

## Middle English Literature: General Overviews & Critical Studies

Rakhi Tyagi

Dept. of English (NET) H.No. 10, Type II – A MDU Campus, Rohtak (HR.)

### Abstract:

*The main focus of this article is on English-language literature rather than the literature of England, in order that it includes writers from Scotland, Wales, and the whole of Ireland, in addition to literature in English from countries of the former British Empire, including the United States. On the other hand, until the early 19th century, it only deals with the literature of the United Kingdom and Ireland. It does not include literature written in the other languages of Britain. The English language has developed over the course of more than 1,400 years. The initial forms of English, a set of Anglo-Frisian dialects brought to Great Britain by Anglo-Saxon settlers in the fifth century, are called Old English. Middle English began in the late 11th century with the Norman Conquest of England. Near the beginning Modern English began in the late 15th century with the introduction of the printing press to London and the King James Bible in addition to the Great Vowel Shift. Through the influence of the British Empire, the English language has spread around the world since the 17th century.*

**Keywords:** Literature, British Empire, Anglo-Frisian, Anglo-Saxon. Norman.

**Introduction:** After the Norman conquest of England in 1066, the written form of the Anglo-Saxon language became less common. Under the influence of the new

aristocracy, French became the standard language of courts, parliament, and polite society. As the invaders integrated, their language and literature mingled with that of the natives, and the Norman dialects of the ruling classes became Anglo-Norman. From then until the 12th century Anglo-Saxon underwent a gradual transition into Middle English. Political power was no longer in English hands, so that the West Saxon literary language had no more influence than any other dialect and Middle English literature was written in the many dialects that corresponded to the region, history, culture, and background of individual writers.

### Middle English Literature Background:

The Norman conquest of England in 1066 customarily signifies the beginning of 200 years of the domination of French in English letters. French cultural dominance, furthermore, was common in Europe at this time. French language and culture replaced English in polite court society and had lasting effects on English culture. However, the native tradition survived, although little 13th-century, and even less 12th-century, vernacular literature is extant, since most of it was transmitted orally. Anglo-Saxon fragmented into several dialects and gradually evolved into Middle English, which, despite an admixture of French, is unquestionably English. By the mid-14th cent., Middle English had become the

literary as well as the spoken language of England.

### **The Early Period:**

There are numerous poems in early Middle English are extant. The Ormulum- a 12th-century work of Biblical exegesis, written in early Middle English verse by a monk named Orm. It's a verse translation of parts of the Gospels which is of linguistic and prosodic rather than literary interest. Of approximately the same date, The Owl and the Nightingale is the first example in English of the *débat*, a popular continental form; in the poem, the owl, strictly monastic and didactic, and the nightingale, a free and amorous secular spirit, charmingly debate the virtues of their respective ways of life.

### **The Thirteenth Century:**

Middle English prose of the 13th century continued in the custom of Anglo-Saxon prose—homiletic, didactic, and directed toward ordinary people rather than polite society. The “Katherine Group”, comprising three saints' lives, is typical. The *Ancren Riwe* is a manual for prospective anchoresses; it was very popular, and it greatly influenced the prose of the 13th and 14th cent. The fact that there was no French prose tradition was very important to the preservation of the English prose tradition.

In the 13th century, the romance, an significant continental narrative verse form, was introduced in England. It drew from three rich sources of character and adventure: the legends of Charlemagne, the legends of ancient Greece and Rome, and the British legends of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. Layamon's *Brut*, a late 13th-century metrical romance

marks the first appearance of Arthurian matter in English.

**Layamon's Brut**, also known as the **Chronicle of Britain** and often called simply *Brut*, is a Middle English poem compiled and recast by the English priest Layamon. It is named for Britain's mythical founder, Brutus of Troy. The *Brut* is 16,095 lines long and narrates the history of Britain. The rhyming style is the alliterative verse line style commonly used in Middle English poetry. Layamon's *Brut* (c. 1215) is a history of England in verse written in a form of Middle English and it remains one of the best extant examples of early Middle English.

