

Essential Questions Across Time

The Old English and Medieval Periods (A.D. 449–1485)



What is the relationship between literature and *place*?

In 1399, just before he was deposed and killed, King Richard II returned to England from Ireland. In Shakespeare's version of the scene, the King kneels, touches the sacred soil of England, and says: "Dear earth, I do salute thee with my hand . . . So weeping, smiling, greet I thee, my earth, . . ." This is almost a thousand years after the invading Angles, Saxons, and Jutes set foot on the island's soil, but they neither knelt nor wept. Shakespeare's tragic king, whose feeling for the soil of England is so powerful, shows how the people had shaped a country that had, in turn, shaped them.

How did English writers respond to their island geography?

The Placeless Sea The creation of a sense of place is an important theme in the literature of those who came from elsewhere to dwell on the island. In a way, however, this work of creation begins with an awareness of what is the opposite of place. For islanders, that means the sea, both a protective barrier and an untamable threat. As a watery wilderness, the sea is a kind of placeless place, a vast nowhere that can separate one from home.

"The Seafarer" and "The Wanderer" Two Anglo-Saxon poems chilled by images of the sea, "The Seafarer" and "The Wanderer," are spoken by men on sea voyages. They tell of exile and separation from a remembered home. The bleakness of these poems of lonely struggle is, however, tempered by a different frame of values. Resigned and even bitter as they must have been in their original forms, these poems have come down

TIMELINE

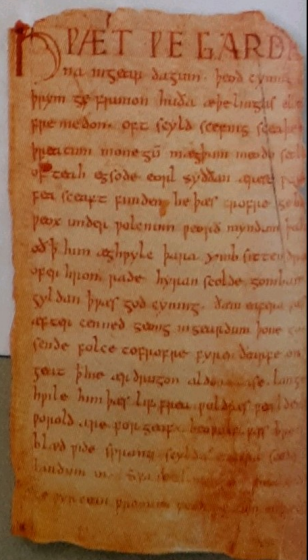
656

712: Spain Seville
conquered by Moors.

732: France Charles
Martel defeats Moors. ▼



▲ c. 750: Surviving
version of *Beowulf*
composed.



The BRITISH TRADITION

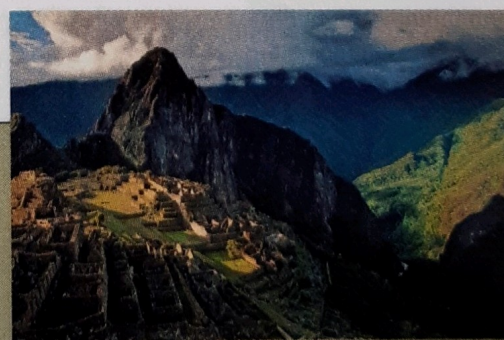
THE CHANGING ENGLISH LANGUAGE by Richard Lederer

The Beginnings of English

The rise of English as a planetary language is an unparalleled success story that began, long ago, in the middle of the fifth century A.D. Several large tribes of sea rovers—the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes—invaded the islands then known as Britannia. They brought with them a Low Germanic tongue that, in its new setting, became Anglo-Saxon, or Old English. The language came to be called *Englisc*, after *Englaland*, “land of the Angles.”

Old English differs so much from modern English that it is harder for us to learn than German is. Still, we can recognize a number of Anglo-Saxon words: *bedd*, *candel*, *eorth*, and *waeter*. Anglo-Saxon words such as these concern the unchanging basics of life. They survived later social upheavals nearly unchanged.

A dramatic evolution in the language came after yet another conquest of England, this one by the Norman French. These Normans (shortened from *Northmen*) had originally been Vikings, but they now spoke French and had taken to French customs. In 1066, under William, Duke of Normandy, the Normans invaded England. One result was that Old Englisc was flooded by the French spoken by the Normans. Examples of French influence include the words *sir*, *madam*, *courtesy*, *honor*, and *royal*. From this infusion of French words emerged a tongue that today we call Middle English.



▲ 800: Peru
Incans build city
of Machu Picchu.

861: North Atlantic
Vikings discover Iceland.

to us in copies made by monks. These monks were aware that Christianity itself begins with a story of exile: Adam and Eve banished from the Garden of Eden. In the Christian tradition, all exile is a model of the exile of humankind from its rightful place in Heaven. In editing “The Seafarer,” monks therefore framed the sea-tossed speaker’s lament for his life with the overarching Christian theme of exile from Eden, from Heaven, and from God.

