

Medieval Literature

(Simplified from Andrew Sanders)

The Middle Ages run roughly from 500 to 1500. English changed a lot in this time. **Old English** (also called Anglo-Saxon, the language of *Beowulf*) was spoken until about 1100. After the Norman Conquest it slowly changed into **Middle English** (the language of Chaucer), which lasted until about 1500. This chapter covers the early part of that story, from 1066 to about 1510.

1. The Norman Conquest and its effect on culture:

In 1066 a French-speaking duke took England. English was pushed down the social ladder, and English writing was reshaped by French and Latin influence.

Background: King Edward the Confessor died without a clear heir. Harold, an English earl, became king. William, Duke of Normandy (in northern France), said Harold had sworn to support *him*. William invaded, defeated and killed Harold at the **Battle of Hastings** (1066), and became King William I, "the Conqueror".

The Bayeux Tapestry:

- It is not truly a tapestry but an **embroidery** about 70 metres long. It tells the story of the Conquest in pictures, with short Latin captions.
- It is not the work of Queen Matilda, as legend says. English needlewomen probably made it. England was famous for fine needlework.
- It was probably ordered by **Bishop Odo** (William's half-brother) for his new cathedral at Bayeux, consecrated in 1077.
- It is **propaganda**. It shows Harold swearing an oath to William on holy relics, then breaking it. It shows signs of God's favour for William, such as Halley's comet. It presents William as the rightful heir and Harold as a liar.
- It mixes religion and war, and tells a story while also teaching a lesson.

Language after the Conquest:

- England became **trilingual**:
 - **Norman French**: the language of the new rulers.
 - **Latin**: the language of the Church, learning and many records.
 - **English**: the language of ordinary people.
- William tried to learn English at 43 but gave up.
- No English king spoke English as a first language for about **300 years**.
- Only in the mid-14th century was English allowed in Parliament petitions, court procedure, and documents such as wills.
- The Conquest changed the ruling class but not much else. Most English place-names

stayed. Norman names mainly appear in new castles and abbeys (Richmond, Battle) or on estates taken over by Norman families.

Four long-term effects:

1. **English language changed.** It became simpler in structure, and its spelling and vocabulary were strongly influenced by Norman French.
2. **London became the centre.** London, not Winchester, was now the administrative capital, which helped decide what "standard English" would be.
3. **French literary taste.** Writers followed French forms, themes and subjects, so English writing moved away from its older Germanic isolation toward a wider Western European pattern.
4. **The "Norman Yoke" idea.** Some people claimed the Conquest created a permanent gap between "us" (the English common people) and "them" (a foreign ruling class). The chapter calls this idea "tendentious" (pushing a point of view). It was used again in the Peasants' Revolt (1381), after Charles I's execution (1649), and in the Industrial Revolution (helped by Scott's novel *Ivanhoe*, and by Robin Hood stories).

Overall result: the old English upper-class literature in English (poetry and prose) lost its patrons. A new, European, French-influenced literary culture took over.

2. The Church, church building and Latin historians:

The Normans put their own men in charge of the English Church, built huge new churches, and produced many Latin histories. The most imaginative of these, by Geoffrey of Monmouth, gave later writers the story of King Arthur.

Background: In the Middle Ages the Catholic Church was the biggest institution in western Europe. It ran schools, kept records, owned land, and shaped daily life. Monks lived in **monasteries** (abbeys) and often wrote the books and histories. Bishops and archbishops were both religious leaders and government officials.

Important Church figures:

- **Lanfranc** (Italian-born, Archbishop of Canterbury 1070–89) replaced the English archbishop Stigand. By ten years after the Conquest almost all English bishops and most abbots were foreigners.
- **Anselm** (1033–1109) succeeded Lanfranc. He wrote *Cur Deus Homo* ("Why did God become Man?") in Latin. He argued that faith could be explained by human reason, not only by authority. He had a difficult relationship with King Henry I.
- **Thomas Becket** became Archbishop of Canterbury in 1162 through his friend King Henry II. They later became bitter opponents over the power of Church versus king. Becket was **murdered in Canterbury Cathedral in 1170** by four of the king's knights. He was made a **saint in 1173**, and Henry had to do public penance at his shrine.
- Pilgrims flocked to Becket's tomb. This is the background of Chaucer's *Canterbury*

Tales.

Domesday Book (1086):

A huge survey of who owned what land in England, ordered by William. It recorded the property of the new Norman Church and nobility.

Church buildings:

- Early Norman cathedrals (Canterbury, Ely, London, Durham, and abbeys at St Albans and Peterborough) were **Romanesque**: massive, with thick walls and round arches.
- A new style called **Gothic** (pointed arches, lighter and taller) appeared in France in the 1140s.
- After a fire at Canterbury in 1174, the monks rebuilt the choir in Gothic style. The French architect **William of Sens** began it, and **William the Englishman** finished it. The **Trinity Chapel** held Becket's shrine. It helped start a distinctive English style.
- The monk **Gervase** wrote (c.1188) a careful history of the rebuilding.

Latin historians:

Most were monks who wrote in Latin for their own communities.

Historian	Work	Key points
Ordericus Vitalis (1075–?1142)	<i>Ecclesiastical History</i>	Born in Shrewsbury, lived in a Norman monastery. Copied Bede's <i>History</i> as a novice. Good source on the Conquest.
William of Malmesbury (c.1090–c.1143)	<i>Gesta Regum Anglorum</i> (1120) and <i>Gesta Pontificum Anglorum</i> (1125)	Two histories, one of kings and one of bishops. Doubted the legends of Arthur.
Jocelin de Brakelond (fl. 1200)	<i>Chronicle</i> of Bury St Edmunds	Lively, partisan account of Abbot Samson's reforms. Admires Samson but is shocked when he promotes a favourite.
Matthew Paris (c.1199–1259)	<i>Chronica Maiora</i>	St Albans monk. History of the world, strongest on events he saw. Critical of the Pope and of Henry III favouring foreigners.
Henry of Huntingdon (?1084–1155)	History	Contemporary of the above.

- For these writers, **history was a moral process** showing God's purposes. Storms, shipwrecks and disease showed his anger; miracles and healings showed his mercy.