Original English romances include **King Horn** ( one of the earliest Middle English romances which was written in a South Midlands dialect somewhere around 1225 by an unknown poet and which is based on the Anglo-Norman story) and **Havelok the Dane** ( a Middle English romance story). Both 13th-century works retain elements of the Anglo-Saxon heroic tradition.

On the other hand, French romances were far extra influential than their English counterparts. In England French romances popularized ideas of adventure and heroism quite contrary to those of Anglo-Saxon heroic literature and were representative of wholly dissimilar values and tastes. Ideals of courtly love, together with its elaborate manners and rituals, replaced those of the heroic code; adventure and feats of courage were pursued for the sake of the knight's lady rather than for the sake of the hero's honor or the glory of his tribal king.

Continental verse forms based on metrics and rhyme replaced the Anglo-Saxon

alliterative line in Middle English poetry. Numerous French literary forms also became popular, for instance a moral tale, the animal fable, and the dream vision. The continental allegorical tradition, which derived from classical literature, is exemplified by the Roman de la Rose, which had a strong impact on English literature.

Medieval works of literature often center on the inevitability, sadness, change, loss, and death; and the vanity of human grandeur. A number of 13th-century secular and religious Middle English **lyrics** are extant, but like Middle English literature in general, the lyric reached its fullest flower during the second half of the 14th cent. Lyrics continued popular in the 15th cent., from which time the **ballad** also dates.

### **The Fourteenth Century:**

The poetry of the alliterative revival includes some of the best poetry in Middle English. The Christian allegory *The Pearl* is a poem of great intricacy and sensibility that is meaningful on several symbolic levels. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, by the same anonymous author, is also of high literary sophistication, and its intelligence, vividness, and symbolic interest render it possibly the finest Arthurian poem in English. Other important alliterative poems are the moral allegory *Piers Plowman*, attributed to William Langland, and the alliterative *Morte Arthur*, which, like nearly all English poetry until the mid-14th cent., was anonymous.

### **Pearl:**

It is a Middle English alliterative poem written in the late 14th century. Its unknown author, designated the "Pearl poet" or

"Gawain poet", is generally assumed to be the author of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Patience*, and *Cleanness* and may have composed *St. Erkenwald*.

### **Sir Gawain and the Green Knight:**

Sir Gawain was one of the famous heroes of Arthurian legend; nephew of King Arthur, a knight of King Arthur's Round Table. He was regarded, particularly in the early romances, as the model of chivalry—pure, brave, and courteous. In later romances, when spiritual purity was valued more than chivalrous deeds, his character deteriorated, becoming treacherous and brutal. Gawain is most famous as the hero of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

In the tale, Sir Gawain agrees to a challenge from a mysterious warrior who is completely green, from his clothes and hair to his beard and skin. The "Green Knight" offers to allow anyone to strike him with his axe if the challenger will take a return blow in a year and a day. Gawain accepts, and beheads him in one blow, only to have the Green Knight stand up, pick up his head, and remind Gawain to meet him at the appointed time. The story of Gawain's struggle to meet the appointment and his adventures along the way demonstrate the spirit of chivalry and loyalty. He sets out to find the Green Knight, and undergoes many trials to his ideals and virtue, as compared with Beowulf who has to fight Grendel and his dam to save his people.

**Geoffrey Chaucer:** is considered the greatest poet of the Middle English period. He's well-known for "*The Canterbury Tales*." He has been called "the father of English poetry. With his knowledge of

Latin, French and Italian literature, he transformed the world of literature. Chaucer's greatest work was his "Canterbury Tales," a collection of stories told by pilgrims on their way to Canterbury. Chaucer (the name is French and seems to have meant originally 'shoemaker') came into the world probably in 1338, the first important author who was born and lived in London, which with him becomes the centre of English literature. About his life, as about those of many of our earlier writers, there remains only very fragmentary information, which in his case is largely pieced together from scattering entries of various kinds in such documents as court account books and public records of state matters and of lawsuits. His father, a wine merchant, may have helped supply the cellars of the king (Edward III) and so have been able to bring his son to royal notice; at any rate, while still in his teens Geoffrey became a page in the service of one of the king's daughters-in-law.