The “Sea-Road” The sea also figures in the first epic poem of British literature, *Beowulf*, which contains a distant echo of the journey of the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes to England. In this poem, the hero Beowulf and his men travel by ship to the land of the Danes to face the monster Grendel. The “sea-road,” as it is called in the poem, is not merely a threatening watery waste. It is a “road” to fame and honor—and a natural place for these seafaring warriors.

The Mead Hall The destination for Beowulf and his men is not a nation in our modern sense. It is a kingdom, whose capital and command center is Herot, a mead hall. This gathering place—a large building with a single room—probably smelled like a locker room, but it provided warmth, light, food, drink, song, and fellowship for a lord and his warriors. When the monster Grendel comes from the bleak and mysterious darkness to menace Herot, he is striking at the very center of human society, the hearth around which people gather. That is why Beowulf must meet him there and drive him back into the swamp, the dark place from which he comes.

793: Vikings attack
Lindisfarne. ▼

863

How did literature make a nation of an island?

A Place of Shared Stories In the 8th century, Bede, a learned monk, wrote *A History of the English Church and People*, marking an important stage in England’s developing sense of itself as an island-nation. With his knowledge of Latin and history, Bede was not interested in merely telling the story of a single clan’s mead hall. Instead, he wrote the history of an entire nation—“Britain, formerly known as Albion.”

Through Bede’s informative prose, the reader can sense how “the island in the ocean” he describes, with its abundant resources, is on its way to becoming the earth to which Shakespeare’s Richard II will kneel. Most importantly, Bede is aware that his island is becoming a nation, a place that is as much a product of its history as of its geography; a country is a geographical area with shared stories.

A Nation Created by Imagination Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, England’s greatest medieval poem, is all about “shared stories” and a sense of England as a nation of different social types. These various characters are on a pilgrimage to the town of Canterbury. There, in 1170, Thomas à Becket, the Archbishop of Canterbury, was murdered in the cathedral on the orders of his former friend King Henry II, to whom he would not yield in matters of church policy. Becket was canonized, or declared a saint, and the cathedral became a shrine. That is why the pilgrims are traveling there, and they will seal their fellowship by telling one another stories along the way.

For Chaucer and his pilgrims, Canterbury is a somewhat distant goal, a symbol of the ultimate sacred place to which people journey on their life’s pilgrimage—Heaven. Such was the ideal. Chaucer’s pilgrims, however, have a wide range of motives, desires, and needs, many of which are far from noble. A later great poet and critic, John Dryden, was moved to say of Chaucer: “He has taken into the compass of his *Canterbury Tales* the various manners and humors...of the whole English nation...Not a single character has escap’d him.”

In the process of inventing English poetry as we know it, Chaucer presents his pilgrims on the road. England is a place in motion, a nation

created by the imagination, by the stories people tell one another. It is these shared stories, with all their humble realities, that transform the British Isles to—in the words of Shakespeare’s Richard II—“Dear earth.”

ESSENTIAL QUESTION VOCABULARY

These Essential Question words will help you think and write about literature and place:

exile (ek’ sīl’) *n.*
long time living away from one’s country or community, usually involuntary; banishment

geography (jē äg’ rə fē) *n.*
physical features of a region, area, or place

pilgrimage (pil’ grə mij) *n.*
long journey to a holy or important place



▲ c. 975: Saxon monks copy Old English poems into The Exeter Book.

TIMELINE

871: Alfred the Great becomes King of Wessex. ▶

c. 900: Western Europe Feudalism develops.

863





How does literature shape or reflect *society*?

In the ten centuries between the Germanic invasions and the dawn of the modern world, England changed from a place of warrior bands and invading tribes to a country ruled by a king, nobles, and bishops. Indeed, England was increasingly run and organized by merchants and landowners and their representatives in an evolving Parliament. The literature written during this period reflects these changes.

How did writers capture a vanishing world of tribes and clans?

The Hero's Code The world of the Anglo-Saxon epic poem *Beowulf* is that of the tribe and its leader. To become a leader a young warrior must prove himself in battle. So Beowulf crosses the sea to aid his kinsman Hrothgar, who cannot protect his people from the monster Grendel. After his victories over Grendel and Grendel's mother, Beowulf becomes the leader of his own tribe.

Vanishing World, Enduring Values The *Beowulf* poet tells a rousing story, but he also allows his listener to see and feel the world of the hero in both its glory and decline. At the end of the poem, Beowulf, with only the faithful young warrior Wiglaf at his side, battles a dragon and dies for his people. The audience knows that the poet is lamenting not only the death of a hero, but the passing of a hero's way of life.

