

**-Anglo-Norman Literature (1066-1340) and the Age of Chaucer (1340-1400)**

The Norman Conquest: The Normans were originally a hardy race of sea rovers living in Scandinavia. In the 10th century, they conquered a part of northern France, which has been called Normandy, and settled down there. They adopted French as their language and embraced Christianity. They became renowned for their learning, their military prowess and their organising ability. The Duke of Normandy **William the Great** was an able military leader and statesman. In the year 1066, he led the Norman army to attack England. The two armies met and fought at **Hastings**. Finally the English army was defeated. William and his men marched speedily into London and William became the King of England. After the conquest, feudal system was established in English society. The new king ruled England with a high hand. He made a thorough job of taking over the country, and had everything inventoried. William saw himself as the owner of the country. He owned the land and everything in it. At its top was the King William and below him were his noblemen such as barons and knights.

**-Social Conditions in the Feudal England**

In the feudal society, class division was very obvious, and class contradictions became very sharp. The peasants, who had become serfs, toiled all the year round for the feudal landlords. The church and court were united to control and oppress the people. Those who dared to say anything against the feudal order would be put to death. Moreover, continuous wars with other countries and diseases added miseries to the English people. The government had no sympathy with the people. Instead, they enforced heavy taxes upon the people. The poor peasants could not endure any longer, and they rose up to fight against the ruling class. The year 1381 witnessed a famous peasant uprising led by **Wat Tyler** and **John Ball**. Though it failed and its leaders were killed, it gave the ruling class a heavy blow.

**-Social Impact of the Conquest**

The Norman conquest accomplished precisely that racial rejuvenation of which Anglo-Saxon England stood in need. For the Normans brought with them from France the zest for joy and beauty and dignified and stately ceremony in which the Anglo-Saxon temperament was poor—they brought the love of light-hearted song and chivalrous sports, of rich clothing, of finely-painted manuscripts, of noble architecture in cathedrals and palaces, of formal religious ritual, and of the pomp and display of all elaborate pageantry. In the outcome they largely reshaped the heavy mass of Anglo-Saxon life into forms of grace and beauty and brightened its duller surface with varied and brilliant colors. For the Anglo-Saxons themselves, however, the Conquest meant at first little else than that bitterest and most complete of all national disasters, hopeless subjection to a tyrannical and contemptuous foe. The Normans were not heathen, as the 'Danes' had been, and they were too few in number to wish to supplant the conquered people; but they imposed themselves, both politically and socially, as stern and absolute masters. King William confirmed in their possessions the few Saxon nobles and lesser land-owners who accepted his rule and did not later revolt; but both pledges and interest compelled him to bestow most of the estates of the kingdom,

**-The Influence of the Norman Conquest upon English Language and Literature**

After the conquest, the Normans introduced the body of customs and ideals known as **chivalry** into England. The **knightly code**, the **romantic interest in women**, **tenderness** and **reverence** paid to **Virgin Mary** were reflected in literature. With the coming of the Normans, the Anglo-Saxons sank to a position of abjectness.

Their language was made a despised thing. French words of warfare and chivalry, art and luxury, science and law, began to come into the English language. Thus three languages existed in England in that period. The Normans spoke **French**, the lower classes spoke **English**, and the scholars and clergymen used **Latin**. The literature of that period was varied in interest and extensive in range. The Normans began to write histories or chronicles to record their achievements. Most of the books were written in Latin or French. The prevailing form of literature in the feudal England was the **romance**.

### **-The Union of Races and Languages: LATIN, FRENCH, AND ENGLISH.**

That their own race and identity were destined to be absorbed in those of the Anglo-Saxons could never have occurred to any of the Normans who stood with **William** at **Hastings**, and scarcely to any of their children. Yet this result was predetermined by the stubborn tenacity and numerical superiority of the conquered people and by the easy adaptability of the Norman temperament. Racially, and to a less extent socially, intermarriage did its work, and that within a very few generations. Little by little, also, Norman contempt and Saxon hatred were softened into tolerance, and at last even into a sentiment of national unity. This sentiment was finally to be confirmed by the loss of Normandy and other French possessions of the Norman-English kings in the thirteenth century, a loss which transformed England from a province of the Norman Continental empire and of a foreign nobility into an independent country, and further by the wars ('The Hundred Years' War') which England-Norman nobility and Saxon yeomen fighting together—carried on in France in the fourteenth century.