Geoffrey of Monmouth (c.1100–55):

- Welsh monk, later bishop of St Asaph.
- His ***Historia Regum Britanniae*** ("History of the Kings of Britain", c.1130–8) was hugely popular (about 190 manuscripts survive).
- He claimed to have translated "a very old book in the British tongue". More likely he used oral traditions and **added a great deal from his own imagination**.
- It is the **main written source for King Arthur and the Round Table**.
- It told how the British were descended from **Brutus**, a prince of Troy, great-grandson of Aeneas, who landed in Devon, defeated giants and founded "Troynovant" (New Troy, later London).
- It gave later writers stories of kings such as Lear, Cymbeline and Gorboduc, and the story of Vortigern, who invited the Saxons Hengist and Horsa to help him and then married Hengist's daughter Rowena.
- Serious historians doubted it, but poets, storytellers and nationalists mined it for generations. Shakespeare's *King Lear* and *Cymbeline* draw on this tradition.

3. Early Middle English literature:

Around 1200, English writers began again to write seriously in English. Layamon told Britain's history in old-fashioned verse; an unknown poet wrote a witty bird debate; and religious writers wrote advice for women who couldn't read Latin.

Background: Old English poetry did not use end rhyme. Instead, each line had a strong beat and repeated starting sounds (**alliteration**), for example "fair field full of folk". Writers like Layamon and later the *Gawain*-poet kept this old style, while French-influenced poets used rhyme and a regular number of syllables.

Writers who retold Geoffrey's history:

- **Geoffrey Gaimar** (fl. 1140) wrote *Estorie des Engles* ("History of the English") in French.
- **Wace** (c.1100–after 1171), from Jersey, wrote *Roman de Rou* (history of the dukes of Normandy) and *Roman de Brut* (Geoffrey's history in French verse). He supported the Norman rulers.
- **Layamon** (fl. 1200), a priest in Worcestershire, wrote ***Brut*** in English, about **16,000 lines**, based on Wace.
 - It is in old-fashioned alliterative verse, not French-style rhyme.
 - He wrote for ordinary English readers, not a French court.
 - He opens with a patriotic statement about "the noble origins of the English". He uses "English" and "British", "England" and "Britain" as if the same.
 - He knows the Anglo-Saxon idea of **wyrd** (fate): Britain rises and falls, but a God-given continuity survives.

- His Arthur is a generous, mighty warrior like heroes in Old English poetry. Famous images: Arthur as a wolf with snow on his fur; the enemy Childric hunted like a fox; drowned Saxons like fish with golden shields.

***The Owl and the Nightingale* (early 13th century, anonymous):**

- A **debate poem**: two birds argue, overheard by the narrator.
- The fussy **nightingale** says the owl is dirty, gloomy and miserable. The **owl** says her own voice is bold and musical, and the nightingale is just a flighty chatterer.
- Arguments move from personal insults to subtle points about love, religion and morality. The nightingale stands for light, love and pleasure; the owl for seriousness and sorrow.
- The birds agree to ask **Master Nicholas of Guildford**, a poorly paid clerk in Dorset, to judge. The poem **ends before the decision** ("I can tell you nothing more").
- It is written in lively four-beat rhyming couplets. It is more a clever intellectual game (*jeu d'esprit*) than a sermon.
- Some critics think the poem was written by Nicholas himself, hinting he deserved a better job.

Devotional prose for women:

- **Katherine Group**: prose lives of virgin saints (Katherine, Margaret, Juliana) and writing about Christ and his "brides", written for women in Herefordshire who lacked Latin.
- ***Ancrene Riwe*** ("Anchoresses' Rule"), early 13th century:
 - Written in English by a male confessor for **three young sisters** of a good family who chose a life of prayer and withdrawal.
 - Eight books. The first and last cover outer life; the middle sections cover inner life.
 - It recommends reading, meditation, self-examination, private confession and penance. It warns against too much brooding on oneself.
 - It pictures Christ as a **lover, a knight and a king**.
 - It gives very practical advice: keep a **cat rather than a cow** (a cow would make you worldly), have only **two maidservants**.
 - Ends with the writer saying he would rather walk to Rome than write the whole book again.
 - It was reworked later for general readers as the *Ancrene Wisse*.

4. Chivalry and "courtly love":

Knights followed a code of honour called chivalry. French poets developed a related idea in

which a man served and adored his lady the way a knight served his lord. This shaped the romances that English poets later wrote.

Knighthood:

- A knight was originally a soldier rich enough to own a horse and arms. England kept the English word **knight** (from Old English *cniht*, "youth, servant") rather than the French word.
- A boy trained as a **squire** and then became a knight in a ceremony: ritual bath, a night-long **vigil** (prayer), confession, and being "dubbed" by his lord (often the king).
- He swore an oath of loyalty to his lord and promised to protect the weak, right wrongs and defend the Christian faith (against Muslims especially).

Military Orders:

Groups of celibate knights founded to protect pilgrim routes to Jerusalem:

- **Hospitallers** (c.1099)
- **Templars** (c.1119), later suppressed by the kings of France and England in the early 14th century
- **Teutonic Knights** (c.1143)

The Order of the Garter:

- Founded by **Edward III c.1344**, looking back to the legend of Arthur rather than the Crusades.
- Limited to **25 members** including the king. Edward acted as "pseudo-Arthur" at a mock Round Table, with ceremonies and tournaments.
- Motto: ***Honi soit qui mal y pense*** ("Shame to him who thinks evil of it"). This also appears at the end of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

Why Arthur mattered:

Since Geoffrey of Monmouth, Arthur had been the model Christian king. His court became a fixed point to which many legends, Celtic myths, and religious and moral ideas were attached. The Knights of the Round Table gained names, family histories, coats of arms and quests, and a new interest in love.

Courtly love (*fin'amors*):

- Courtly love is the modern name (not medieval) for **fin'amors**, "refined love".
- It began with the **troubadours** (poet-singers) of Provence in southern France. It spread north through **Eleanor of Aquitaine**, queen first of Louis VII of France, then of Henry II of England. She was granddaughter of the first troubadour poet.
- The idea: a lover serves his lady like a knight serves his lord. He is her "vassal" (servant). His love is passionate, ennobling, and usually **unfulfilled**, and often outside marriage.

- Whether this reflected real court life is **disputed**. What is certain is that the 12th-century culture put new emphasis on women's dignity in a male-dominated world.
- **Andreas Capellanus**, chaplain to Eleanor's daughter Marie de Champagne, wrote the Latin *De Amore* (c.1184–6) about the "rules" of love, in which the woman is the dominant partner.

