth of national feeling during the first years of the war found an echo in literature. There appeared poor priests who wandered from one village to another and talked to the people. They protested not only against rich bishops but also against churchmen who were ignorant and could not teach people anything. Poets and priests William Langland and John Wyclif were among them.

Main part. William Langland (1332?-1400?) was a poor priest. His parents were poor but free peasants. He denounced the rich churchmen and said that everybody was obliged to work. His name is remembered for a poem he wrote, “The Visions of William Concerning Piers the Ploughman” (Piers -Peter). Nowadays the poem is called “Piers Plowman”.

“Piers Plowman” is an allegorical poem. In it vice and Virtue are spoken of as if they were human beings. Truth is a young maiden, Greed is an old witch. The poem was very popular in the middle ages. The content of the poem is as follows. On a fine May Day, the poet William went to the Malvern Hills. After a time he fell asleep in the open air. In his dream the poet sees Piers the Ploughman, a peasant. Piers tell him about the hard life of the people. He says that it is peasants alone who work and keep the monks and the lords in comfort, and the monks think they do quite enough by praying for the peasants. This poem helped the people to understand the necessity of fighting for their rights.[1]

John Wyclif (1320?-1384) was also a poor English priest. Wyclif is remembered because he discussed political questions with the common people in the common tongue, and because he translated the Bible into English. He conflict-ed with one of the English bishops and told his associates to leave the Church and go among the people to teach the truth. The last years of his life he lived in retirement occupied with his literary work and organizing his “poor priests”.

But the greatest writer of the Middle English period was the poet Geoffrey Chaucer.

GEOFFREY CHAUCER

(1340 - 1400)

Geoffrey Chaucer is listed by most scholars as one of the three greatest poets in English literature (along with William Shakespeare and John Milton). He was born in London. His father, John Chaucer, was a London wine merchant. In 1357 Geoffrey was listed as a page in the household of the wife of Prince Lionel, a son of Edward III. His service in that household indicates that his family had sufficient social status for him to receive a courtly education. Throughout the rest of his lifetime, Chaucer was in some way connected with members of the royal family. In 1366 Chaucer married Philippa Roet, a lady-in-waiting to the Queen. Chaucer rose socially through his marriage. In 1368 he became one of the King's esquires, which in those days meant that he worked in the

administrative department of the King's government. One of his duties was to act as a government envoy on foreign Diplomatic missions. Chaucer's diplomatic missions took him first to France and later to Italy.[2]

Chaucer's poetry is generally divided into three periods.

The first period. While in France Geoffrey Chaucer came in contact with French literature, his earliest poems were written in imitation of the French romances. He translated from French a famous allegorical poem of the 13th century, "The Romance of the Rose".

The second period. In 1372 Chaucer was sent to Genoa to arrange a commercial treaty. In Italy he became acquainted with Italian life and culture, with the classical authors and with the newer Italian works of Dante and Petrarch, with the tales of Boccaccio. In Chaucer's own writing, the French models of his earliest years gave way to this Italian influence. To the Italian period can be assigned "The House of Fame", a didactic poem; "The Parliament of Fowls" (birds), an allegorical poem satirizing Parliament; "Troilus and Cressida", which is considered to be the predecessor of the psychological novel in England, and "The Legend of Good Women", a dream-poem.

The third, English, period. After his return to London, Chaucer became a customs official at the port of London. He gave up his job in 1386, and began composing his masterpiece "The Canterbury Tales", but it remained unfinished.

He died in 1400 and was buried in Westminster Abbey in a section, which later became established as the Poet's Corner. Chaucer was the last English writer of the Middle Ages and the first of the Renaissance.[3]

"The Canterbury Tales"

"The Canterbury Tales" is a long poem made up of general introduction ("The Prologue") and twenty-four stories, told in verse. The frame-work which serves to connect them is a pilgrimage from London to Canterbury. Chaucer opens his work with a prologue to the whole book. In the prologue thirty men and women from all ranks of society pass before the readers' eyes. Chaucer draws a rapid portrait of each traveller, thus showing his character. Chaucer himself and a certain Harry Bailly, the host (owner) of a London inn are among them. Harry Bailly proposes the following plan: each pilgrim was to tell two stories on the way to the shrine and two on the way back. The host would be their guide and would judge their stories. He who told the best story was to have a fine supper at the expense of the others.