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CLOSE-UP ON HISTORY

Guilds and the Status of Women

By 1000, merchants, traders, and artisans or crafts workers formed a new middle class, ranked between nobles and peasants. This class gained power in medieval towns, with merchants and artisans forming associations called guilds.

The craft guilds of artisans represented workers in one occupation, such as weavers, bakers, or goldsmiths. Guild members made rules to protect the quality of their goods, regulate hours, and set prices. No one except guild members could work in any trade, and becoming a guild member took many years of labor.

Guilds offered opportunities to women, who worked in dozens of crafts and dominated some trades. Young girls became apprentices in trades such as ribbon-making and papermaking. Also, a woman often engaged in the same trade as her father or husband and might inherit his workshop if he died. Chaucer's *Wife of Bath*, a weaver, represents this type of new middle-class woman.



982: Greenland Eric the Red establishes first Viking Colony. ▼

991: English defeated by Danes at Battle of Maldon.

c. 1020: America Viking Leif Ericson explores Canadian coast.

1040: Macbeth kills Duncan I.

▲1066: Normans defeat Saxons at Hastings; William the Conqueror becomes king of England.

1070



How did Chaucer reflect social trends without preaching?

A Poet and His World At the other end of the period, Chaucer provides the most complete example of the poet's interaction with his world.

Chaucer's lifetime, the late fourteenth century, was a turbulent period in English history. The country suffered the devastations of the Black Death and Chaucer vividly describes that plague in "The Pardoner's Tale." In the preaching of dissident theologian John Wycliffe, the country also experienced a foreshadowing of the Protestant Reformation, the Protestant separation from the Catholic Church that would occur in the early sixteenth century. Wycliffe's criticisms of the church reflected a growing discontent with the showy wealth of some religious institutions. In the Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*, we meet a number of characters who represent various religious orders. Their sometimes questionable behavior suggests the controversy that would lead to the Reformation.

Showing, Not Sermonizing Chaucer, however, does not rant, rave, or preach about corruption among religious orders or other social ills. Instead, he shows us characters like the Monk, who spends more time hunting and feasting than praying and fasting.

Political Turbulence In 1381, England was shaken by The Peasant's Revolt, in which farmers and laborers demanded a greater share in the wealth and governance of the country. King Richard II put the rebellion down, only to lose power himself eighteen years later. London, originally a Roman settlement on the banks of the Thames River, had by this time grown into a great city and a center for international trade.

Rising Middle Class Part of this tumult and change involved the replacement of feudal roles, such as knight and serf, with a newly empowered urban middle class. Chaucer himself was a member of this newly-rising group, as is one of his most memorable characters, the Wife of Bath.

The Writer and Society Writers often address social issues, but not as sociologists. Writers are interested in the human stories, the individual tale rather than the mass phenomenon. Readers are often left to figure out who or what is to blame or praise. The turbulent history of the later Middle Ages is contained in Chaucer's pilgrimage—between the lines.

ESSENTIAL QUESTION VOCABULARY

These Essential Question words will help you think and write about literature and society:

sociologist (sō sē əl' ə jist) *n.* scientist who studies societies and the behavior of people in groups

turbulent (tər' byə lənt) *adj.* full of commotion or wild disorder

feudal (fyōōd' 'l) *adj.* relating to a system in which overlords granted land to lesser lords, or vassals, in return for military service and in which poor farmers worked the land for vassals



TIMELINE

1070

▲ 1073: Canterbury becomes England's religious center.



▲ 1096: Europe and Middle East First Crusade begins.

c. 1100: France *Song of Roland* written.

▲ c. 1130: Oxford becomes a center for learning.



What is the relationship of the writer to *tradition*?

You may first have encountered King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table in a book, a movie, a comic strip, or even a multi-player game. Their stories have been told, reverently and irreverently, for over a thousand years. These tales, in other words, are traditional; they have been handed down. The word *tradition* comes from the Latin *traditio*, meaning “to hand over, to transmit.” Tradition in literature, however, does not simply refer to what a writer receives from the past. It also refers to what a writer does with the inheritance.

How do writers change what they have inherited?

Bequest from the Past The King Arthur stories are a kind of bequest from the past. Different authors accepted this literary inheritance but decided to use it in different ways. For example, the poet who wrote *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* has his knight-hero submit to a series of tests that teach him something about himself. The tests come from earlier folk tales and romances, or adventure stories about knights, and the poet weaves them into a seamless whole.

Sir Thomas Malory, writing in the fifteenth century at the end of the age of chivalry, uses Arthurian legend in a different way. In his book *Morte d'Arthur* (“Death of Arthur”), Malory gathers many legends of Arthur and his companions to write an elegy, or farewell, to the era of knights.