French writers who influenced English literature:

- **Marie de France** (fl. 1160–90):
 - Wrote twelve short verse stories called **Lais** (said to be from Breton tales). Settings include Brittany, Ireland and Britain.
 - Only *Lanval* mentions Arthur by name. Others deal with love between knights and ladies and supernatural elements.
 - *Lanval* led to English versions such as *Sir Launfal*. Her lais gave models for Chaucer's *Franklin's Tale* and Gower's tale of Rosiphilee.
- **Chrétien de Troyes** (fl. 1170–90):
 - Wrote five romances, centred on Arthur's court (Camelot): *Yvain*, *Lancelot (Chevalier de la Charrette)*, and the unfinished *Perceval (Conte du Graal)*, the story of the Holy Grail).
 - *Yvain* became the English *Ywain and Gawain* (c.1400).

Background: A medieval **romance** was a story (usually in verse) about knights, quests, love and magic. The word comes from "Romance" languages like French. Romances were written for aristocratic readers and listeners.

Roman de la Rose ("Romance of the Rose"):

- Begun by **Guillaume de Lorris** (d. 1237), completed around 1275 by **Jean de Meun** (d. 1305).
- A **dream allegory**. The narrator dreams of a walled garden on a May morning, and a rose he cannot pick. The rose stands for his beloved. Figures such as Reason and Jealousy help or hinder him.
- It shows how fashionable romance moved from knightly action to **allegory and philosophy**.
- It was hugely popular. Chaucer translated part of it (*The Romaunt of the Rose*). It influenced English dream poems, including Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess* and the religious poem *Pearl*.

Background: An **allegory** is a story where characters and places stand for ideas (e.g. a character called "Reason" or "Jealousy"). A **dream vision** is a poem where the narrator falls asleep and dreams the story. These two forms were hugely popular in the Middle Ages.

5. English romances and the *Gawain*-poet:

In short: English poets adapted French romances, usually making them simpler. The finest of all is *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, by an anonymous poet who also wrote *Pearl*, *Patience* and *Cleanness*.

General features of English romances:

- Most are secular but express confidence in a Christian society (set against pagan or Muslim ones).
- Heroes usually go on a lonely quest, but community values also matter.
- English versions are generally **simpler and more direct** than French originals.
- Three categories of subject, called "matters":
 1. **Matter of Rome:** classical stories.
 2. **Matter of France:** Charlemagne and his knights, or fights against Saracens.
 3. **Matter of Britain:** Arthurian stories and later heroes.

Romance	Date	Summary
<i>King Horn</i>	c.1225	Earliest surviving English romance. A prince driven from home by Saracens takes refuge in another kingdom, falls in love with Princess Rymenhild, is banished to Ireland, proves himself, and regains his kingdom.
<i>Havelok the Dane</i>	c.1300	Prince Havelok is dispossessed, lives humbly at Grimsby, and a mystical light reveals his royal blood. He marries Princess Goldborough and regains his throne. Shows ordinary life and a hero who fights with fists and a club.
<i>Sir Orfeo</i>	early 14th c.	Retelling of Orpheus and Eurydice, but with a Celtic fairyland instead of Hades and a happy ending .
<i>Floris and Blancheflour</i>	early 13th c.	Two children raised at a Saracen emir's court; the Emir has to overcome his religious scruples for them to marry.
<i>Otuel and Roland</i> (c.1330), <i>Sege of Melayne</i> (c.1400)		Show Muslims in a harsher light; Otuel is converted by the Holy Ghost landing as a

Romance	Date	Summary
		dove.
<i>Bevis of Hampton, Guy of Warwick</i>	late 13th c.	Celebrate the supposed ancestors of noble families. Bevis accepts his rewards; Guy later atones for pride by becoming a hermit.

The Gawain-poet:

- Anonymous; his dialect shows he came from the **northwest Midlands**, writing in the **second half of the 14th century**.
- Four poems survive in one manuscript in the British Library: ***Pearl***, ***Cleanness*** (*Purity*), ***Patience***, and ***Sir Gawain and the Green Knight***. None has a title in the manuscript. Most scholars think one poet wrote them all.
- They belong to the **alliterative revival** in northern and western England from about 1350. (The chapter notes it may be more a *survival* of pre-Conquest alliterative verse, newly supported by English-speaking noblemen.)
- The poet was highly sophisticated: well versed in Scripture, devotional writing and French and English romances.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: the story

1. It is **New Year's Day** at King Arthur's court. A giant knight rides in. **Everything about him is green** (rider, armour, horse). He holds a holly branch (life) and a huge axe (death).
2. He proposes a **"beheading game"**: someone may strike his head off, if he agrees to take the same blow in a year. **Gawain**, Arthur's nephew, accepts and cuts off the head.
3. The Green Knight picks up his head, repeats the challenge, and rides away.
4. A year later (starting on **All Saints' Day, 1 November**), Gawain sets out in splendid armour. His shield has the Virgin Mary inside and a **pentangle** on the outside. He travels through harsh winter weather.
5. He reaches a castle where he is warmly welcomed for Christmas. He agrees with his host to **exchange "winnings"** each day.
6. On the third day the host's wife gives him a **green girdle (belt)** said to protect from death. Gawain **keeps it** instead of handing it over.
7. At the **Green Chapel**, the Green Knight swings the axe three times: two feints and a light cut on the neck.
8. The Knight is the **lord of the castle**. The test was set up by the sorceress **Morgan le Fay** to challenge Arthur's court. He punishes Gawain only lightly because he failed only in keeping the girdle, out of fear.

9. Gawain is **ashamed**. Back at Camelot, the court forgives him and all the knights wear a green sash in solidarity. The poem ends with the Garter motto.

Themes and symbols:

- A test not of Gawain's **courage** (which is never doubted) but of his **chastity and honesty**, and also, more broadly, of **what "value" means**.
- It puts old chivalric ideals (personal honour, loyalty) beside a **merchant-like idea of exchange and barter** (note that merchants were starting to become knights).
- **The pentangle** is a five-pointed star drawn in one unbroken line, the "endless knot". It stands for the **five wits, five fingers, five wounds of Christ, five joys of Mary**, and five virtues (generosity, fellowship, cleanness, courtesy, pity).
- **The girdle** is a "broken line" that can be joined into a circle. It is a sign of fear and failed loyalty, but also becomes a badge of honour, like the **Round Table** and the **Garter**.
- Gawain finds **his fullest humanity** through failure.
- Mixes **Celtic myth** (the beheading game, a green supernatural figure) with **Christian knighthood**, and shows the seasonal contrast between the optimism of New Year and the "unease of the season of dying".