Chaucer's literary activity is often divided into three periods. The first period includes his early work (to 1370), which is based largely on French models, especially the Roman de la Rose and the poems of Guillaume de Machaut. He drew inspiration from the rich French poetry of the period, which was produced partly in France, partly in England.

Chaucer experimented with the numerous lyric forms which the French poets had brought to perfection; he also translated, in whole or in part, the most important of medieval French narrative poems, the thirteenth century 'Romance of the Rose' of

Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meung, a very clever satirical allegory, in many thousand lines, of medieval love and medieval religion. Chaucer's chief works during this time are the Book of the Duchess, an allegorical lament written in 1369 on the death of Blanche, wife of John of Gaunt, and a partial translation of the Roman de la Rose.

### **Italian Period:**

Chaucer's second period (up to c.1387) is called his Italian period because during this time his works were modelled primarily on Dante and Boccaccio. It dates from his first visit to Italy in 1372-3, where at Padua he may perhaps have met the fluent Italian poet Petrarch, and where at any rate the revelation of Italian life and literature must have aroused his intense enthusiasm. From this time, and especially after his other visit to Italy, five years later, he made much direct use of the works of Petrarch and Boccaccio and to a less degree of those of their greater predecessor, Dante, whose severe spirit was too unlike Chaucer's for his thorough appreciation. The longest and finest of Chaucer's poems of this period, 'Troilus and Crisside' is based on a work of Boccaccio. It's one of the great love poems in the English language. Here Chaucer details with compelling power the sentiment and tragedy of love, and the psychology of the heroine who had become for the middle Ages a central figure in the tale of Troy. Chaucer perfected the seven-line stanza later called rhyme royal.

### **Sir Thomas Malory:**

Malory, English author of Morte d' Arthur. It is almost certain that he was Sir Thomas Malory of Newbold Revell, Warwickshire.

Knighted in 1442, he served in the parliament of 1445. He was evidently a violent, lawless individual who committed a series of crimes, including poaching, extortion, robbery, rape, and attempted murder. Most of his life from 1451 on was spent in prison, and he probably did most of his writing there. Malory's original book was called *The Book of King Arthur and His Noble Knights of the Round Table* and was made up of eight romances that were more or less separate. William Caxton printed it in 1485 and gave it the misleading title of *Morte d' Arthur*. This work is usually regarded as the most significant accomplishment in English literature in the two centuries between the works of Chaucer and those of such masters as Spenser and Shakespeare. The last medieval English work of the Arthurian legend, Malory's tales are supposedly based on an assortment of French prose romances. The *Morte d' Arthur* is noted for its excellent dramatic narrative and the beauty of its rhythmic and simple language. It remains the standard source for later versions of the legend.

"*Le Morte Darthur*" was written in English and consists of eight tales in 507 chapters in 21 books, so arranged by Caxton, for clarity of understanding. It is the basis of most modern tellings of the Arthurian story and was the inspiration for Tennyson's "*Idylls of the King*." *Le Morte Darthur* is undoubtedly the last definitive interpretation of the Arthurian myth before the dawn of the English Renaissance.

### **King Arthur - Legendary Character / Royalty:**

King Arthur is one of the great mythic figures of English literature. Dozens of legends and romantic images have grown up

around him: the Knights of the Round Table, Merlin the wizard, and the Holy Grail, to name a few. According to the main Arthurian legends, the king wielded a magical sword, Excalibur; lived in a glorious kingdom called Camelot; was helped by the wizard Mordred; and was married to the beautiful Queen Guinevere (who in many legends falls for Arthur's knight Sir Lancelot). Many of our modern-day stories of Arthur are based on *Le Morte d'Arthur* ("The Death of Arthur"), the collection of Arthurian tales published by Sir Thomas Malory in 1485. Historians can't decide whether anyone like Arthur ever existed, though most now accept that the legend is very loosely based on a real historical figure; he may have been a 5th or 6th century ruler name Arturus or Riothamus.

