

ENGLISH LITERATURE

PRE-CHAUCERIAN AGE

Literature is not something like a dormant volcano which keeps sleeping for ages to erupt suddenly, nor as it comparable to anything mechanical such as found around us these days ; it is as quoted by Emile Legouis, like a river which is shaped gradually by numerous tributaries and streams which keep it flowing. This is especially true with reference to English Literature of Chaucer's times. The literature preceding the Age of Chaucer (1340 -1400) cannot be termed as English Literature because of two theoretical reasons: we find no span of time when language remained persistently single from first to last ; secondly, there has not been the continuity of written works handed down from generation to generation .Despite the pedagogical limitations, the literature produced or acquired is by no means inferior in its content and quality from thematic or stylistic perspective.

Generally speaking we can divide the Pre-Chaucerian literature into two main parts: Anglo Saxon and Anglo Norman.

Anglo Saxon's Literature

By the end of 5th century, a many Teutonic tribes from the neighbour invaded Britain where Brythons of Celtic race had already settled. These locals were Christianized by Romans. The invaders came from

two directions: Engle_land (Germanic) invaders settled in Northumbria and Marice , whereas Saxons (Scandinavian and Icelanders) and Jutes invaded the Southeast part of Britain and the food resources kept them there forever. By the next couple of centuries they transformed into the local settlers. These settlers brought with them the tales , inspirations and folklore of their parent culture which haphazardly inspired the literature if there was any in infancy . Their tales and inspirations marked the spirit of paganism in contrast to the Christian inspiration and religious zeal of the native people . The invaders' values match exactly with the spirit of their contemporary parent culture in those times. For example, German Hagen Epic of ***Nibeungen Leid*** and ***Edda and prose sagas of Scandinavia*** and Iceland depict the similar flare which was found in the invaders taste .Their tales relating the contests between savage men and god warfare reflect the similar spirits .

Anglo Saxons did not affect the later English Literature as much as it contributed the English vocabulary. We find Germanic and Franko Latin in English words even today.

By themes , most of the literature concerned with the contests between savage men , gods' warfare , religious travelogues and monks' fervor .In Latin prose of that age , we find treatises mostly written by courtiers to administer the savage tribes.

In poetry most influential piece is a long poem of 6000 lines **Beowulf** which truly represents the pagan

spirit of the age. This poem relates the heroics of a strong godlike hero who kills the giant Grendel in fierce fights. At times the pieces in the poem appear with the emotional grandeur as powerful as are found in the Greek tale of Hercules. **Beowulf** is such a forceful piece that it still survives though in fragments. Apart from **Beowulf**, the other mentionable pieces are Caedmon's "paraphrase of Scripture" and Cynewulf's "Elene", a series of poem relating to **Christ**.

In prose, we find Aldhelm with his **Book of Riddles**; the venerable Bede wrote many treatises but the most valuable work was **Ecclesiastical History of England**. Alcuin also wrote treatises, letters and a few poems. Last but not the least, the monks and clerks added a flare of Saxon Chronicles which show the religion as an important segment of Anglo Saxon's lives.

Marsh observes, "*Anglo Saxon Literature, so far from being the mother, was not even the nurse of the infant genius who opened its eyes to the sun of England.*"

Anglo Norman Literature

Anglo Norman era starts with the French conquest of Britain in 1066. The conquest in those times meant a complete change of status quo in all the forms of life from geographical to social level. William I the conqueror brought with him a complete change of set up so comprehensive that changed the themes, and even modes of literature. The French brought with them

"the Norman feudalism with its lordly barons and degraded serfs ; its castles, moats and drawbridges ; its Wambas and Robinhoods; its troubadours or wandering minstrels ; men of no small esteem and importance; and its armour clad knights, chivalrous defenders of ladies, brave champions in the battle of tournament. " For nearly three hundreds years the slow amalgamation of ruling Normans and enslaved sections, with the fusion of their languages resulting in English, was in progress .Literally no big name whose work survives, quoted or even remembered today , however potentially Anglo Norman era is so important that according to Emile Legouis : *"no knowledge of Anglo Saxon is needed in order to understand Chaucer; but it is impossible to understand the origin of his work without knowing something of the French poetry which preceded it ."*

Generally speaking we can divide Anglo Norman literature into three categories: The Latin writings of numerous monks and historians, Norman French, and Semi Saxon.

The Latin writings of numerous monks and historians:

- * Walter Map or Mape wrote stories of King Arthur, *De Nugis Curialium* (trifles of courtiers)
- * Geoffrey of Monmouth wrote history of Britons (preserving the tales of King Arthur)
- * Ralf Higden wrote 24 miracle plays title as " *Chester Plays* " , also wrote *polychronicon* (in 7 books).

Norman French

* Wace wrote " Brut d' Angleterre" a versified history of Britons.

Semi Saxon: (Morley calls it the transitional English)

* Layamon wrote the " Brut" (a superior translation and enlargement of Wace's poem).

* Orm or Ormin wrote " Ormulum ".

* Romances in poetry by Nichoas of Guildford .

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