The other three poems:

- **Patience**: a retelling of the story of **Jonah**. Jonah, who is angry that God forgives Nineveh, stands for human **impatience**.
- **Cleanness (Purity)**: shows God punishing defiled societies: the time of Noah, Sodom, and Belshazzar's Babylon.
- **Pearl**:
 - A **dream vision** by a father who has lost his **2-year-old daughter**. He falls asleep on her grave mound (in an arbour, in August).
 - In the dream, he meets a glorious white-clad maiden (his daughter, as a "pearl"), now a **bride of Christ and a queen in heaven**.
 - She corrects his doubts. When he asks how she, so young, can be a queen, she answers with Christ's **parable of the vineyard** (all workers receive equal pay).
 - He sees the heavenly Jerusalem, tries to cross the stream toward her, and **wakes up** on the mound.
 - The name may play on **Margaret** (Latin *margarita*, "pearl"). It also echoes Christ's parable of the "pearl of great price" (Matthew 13:46).
 - **Form: 101 stanzas of 12 lines (1,212 lines)** in 20 sections. The last line of each stanza repeats and links to the next section. The number patterns echo the heavenly Jerusalem and the 144,000 virgins of the Book of Revelation.

6. Middle English lyrics:

Many short poems from the 13th to 15th centuries survive, mostly by unknown authors. They treat human love and religious love in similar language.

- **Secular (non-religious) love lyrics:** French-influenced. They show a shift from heroic, military themes to **service of a lady**. They express longing, often in spring ("Bitwene March and Averil", preserved in British Library MS Harley 2253).
- **Religious lyrics:** the "fair lady" becomes the **Virgin Mary**; the lord becomes **Christ**. Example: "**As I lay upon a night**", a lullaby in which the poet imagines Mary rocking baby Jesus. The child asks her to sing, and the poem hints at future suffering (the Crucifixion).

7. Fourteenth-century England: death, disruption and change

In short: The 1300s brought plague, rebellion and religious criticism. At the same time English became the main language of government, and a great age of English writing began.

The "Ricardian" literary revival:

- Richard II reigned **1377–99**. He did not personally cause the literary boom, but his reign saw great literature in English: Chaucer, Gower, Langland and the *Gawain*-poet.
- It was linked to the **rise of English** as the main language of communication, government and entertainment among the ruling élite.
 - **Gower** wrote in French, Latin *and* English; **Chaucer** wrote only in English.
 - **Henry IV** (1399–1413) did his government business in English. **Henry V** (1413–22) made a point of using English, not French, in all official dealings.
- Chaucer and Gower were London-based and international in outlook. The *Gawain*-poet and Langland were more provincial but not unaware of fashion.

Changing society:

Background: Medieval theory divided society into three groups: the **clergy** (who pray), the **nobility/warriors** (who fight), and the **commons/workers** (who labour and feed the others). Writers such as Gower still used this model.

- By the early 14th century this theory no longer matched reality. **Towns grew:** London had about 40,000 people c.1370; York and Bristol over 10,000 each. Many skilled craftsmen worked in organised trades (about 850 men in York worked as their own masters in about 100 crafts).
- **Literacy** grew, so clergy no longer monopolised administrative jobs.
- Chaucer's pilgrims (Man of Law, Franklin, Wife of Bath, guildsmen) are hard to fit into the old three estates.

The Black Death:

Background: The Black Death: a deadly plague (probably bubonic plague) that

swept across Europe in the 1340s. It reached Dorset in 1348 and peaked in London in summer 1349.

- England may have lost **about one-third of its population**.
- Many parish priests died, and the Church's income fell.
- It seemed to survivors like a **punishment from God**. In *Piers Plowman*, Reason says the plagues were "for pure synne". A chronicler said nothing like it had happened, "even by the flood in the days of Noah".
- Labour shortage worsened tension between landowners and workers.

The Peasants' Revolt (1381):

- The immediate trigger was a very unpopular **poll tax** (a tax on every person) on workers.
- Rebels briefly held London in June and killed unpopular Church and royal officials.
- The radical priest **John Ball** preached on the injustice of serfdom, asking: "*When Adam dalf and Eve span, who was then a gentleman?*" (When Adam dug and Eve spun, who was then a gentleman?)
- The revolt collapsed at the end of June; leaders including Ball were executed.
- But the poll tax was not revived, and English commoners were never again taxed directly in a way that left the clergy and nobility untaxed (unlike in France).
- Over time, England's nobility stayed open to new members from below, giving **more social mobility** than on the continent.
- **Gower** added an allegory of a peasant mob as beasts to his Latin *Vox Clamantis* after this revolt.

Church criticism: John Wyclif (c.1330–84) and the Lollards

- Late 14th-century Church: many parish clergy were less educated; worldly monks and friars were criticised (e.g. by Chaucer, Langland).
- **John Wyclif** was an Oxford theologian who attacked:
 - the Pope's misuse of power and money,
 - the sale of **indulgences** (paying to reduce punishment for sin),
 - monks and friars living off others,
 - the doctrine of **transubstantiation** (the belief that bread and wine in the Mass literally become Christ's body and blood).
- He and his followers were condemned in 1382, but **John of Gaunt** (the king's uncle) protected him. He died peacefully in 1384. In 1415, after the Council of Constance declared him a heretic, his bones were dug up, burned and thrown in a river.
- His English followers, the **Lollards**, held that **Scripture is the only authority** in

religion.

- Wyclif was not really a popular rebel; he was a dissident academic who wrote in Latin. His lasting influence was the call for a **translation of the Bible into English**.
- The **Wycliffite Bible** (1380s) was made by his disciples **Nicholas of Hereford** and **John Purvey** from the Latin **Vulgate** (the standard Latin Bible). It was awkward, "a version of a version", but historically important in showing English was a proper language for Scripture. It inspired later translators in the 16th and 17th centuries.

Background: The Reformation was the 16th-century movement that split Western Christianity into Catholic and Protestant churches. The chapter says Wyclif is often called its main English forerunner.

8. William Langland and *Piers Plowman*:

In short: *Piers Plowman* is a long dream-vision poem about how to live a good Christian life in a corrupt society. Its hero Piers, a humble ploughman, comes to represent Christ.

The author:

- **William Langland** (c.1330–c.1386), educated in the west of England, worked in London as a **clerk in minor orders** (an unbeneficed clerk, so without a church job of his own).
- He knew the **Vulgate Bible** very well, especially the **Psalms**. He was not a professional scholar, but a serious and devout thinker.
- He wrote for a **broad audience**: churchmen and ordinary people.