In language and literature, the most general immediate result of the Conquest was to make of England a **trilingual** country, where **Latin**, **French**, and **Anglo-Saxon** were spoken separately side by side. With Latin, the tongue of the Church and of scholars, the Norman clergy were much more thoroughly familiar than the Saxon priests had been; and the introduction of the richer Latin culture resulted, in the latter half of the twelfth century, at the court of Henry II, in a brilliant outburst of Latin literature. In England, as well as in the rest of Western Europe, Latin long continued to be the language of religious and learned writing—down to the sixteenth century or even later. French, that dialect of it which was spoken by the Normans—Anglo-French (English-French) it has naturally come to be called—was of course introduced by the Conquest as the language of the governing and upper social class, and in it also during the next three or four centuries a considerable body of literature was produced. Anglo-Saxon, which we may now term English, remained inevitably as the language of the subject race, but their literature was at first crushed down into insignificance. Ballads celebrating the resistance of scattered Saxons to their oppressors no doubt circulated widely on the lips of the people, but English writing of the more formal sorts, almost absolutely ceased for more than a century, to make a new beginning about the year 1200. Among the aspects of Medieval English Literature:

- The frequent use of allegories, ballads and romances.
- Focus on religious and educational writings
- Anonymity of writers
- Chivalry and Courtly Love depiction in literature.

### **1-Anglo – Norman Period (1066 AD – 1340 AD)**

Immediately after the Norman Conquest, the Norman French was made the official language of England. English literature, which was making a beginning, ceased to exist. The Revival came during the reign of **King John** and with **Magna Carta**, English Language began to assert itself again.

**Layamon's Brut** (1205) was the first noteworthy product of this revival of the English language. Written in 30,000 lines, the book deals with the legendary history of ancient Britain starting with Aeneas Brutus. Layamon was a priest of Worcestershire. His Brut shows three streams of influence – Celtic, French and English, written in alliterative verses. The poet makes use of occasional rimes.

**Ormulum** by **Orm** is a series of metrical homilies. The fine imaginative piece of the period is “The Owl and the Nightingale” which is in the form of a dialogue between the two birds about their respective merits.

In the early 14th century, the major productions include **Robert Mannyng's Handlyng Synne** (Manual of Sins) the prose **Ayenbite** of **Inwyt** were translations from the French.

### **-The Romance in the Anglo-Norman Period**

The romance was the prevailing literary form in the medieval period. It was a long composition, sometimes in verse and sometimes in prose, which described the life and adventures of a noble hero. Its essential features include:

\*It lacks general resemblance to truth or reality.

\*It exaggerates the vices of human nature and idealises the virtues.

\*It contains perilous adventures more or less remote from ordinary life.

\*It lays emphasis on supreme devotion to a fair lady.

\*The central character of the romance is the knight, a man of noble birth and skilled in the use of weapons, who is commonly described as riding forth to seek adventures, or taking part in tournaments, or fighting for his lord in battle. He is devoted to the church and the king.

\*In romances we see an epitome of the English society in the medieval period. The romance, as a literary genre, prospered for about 300 years (1200-1500). It was written for the upper class, so it had little to do with the common people

### **2-The Age of Chaucer (1340 -1400)**

The founder of English poetry or the father of English poetry; introduction of the rhymed stanza of various types from France to English poetry, instead of the old alliterative verse; the 1st great poet who wrote in the English language; making the London dialect the standard for the modern English speech.

\***The Canterbury Tales**: Chaucer's main literary product. It is a picture of the 14th century England; beginning with a general prologue; manifesting the influence of Boccaccio's “Decameron” throughout his characterization choices and storytelling techniques.

## 2-1-The Contemporaries of Chaucer

The Fourteenth century England produced four poets, of whom Chaucer is the greatest. The other three are William Langland, John Gower and John Barbour.

**-William Langland** He is generally identified as the author of Vision of William Concerning Piers the Plowman. It is a long poem in which Langland makes a vehement attack on the vices of the corrupt Church. It is also an allegory like Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress.

**-John Gower:** Gower was a popular writer who wrote in three languages. He is famous for his third work written in English, Confessio Amantis. This has the allegorical setting. The story contains many anecdotes that reveal Gower's capacity as a story teller.

**- John Barbour:** Barbour is the first famous Scottish poet. His great work is The Brus, a long poem of twenty books and 1300 lines. It is the history of Scotland's struggle for freedom till the death of Bruce.

## 2-2-Prose of Chaucer's Age

During Chaucer's period, the English language was ripe for a good prose style. The language was settling for a standard. In the works of Mandeville and Malory, we have a prose that is both original and individual. Though the existence of Mandeville is denied now, The Travels, a compilation from several popular books of voyages, is interesting. The travels are full of incredible descriptions and anecdotes. The style is sweet and clear with colloquial touches.

**-John Wycliffe**, an Oxford scholar, began satirizing the abuses of the church. He is said to have brought out an English translation of the Bible. His style is not polished but it is vigorous and pointed with a homely simplicity. He is known as 'the morning star of Reformation', because of the influence of his satire on the church.

**-Sir Thomas Malory** is famous for his book, Morte d' Arthur. It is also a compilation of several romances about King Arthur. It is a skilful blend of dialogue and narrative and is full of colour and life, which makes Malory the first great individual prose stylist. Malory's work came to be published by Caxton in his printing press.