### **The Fifteenth Century:**

The 15th Century is not distinguished in English letters, due in part to the social dislocation caused by the prolonged Wars of the Roses. Of the many 15th-century imitators of Chaucer the best-known are John Lydgate and Thomas Hoccleve. Other poets of the time include Stephen Hawes and Alexander Barclay and the Scots poets William Dunbar, Robert Henryson, and Gawin Douglas. The poetry of John Skelton, which is mostly satiric, combines medieval and Renaissance elements.

The miracle play, a long cycle of short plays based upon biblical episodes, was popular throughout the middle Ages in England. The morality play, an allegorical drama centering on the struggle for man's soul, originated in the 15th cent. The finest of the genre is *Everyman* (a 15th century English morality play).



Everyman is the best surviving example of the type of medieval drama known as the morality play. Moralities evolved side by side with the mystery plays, although they were composed individually and not in cycles. The moralities employed allegory to dramatize the moral struggle Christianity envisions universal in every individual.

Everyman, a short play of some 900 lines, portrays a complacent Everyman who is informed by Death of his approaching end. The play shows the hero's progression from despair and fear of death to a "Christian resignation that is the prelude to redemption." First, Everyman is deserted by his false friends: his casual companions, his kin, and his wealth. He falls back on his Good Deeds, his Strength, his Beauty, his Intelligence, and his Knowledge. These assist him in making his Book of Accounts, but at the end, when he must go to the grave, all desert him save his Good Deeds alone. The play makes its grim point that we can take with us from this world nothing that we have received; only what we have given.

### **Medieval theatre:**

In the middle Ages, drama in the vernacular languages of Europe may have emerged from enactments of the liturgy. Mystery plays were presented in the porches of cathedrals or by strolling players on feast days. Miracle and mystery plays, along with morality plays (or "interludes"), later evolved into more elaborate forms of drama, such as was seen on the Elizabethan stages. Another form of medieval theatre was the **mummers'** plays, a form of early street theatre associated with the Morris dance, concentrating on themes such as Saint

George and the Dragon and Robin Hood. These were folk tales re-telling old stories, and the actors travelled from town to town performing these for their audiences in return for money and hospitality.

Mystery plays and miracle plays are among the earliest formally developed plays in medieval Europe. Medieval mystery plays focused on the representation of Bible stories in churches as tableaux with accompanying antiphonal song. They developed from the 10th to the 16th century, reaching the height of their popularity in the 15th century before being rendered obsolete by the rise of professional theatre.

There are four complete or nearly complete extant English biblical collections of plays from the late medieval period. The most complete is the York cycle of 48 pageants. They were performed in the city of York, from the middle of the 14th century until 1569. Besides the Middle English drama, there are three surviving plays in Cornish known as the Ordinalia.

Having grown out of the religiously based mystery plays of the Middle Ages, the morality play is a genre of medieval and early Tudor theatrical entertainment, which represented a shift towards a more secular base for European theatre. Morality plays are a type of allegory in which the protagonist is met by personifications of various moral attributes who try to prompt him to choose a godly life over one of evil. The plays were most popular in Europe during the 15th and 16th centuries.

The Somonyng of Everyman, usually referred to simply as Everyman, is a late 15th-century English morality play. Like John Bunyan's allegory Pilgrim's Progress, Everyman examines the question of Christian salvation through the use of allegorical characters.

**Conclusion:** The term Middle English literature refers to the literature written in the form of the English language known as Middle English, from the 12th century until the 1470s. During this time the Chancery Standard, a form of London-based English became widespread and the printing press regularized the language. Between the 1470s and the middle of the following century there was a transition to early Modern English. In literary terms, the characteristics of the literary works written did not change radically until the effects of the Renaissance and Reformed Christianity became more apparent in the reign of King Henry VIII. There are three main categories of Middle English Literature: Religious, Courtly love, and Arthurian, though much of Geoffrey Chaucer's work stands outside these. Among the many religious works are those in the Katherine Group and the writings of Julian of Norwich and Richard Rolle.

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