Background: How medieval readers read Scripture They believed the Bible had several levels of meaning: the **literal** (what happened), and others, such as the **allegorical** (what it symbolises), the **moral** (how to behave) and the **typological** (how Old Testament events foreshadow New Testament ones, e.g. Jonah's three days in the whale foreshadowing Christ's three days in the tomb).

The poem:

- ***The Vision of Piers Plowman***, in **alliterative verse**, worked on from the 1360s to early 1380s.
- Three versions:
 - **A-text** (1360s): unfinished, 12 sections.
 - **B-text** (late 1370s): complete revision, adds 8 more sections.
 - **C-text** (early 1380s): further revision and rearrangement, now a Prologue and 22 sections.
 - Each section is called a **passus** (Latin "step").
- **Dreamer**: called **Will**, both a version of the author and an allegorical name ("will" as moral will, and also wilfulness). Langland plays with his own name: "I have lyved

in londe... my name is Longe Wille".

- **Setting:** he falls asleep on the **Malvern Hills** and sees a "fair feeld ful of folk": all sorts of people, rich and poor.
- Not a courtly lover or a visionary lifted to heaven (unlike in *Roman de la Rose* or Dante). It is the **open, working landscape of England**, with confusion and wonder.
- He moves through a series of dreams, with waking periods in between. Genres are mixed; figures can be ambiguous.

Key characters:

- **Holy Church, Truth, Repentance** (female allegorical figures).
- **Lady Meed:** "reward"; partly fair payment, partly corruption and bribery.
- **The Seven Deadly Sins** (Passus V): they confess to Repentance in comic, vivid scenes (Sloth falls asleep mid-confession; Gluttony is waylaid into an ale-house).
- **Anima** (the soul).

Background: The Seven Deadly Sins Pride, envy, wrath (anger), sloth (laziness), avarice (greed), gluttony and lust. They were a standard way to teach people about sin and appear throughout medieval literature (Langland, Gower, Chaucer's Parson).

Piers as Christ:

- **Piers** (Peter) is a humble ploughman, but readers are asked at key moments to see **Christ** in him. In Passus XIII it is said, "*Petrus, id est, Christus*" ("Peter, that is, Christ").
- In Passus XVIII, Christ enters Jerusalem on Palm Sunday looking like "the Samaritan, and somdeel to Piers the Plowman".
- In Passus XIX Piers ploughs with **four oxen**, named after the **four Gospel writers** (Luke, Mark, Matthew, John). His harrows are the Old and New Testaments; four beasts for the Latin Church Fathers (Augustine, Ambrose, Gregory, Jerome), and the seeds are the four **cardinal virtues** (Prudence, Temperance, Fortitude, Justice).
- The poem presents a continuing "covenanted incarnation": God is actively involved with humankind.

Passus XVIII (B-text): the climax:

- Opens on **Palm Sunday**. The tired dreamer sees children carrying palms and singing "Hosanna", remembering Christ's entry into Jerusalem.
- Christ is a **knight-champion** ready to joust, wearing "human nature" as his armour.
- After Christ's victory over the powers of darkness and **his descent into hell** (the **Harrowing of Hell**, freeing righteous souls who died before him), the **Four**

Daughters of God (Mercy, Truth, Righteousness, Peace) are **reconciled**. This is based on Psalm 84 (85): "Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other."

- The English story line meets **Latin Psalm quotations** at three points. This mixture of secular English and sacred Latin gives the verse extra power. The chapter says the technique looks forward to the verbal games of 20th-century Modernist poetry, and shows the creative power of the **Logos** (the Word of God).

Compared with *Pearl*:

Unlike *Pearl*, Langland gives little direct comfort for the world's ills. He leaves the reader with preaching, prophecy and difficult questions.

9. Geoffrey Chaucer (c.1343–1400):

Chaucer is the greatest English poet of the Middle Ages. He wrote exclusively in English, helped raise its status, and was gifted at humour, characterisation and ambiguity.

Background: Chaucer was born in London, the son of a wine merchant. He worked as a courtier, diplomat and royal official (the chapter notes he was a "high-ranking royal official"). He travelled to Italy, where he came to know the works of **Dante** and **Boccaccio**, the great Italian writers. Many of his poems adapt Italian and French sources.

Main ideas in his work:

- Despite the disruption of his age, Chaucer's poetry expresses a sense of **order**: the natural and human worlds as related parts of a divine plan, arranged in **hierarchies**, like the kingdom of heaven.
- He translated **Boethius's *De consolazione philosophiae*** (c.1380) into English prose.

Background: Boethius was a Roman philosopher (c.480–524). While in prison awaiting execution, he wrote *The Consolation of Philosophy*, a dialogue about **fortune, free will and God's order**. It was one of the most-read books of the Middle Ages and influenced Chaucer, James I of Scotland and many others.

- He wrote a prose **treatise on the astrolabe** (an instrument for astronomy) to teach his young son Lewis.

Major works

Work	Date	Key points
<i>The Book of the Duchess</i>	c.1369	Dream elegy (a poem of mourning) on the death of Blanche of Lancaster, first wife of John of Gaunt. The narrator meets a knight in black grieving for his wife. Their love was mutual: "a

Work	Date	Key points
		marriage of minds", not just courtly flirtation. Begins with Ovid's story of Alcyone and Ceyx.
<i>The Parlement of Foulys</i>	c.1382	Birds gather on St Valentine's Day before the goddess Nature to choose mates. Noble eagles speak first and in a formal way; common ducks are blunt and practical ("Ye quek!"). Shows rank affecting how people think about love. Possibly written for the marriage of Richard II and Anne of Bohemia (1382).
<i>The Legend of Good Women</i>	c.1372–86	Written as a penance after the god of Love rebukes Chaucer for speaking ill of women in earlier poems. Retells nine stories of women betrayed by men (Cleopatra, Dido, Lucrece, Ariadne, etc.). Pity is the female virtue it highlights. Unfinished.
<i>Troilus and Criseyde</i>	mid-1380s	See below.
<i>The Canterbury Tales</i>	planned c.1387	See below.

Troilus and Criseyde:

- Based on **Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato***, but a real reinterpretation, not just a translation.
- Story: during the **Trojan War**, Troilus (a Trojan prince) loves Criseyde. Her uncle **Pandarus** brings them together. She is sent to the Greek camp, takes a new lover (Diomedes), and betrays Troilus.
- Chaucer changes Boccaccio: **Pandarus** is her *uncle* and guardian, a sensible, sentimental but manipulative figure. Criseyde is tender, sensitive and open to change, not simply fickle. Her persuasion is slow, and her anguish about leaving him is shown at length.
- Both lovers are seen as **victims of circumstances**, humanly and divinely arranged, beyond their control.
- The narrator is sympathetic and holds back from judging her ("Iwis, I wolde excuse hire yet for routhe", meaning "I would excuse her for pity").