Chaucer planned to include 120 stories, but he managed only twenty-four, some of them were not completed. The individual stories are of many kinds: religious stories, legends, fables, fairy tales, sermons, and courtly romances. Short story writers in the following centuries learned much about their craft from the poet Geoffrey Chaucer.

As it was already mentioned, Chaucer introduces each of his pilgrims in the prologue, and then he lets us know about them through stories they tell. The passage below is a part from the prologue, where the author introduces a plowman:

There was a Plowman with him there, his brother
 Many a load of dung one time or other
 He must have carted through the morning dew.
 He was an honest worker, good and true,
 Living in peace and perfect charity,
 And, as the gospel bade him, so did he,
 Loving God best with all his heart and mind
 And then his neighbour as himself, repined
 At no misfortune, slacked for no content,
 For steadily about his work he went
 To thrash his corn, to dig or to manure
 Or make a ditch; and he would help the poor
 For love of Christ and never take a penny
 If he could help it, and, as prompt as any,

He paid his tithes and full when they were due
 On what he owned, and on his earning too
 He wore a tabard smock and rode a mare.

In “Canterbury Tales” Chaucer introduced a rhythmic pattern called iambic pentameter into English poetry. This pattern, or meter, consists of 10 syllables alternately unaccented and accented in each line. The lines may or may not rhyme. Iambic pentameter became a widely used meter in English poetry.

Chaucer’s contribution to English literature is usually explained by the following:

1. “The Canterbury Tales” sum up all types of stories that existed in the middle ages.
2. He managed to show different types of people that lived during his time and through these people he showed a true picture of the life of the 14th century. (The pilgrims range in rank from a knight to a poor plowman. Only the very highest and lowest ranks - the nobility and the serfs - are missing.)
3. Chaucer was the creator of a new literary language. He chose to write in the popular tongue that is in English language, though aristocracy of the time read and spoke French. Chaucer was the true founder of English literature.
4. Chaucer was by learning a man of the Middle ages, but his attitude towards mankind was so broad-minded that his work is timeless. He is the earliest English poet who may still be read for pleasure today.[4]

Literature of the 15th century

Chaucer’s death was a great blow to English poetry. It took two centuries to produce a poet equal to him. But folk poetry flourished in England and Scotland in the 15th century. The most interesting examples of folk poetry were the ballads. Ballads and songs expressed the sentiments and thoughts of the people. They were handed down orally from generation to generation. The art of printing did not stop the creation of folk-songs and ballads. They continued to develop till the 18th century.

The original authors of ballads are unknown; in fact, a given ballad may exist in several versions, because many different people told and revised the ballad as it travelled from village to village. But when a version seemed just right, its teller would be urged to recite the story again and again without changing a thing. Some folk ballads make use of refrains, repetitions of a line or lines in every stanza without variation. Refrains add emphasis and a note of continuity to the ballads.

As regards to content, the ballads are usually divided into three groups: historical, heroic, and romantic ballads. Historical ballads were based on a historical fact, while heroic ballads were about people who were persecuted by the law or by their own families. Among the most popular ones were those about Robin Hood, who was an outlaw.

Robin Hood Ballads

The Robin Hood ballads, numbering some forty separate ballads, were written down at various times not earlier than the 14th and 15th centuries. Robin Hood is a partly historical, partly legendary character. He must have lived in the second half of the 12th century, during the reign of Henry II and his son Richard I. The older ballads tell us much about the Saxon yeomen, who were famous archers and keen hunters. Being ill treated by the Norman robber-barons, they longed to live free in the forest with Robin as their leader. Robin Hood always helped the country folk in their troubles. Though sheriff put a big price on Robin’s head, Saxons didn’t betray him.

Thus, Robin was an outlaw and lived in Sherwood Forest. He was smart and clever “with a twinkle in the eye”. Whenever the Sheriff or the king sent out a party of men to catch him, Robin fought with so much vigour that his enemies, amazed at his bravery, confessed themselves beaten and stayed with him in the forest. They became “the merry men of Robin Hood”. [5]

In the 16th century many new episodes were introduced into the ballads. They were arranged in series, the most popular of which was “The Jolly Life of Robin Hood and His Men in Sherwood”.

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