Changing in the Telling The much earlier Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf* also ends on a note of farewell, with the dying hero deserted by all but one faithful follower. It is easy to imagine how this story grew in the retelling. Perhaps in the earliest recitals, the hero sails across the sea to rescue his kinsmen and kill the monster. Then, as new audiences clamor for more, the storyteller adds more exploits. Now, Beowulf must also pursue and kill the monster’s mother. Still later, in an episode added by another teller, Beowulf is mortally injured by a dragon. Finally, the monk or monks who copy the tale alter it further, adding Christian elements from their own tradition.

1170: Thomas à Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury, murdered. ▼



1214: Mongol leader Genghis Khan captures Peking.



▲ 1215: King John forced to sign Magna Carta.

1258: First commoners allowed in Parliament.

1270

How did Chaucer respond to and create literary traditions?

Using the Old Geoffrey Chaucer is the supreme literary artist of the English Middle Ages because he is both indebted to traditions and committed to creating them. Consider the idea of his major poem, *The Canterbury Tales*: a varied group of people are thrown together and agree to tell stories to pass the time. In 1353, the Italian author Boccaccio had used the same format in his collection of stories, the *Decameron*, in which a group of aristocrats flee to a castle to avoid the plague and agree to tell one another a hundred tales. Chaucer knew Italian literature and the work of Boccaccio. The idea of a group of stories held together by a frame story is his inheritance.

Making It New Chaucer, however, altered what he inherited. His pilgrims reflect almost all levels of society, from the Knight to the Miller. They are not fleeing from the plague; they are on a religious pilgrimage. Chaucer's approach allows him to explore interesting differences between noble and base motives. For example, the Wife of Bath may be on a pilgrimage not so much to worship at a saint's tomb as to meet her next husband. Chaucer uses each tale to reveal something about the teller.

Inventing The Rhythm of English Poetry Chaucer not only reinvented the frame story; he also reinvented a French verse form to create the iambic pentameter line that would dominate English poetry for hundreds of years. Chaucer knew the ten-syllable lines and rhyming couplets used in French poetry. With the instinct that comes only with real genius, he adapted that form to English. In his rhyming couplets, Chaucer used a line of ten syllables with five alternating accents, the form known as iambic pentameter. This new form, when rediscovered by poets in the sixteenth century, became one of the most enduring traditions in English literature.

Traditions Stretching Backward and Forward The beginnings of literature are lost in the mists of prehistory, when some forms of telling stories came into being. Successive generations used those forms to relate the history of the tribe for each new generation. When these stories came to be written down, traditional forms were established. The wonder of literature in this period is that we can see traditions stretching backward into archeological time and stretching forward to tomorrow.

ESSENTIAL QUESTION VOCABULARY

These Essential Question words will help you think and write about the writer and tradition:

traditional (trə dish'ə nəl) *adj.* relating to or based on old customs, beliefs, and ways of doing things

inheritance (in her'i təns) *n.* goods, ideas, literary creations, or skills received from the past

legend (lej'ənd) *n.* story handed down for generations and believed to be based on actual events

TIMELINE

1275: China Marco Polo visits court of Kubla Khan. ▶

1270

1277: England conquers Wales.



1291: Europe and Middle East End of Crusades.

1325: Mexico Aztecs establish Mexico city and create a dating system with a solar year of 365 days. ▼



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CONTEMPORARY CONNECTION

King Arthur: Legendary Hero, Broadway Star!

In medieval Europe, tales circulated of a legendary king named Arthur. He and his knights represented the ideals of chivalry—rules governing the behavior of knights. Since then, Arthur's story has surfaced in many literary and dramatic works. Most recently, it has been brought to life in *Spamalot*, a musical comedy that pokes fun at the legend, as follows:

- King Arthur's kingdom is a Las Vegas resort, not the town of Camelot.
- The knights of the Round Table are a motley crew who have to be talked into performing heroic deeds.
- Arthur's knights underwent trials and ordeals to prove their courage and virtue. *Spamalot's* crew, however, must prove themselves by producing a Broadway musical.

Despite its silliness, *Spamalot's* success proves the ongoing fascination with the legend. Tales of romance and courage never go out of style.



1429: France Joan of Arc leads French in breaking siege of Orléans.

1453: Germany First Gutenberg Bible printed.▼

1455–1485: The Wars of the Roses.

▲ **1337:** Beginning of the Hundred Years' War with France.

1348: Black Death begins sweeping through England.

1381: Bible first translated into English.



1485