- The poem ends with Troilus's soul rising above the world and laughing at those who mourn him, followed by a Christian prayer to the **Trinity** (partly from Dante). The "old rites" of the pagans are set aside.
- The god of Love in *Legend of Good Women* calls it a story of "how that Criseyde Troilus forsook". Many modern readers see this as too harsh a reading.

The Canterbury Tales:

- **Frame story:** about 30 pilgrims meet at the **Tabard Inn** in Southwark (London) to travel to **Becket's shrine at Canterbury**. The Host (the innkeeper) proposes that each tells **two tales going and two coming back**. In fact the work is **unfinished**: only **24 tales** exist.
- The **General Prologue** introduces each pilgrim by **estate** ("of what degree"), roughly in social order:
 - **Knight** first, then his son the **Squire** and a **Yeoman**.
 - **Church:** Prioress, Monk, Friar.
 - **Third estate:** Merchant, Clerk (student) of Oxford, Man of Law, Franklin, urban guildsmen (Haberdasher, Carpenter, Weaver, Dyer, Tapicer), skilled workers (Cook, Shipman, Doctor of Physic), and the **Wife of Bath**.
 - **Last group:** the **Parson**, **Ploughman**, Manciple, and the "reprobates" (Reeve, Miller, Summoner, Pardoner), then Chaucer himself.
- The **Parson** (true mission of the Church to the poor) and the **Ploughman** (holy poverty) are models of virtue, brothers in meekness, like Langland's Piers. The Reeve, Miller, Summoner and Pardoner show the opposite (cheating, stealing, lust, selling false relics).
- The Knight is described as "a worthy man", loyal to knightly vows. The chapter says he is meant to be admired, though some read him ironically.

Selected tales:

Teller	Tale
Knight	A noble, high-minded version of Boccaccio's <i>Teseida</i> : two cousins' rivalry for one princess, with divine intervention and ceremony.
Miller	A drunken interruption: a comic tale of a dim carpenter, his tricky wife and two suitors. It gives an opposite view of courtship to the Knight's. It provokes the Reeve (a carpenter) into a story about a cheated miller.
Friar and Summoner	The Friar tells of a corrupt summoner carried off to hell by the Devil; the furious Summoner replies with a coarse tale about a

Teller	Tale
	friar.
Merchant	January (old husband) and May (young wife). May deceives him in a pear tree.
Nun's Priest	A lively story of a vain cock caught by a fox , with a "moralite".
Pardoner	Preaches against greed, though he admits he is greedy himself .
Prioress	A devout tale of a Christian child whose throat is cut by Jews, but who keeps singing a hymn to Mary after death. Medieval audiences found it moving; modern readers find it offensive for its antisemitism.
Chaucer (the pilgrim)	First <i>Sir Thopas</i> , a parody of silly romances in awkward rhymes. The Host rudely interrupts. Then the prose <i>Melibee</i> , a long moral tale about the patient wife Prudence.
Parson	A long prose sermon on the seven deadly sins , closing the work.

- **Chaucer the pilgrim** pretends to be an **incompetent storyteller** and is modest and silent. This is a clever device: it lets him report others' words faithfully. He argues (using Christ and Plato as authorities) that a storyteller must repeat what others said exactly, even if rude, because "the wordes moote be cosyn to the dede" (words must be cousin to the deed).

The Wife of Bath:

- Chaucer gives a **strong, articulate woman** the central place, undermining the medieval idea that women are naturally inferior.
- Her **prologue is 856 lines**. She begins with the word "**experience**". From her **five marriages** (three to good, rich, old men) she argues against clerical **antifeminism** (writing that attacks women).
- She says virginity and celibacy are fine, but Christ's stricter demands were for "hem that wolde lyve parfitly", not everyone. She enjoys her sexuality within marriage.
- Her fifth husband **Jankyn**, a clerk 20 years younger, read anti-women books aloud to annoy her. She ripped three pages out; he hit her and she fell. Her "unconsciousness" (maybe faked) made him repent. She then took control of the household, and he burned his book.
- **Two readings**: some see a woman "protesting too much" and thereby confirming male stereotypes. Others see an alternative voice. The chapter says her very stridency comes from over-rigid patriarchal thinking.
- She is, the chapter says, a kind of **bourgeois (middle-class) domestic comedy**

mixed with discredited academic theories about women.

Chaucer as narrator:

- Chaucer's narrators are typically a "gentle, incompetent" or "uncomprehending" persona. In *Troilus and Criseyde* the narrator moves around his characters, defers to sources and audience, withdraws from judgement, and shows **ambivalence**. Because of his sympathy for women the chapter says he adopts a deliberate "**androgyny**".
- He is the first English poet to display the quality Keats called "**negative capability**".

Background: Negative capability is a phrase from the poet **John Keats** (1795–1821): the ability to stay with "uncertainties, mysteries, doubts" without needing to reach a final answer. Here it means Chaucer lets a story contain conflicting views.

10. Gower, Lydgate and Hoccleve

In short: Three poets who came after or alongside Chaucer. Gower was once seen as his equal; Lydgate was long and influential; Hoccleve was unusual in writing about his own troubles.

John Gower (?1330–1408):

- Chaucer's friend; for about 200 years after their deaths seen as his **rival** in eloquence. Chaucer called him "moral Gower".
- Over **50 manuscripts** of his *Confessio Amantis* survive (Chaucer's *Troilus* has about a third as many; *Canterbury Tales* about 80). Some were illuminated by the court painter Herman Scheerre.
- Caxton printed *Canterbury Tales* (1478) and *Confessio Amantis* (1483). Shakespeare used Gower as a source for *Pericles*, and as the story's narrator ("chorus").
- His reputation has been overshadowed by Chaucer's since then.

Three languages, three major works:

Work	Language	Description
<i>Mirour de l'Omme</i> (c.1376–8)	French	A long critical survey of sinful humanity, recommending universal repentance with help from the Virgin Mary.
<i>Vox Clamantis</i> (c.1379–81)	Latin	"The voice crying out", echoing Isaiah's "voice of him that crieth in the wilderness". Applies the same concerns to English society and royal government . Examines the moral diseases of each estate

Work	Language	Description
		and warns of coming doom. Revised in the 1390s with an allegory of the Peasants' Revolt and the deposition of Richard II as "proof" of his prophecies.
<i>Confessio Amantis</i> (c.1386)	English	"The Lover's Confession". More relaxed in tone. Combines pleasure and instruction. Originally inspired by a request from Richard II for "some newe thing". After Richard fell, Gower said it was written "for Engelondes sake".

How *Confessio Amantis* works:

- Gower portrays himself as an unsuccessful lover, **Amans** ("the lover"), who confesses to **Genius**, the **priest of Venus**.
- Genius tells **exemplary stories** (short tales with a moral) for each of the **seven deadly sins** and their sub-types.
- The stories teach self-discipline: controlling blind passion to reach "fyn lovyng" (refined love).
- Gower draws parallels between regulating love and regulating the state. Individuals have a **God-given "degree"** and should act in harmony.
- In Book 8, Amans retires, an "old man". Cupid pulls out a "fiery dart" from his heart. Venus gives him a **necklace of black beads** marked "**Por reposer**" ("for rest"). He wakes, tells his beads (prays) and is healed with "the balm, not of forgetfulness, but of wisdom". The poem ends with a prayer for good governance.
- **Style**: "plain", compared with Chaucer, but with melodic precision, a good sense of decorum, a steady flow of argument, and sympathy for wronged women such as **Phillis** and **Lucrece**. Gower presents himself as slow, slothful and unfulfilled.

John Lydgate (?1370–1449):

- A **Benedictine monk** at Bury St Edmunds, well-connected at court. Scottish poet Dunbar later named "Ludgate laureate" with Chaucer and Gower.
- One of the most **prolific** poets in English. His poems grew longer and heavier as he aged.
- Three major works, all versions of French or Italian originals:
 - ***Troy Book*** (1412–20), about 30,000 lines.
 - ***The Siege of Thebes*** (1420–2), about 24,000 lines.

- ***The Fall of Princes*** (1431–8), about 36,000 lines. Once highly esteemed.
- He saw himself as the **consolidator of Chaucer's innovations** in style, verse and vocabulary and helped establish Chaucer's authority in the 15th century.
- Compared with Chaucer, he lacks subtlety and delicacy, but he helped make English an acceptable language for **elevated poetry**.
- He imitated Chaucer in dream poems such as *The Temple of Glas* and *The Complaint of the Black Knight* (early 1400s).
- He saw history as a **series of warnings** against ambition in princes and nobles. This seemed prophetic to readers during the **Wars of the Roses** (1455–85).

Thomas Hoccleve (?1369–1426):

- A **clerk (scrivener)** in the office of the **Privy Seal** at Westminster. He never had the powerful patronage Lydgate did.
- His ***Regement of Princes*** (1411–12) was written for the future Henry V to show his talents and recommend virtue.
- He is the **most self-consciously autobiographical** of the post-Chaucer poets: one of the first to use his own life as subject matter.
- The **Prologue** is a 2,000-line complaint in the form of a **dialogue with a beggar** he meets walking at night, unable to sleep.
- His distress comes from **thought itself**, not love. He blames the **boredom of his job**, tyrannical bosses, failing eyesight from copying, and low pay. As a young man he chased women with little success; now old, he expects only poverty.
- He had a **severe mental breakdown (1415–20)**, which he describes in a linked series of poems in the early 1420s: the gloomy *Complaint* and the more optimistic *Dialogue with a Friend*, in which a friend coaxes him back into confidence and poetry.
- He called Chaucer his "dere mayster ... and fadir".

11. Scottish poetry in the fifteenth century

In the 1400s, writers in Lowland Scotland produced a distinctive body of literature in the Scots language. They honoured Chaucer but insisted on their own Scottish identity.

- Scots poets admitted their debt to **Chaucer, Gower and Lydgate**, but were aware of their separate national identity and independence from England.
- Scotland had also long had close ties with **France**, as protection against English interference.

Early patriotic poems:

- **John Barbour** (?1320–95), Archdeacon of Aberdeen: ***The Bruce*** (c.1376), a **13,000-line** chronicle poem about **Robert the Bruce** and Scotland's war of

independence, ending with the defeat of Edward II's army at **Bannockburn** (1314).

- **Henry the Minstrel ("Blind Harry")** (?1440–?1492): *Schir William Wallace* (c.1460), about **12,000 lines**. It describes the campaigns of **Sir William Wallace** (?1272–1305), the "martyred" hero of the first phase of the war. It is violent and strongly patriotic, and claims authority from Wallace's chaplain, John Blair.

King James I of Scotland (1394–1437) and *The Kingis Quair*:

- At 11, James was captured by an English ship on his way to France. He spent **19 years** as a prisoner in England (Tower of London and other castles), where he continued his education and learned the new English poetry.
- *The Kingis Quair* ("The King's Book", c.1435) looks back on his imprisonment.
 - The sleepless prisoner reads **Boethius**, looks from his tower window and sees a beautiful lady in a garden. He falls in love and laments his captivity.
 - **Venus** carries him in a dream to the realms of Love and Reason, then he meets **Fortune**. He learns his fate will turn upward and wakes. This may reflect his marriage to Lady **Jane Beaufort** in 1424.
 - It echoes Chaucer's *Knight's Tale* (imprisoned lovers), *Troilus and Criseyde*, and Gower's *Amans*. At the end he honours Gower and Chaucer as "superlative as poetis laureate".

Education and national identity:

Universities were founded at **St Andrews (1411)**, **Glasgow (1451)**, **Aberdeen (1495)**. The Pope also raised St Andrews (1472) and Glasgow (1492) to **archbishoprics**. These moves freed Scottish education and Church life from English claims (the Archbishop of York had claimed authority over Scotland; Oxford and Cambridge considered themselves universities for the whole island).

The three great late poets

Gavin Douglas (?1475–1522):

- St Andrews graduate; named Archbishop of St Andrews briefly and unsuccessfully; became Bishop of Dunkeld (1515).
- *The Palice of Honour* (1501): a learned allegory showing him as a distant follower of Chaucer.
- Famous for his **translation of Virgil's *Aeneid*** into rhymed couplets (completed c.1513). It follows the Latin closely but has its own energy. Each book has a **prologue**; Book I attacks **Caxton's** French-based translation as nothing like Virgil. The prologue to Book VII gives a vivid picture of a bleak northern winter.
- He insisted he wrote in the "Scottis" language, using "hamely playn termys".

Robert Henryson (?1424–?1506):

- Probably a Glasgow graduate; later a **schoolmaster** at Dunfermline Abbey.
- ***The Morall Fabillis of Esope the Phrygian*** (late 15th c.): 13 fables, rewritten from Aesop's brief tales into vivid, carefully shaped poems. Each ends with a **moralitas** (moral explanation).
 - Animals stand for **human pride, vanity and inconsistency**.
 - In "The Taill of the Wolf and the Lamb" the lamb stands for the poor and the wolf for greedy lawyers and landowners.
 - In "The Taill of the Uponlandis Mous and the Burges Mous", a **town mouse** visits her country cousin, dislikes the plain fare, and takes her to town. The country mouse is terrified by cats and servants and returns home, content with beans, nuts and peas.
- Other poems: *The Bludy Serk* (a knight killed by a giant is a parable of Christ's saving of the soul); *Robene and Makyne* (a pastoral dialogue between a shepherd and a country girl).
- ***The Testament of Cresseid***: his **best and most moving poem**, a **sequel to Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde***:
 - On a cold winter night, the poet makes a drink, stirs his fire and picks up Chaucer's poem "to cut the winter nicht".
 - It describes Cresseid's unhappy life after Diomedes deserts her. She curses Venus and Cupid, and in a vision the **planetary gods** (led by a frosty Saturn) punish her with **leprosy**.
 - In the most painful passage, **Troilus meets her** without recognising her. He gives the unknown leper a **purse of gold** "for knichtlie pietie". When she learns who he is, she agonises over her desertion of a noble lover.
 - Henryson shows Chaucerian **pity** for her and her painful self-discovery. The cold, dark season matches the sad subject.

William Dunbar (?1456–?1513):

- MA from St Andrews (1479); employed by the court of **James IV**.
- More varied and more openly courtly than Henryson, but less consistently impressive.
- Wrote poems for official occasions (e.g. ***The Thrissill and the Rose***, 1503, celebrating James IV's marriage to **Margaret Tudor**) and humorous complaints about unpaid salary (*Respontio regis*).
- ***The Tua Mariit Wemen and the Wedo*** ("The Two Married Women and the Widow"): witty account of gossiping women. The widow, who owes something to the Wife of Bath, confesses she wears colourful clothes under her mourning and fakes tears with a hidden wet sponge.

- ***Ane Ballat of the Fenyeit Frier of Tungland***: mocks a false alchemist friar who claimed he could fly.
- Religious poems: a devout "ballat" to the Virgin Mary; a triumphant poem on the Resurrection ("**Done is a battel on the dragon blak**") ending with the Latin *Surrexit Dominus de sepulchro* ("The Lord has risen from the tomb").
- ***Lament for the Makaris*** ("Lament for the Makers", i.e. poets): a meditation on death in **25 four-line stanzas**, each ending with the refrain ***Timor mortis conturbat me*** ("The fear of death troubles me"). Dunbar lists dead English and Scottish poets, beginning with Chaucer, Lydgate and Gower. Death makes princes, prelates, physicians and poets all equal.
- "In Winter" is another lyric recalling the dark, cold days of a northern winter.

12. Late medieval drama

Religious plays, performed by town guilds in the streets, told the whole story of the Bible from Creation to the Last Judgement. Later "morality plays" showed one person's struggle to be saved.

Background to medieval theatre:

Medieval English theatre grew out of the **Church's own ceremonies**. On **Palm Sunday**, people processed with palms and heard the Passion story sung by different voices playing Jesus, Pilate, Peter and others. At **Easter**, a short scene acted out the three Maries visiting Christ's empty tomb (the Maries were played by men in church robes). These Latin enactments grew into plays in English.

Mystery plays (also called "cycle plays"):

- Plays that traced God's plan from the **fall of Lucifer**, through the Creation and the **fall of Adam**, to Christ's **redemption** and the **Last Judgement**.
- They were popular because in the late 14th century, after the Black Death, ideas of the **"four last things" (death, judgement, heaven and hell)** were dreadfully familiar.
- Example: In the York cycle's Herod play, **Death** (Mors) bursts into the king's feast and kills him. The chapter says some audiences must have enjoyed seeing the ranting villain Herod defeated, while others felt a chill.
- Cycles survive in manuscripts from the mid-15th century at the earliest.

Background: Corpus Christi ("Body of Christ") is a feast celebrating the Eucharist (Communion). It was added to the Church calendar in 1264 and observed in England from 1318. It took place in early summer and included a procession carrying the Blessed Sacrament through the streets. **Guilds** were associations of craftsmen and merchants (bakers, ironmongers, etc.) who set standards for their trade and looked after members. They joined the procession in their uniforms with their banners.

- The **guilds** took over responsibility for performing the plays. They paid for the texts, costumes, props and the **movable platforms** (pageant wagons) used for staging.
- Records of performances survive from many cities (Aberdeen to Canterbury). **Complete texts** survive only for:
 - **York** (48 plays)
 - **Chester** (24)
 - **Wakefield / Towneley** (32)
 - an unknown **Midlands town** (42)
 - Fragments survive from Coventry, Norwich, Northampton, Newcastle, plus cycles in **Cornish**.
- Guilds sometimes played a scene matching their trade:
 - Chester: Noah's flood by the "Water-leaders and Drawers in Dee" (who supplied the city with water).
 - Chester: the Crucifixion by the Ironmongers (nail sellers); the Harrowing of Hell by the Cooks and Innkeepers (good with fire).
 - York: Noah by Fishers and Mariners; Crucifixion by Pinners and Painters; Last Supper by Bakers.
- Most actors were amateurs, but there were good **stage effects**: Coventry's records list a "**Hell-mouth**", a barrel to make the sound of an earthquake, and "a link to set the world on fire".
- Major centres of performance were **cities in the North and Midlands**, where guilds could show independence from the Church.
- The **Wakefield Master**, an anonymous 15th-century writer, wrote the two ***Shepherds' Plays*** about the Nativity. They use a strong Yorkshire dialect and local references; shepherds grumble about the cold and oppressive landlords. When the angel appears, their rough humour turns to humility. A **stolen sheep wrapped in a cradle** parallels the birth of the "Lamb of God".
- **Comedy** appears in other plays too: Herod's ranting is almost pantomime ("I wot not where I may sit for anger"), and **Noah's wife** refuses to board the ark. In the Chester play her sons force her in; in the Wakefield play she waits until the flood touches her toes.
- In none of the cycles does comedy or characterisation weaken the central theme: the **unity of human history and its pattern of salvation**. Old Testament characters are shown as types of Christ.
- The plays were "**books of the illiterate**", more accessible than stained-glass windows and similar to graphic **doom paintings** (pictures of the Last Judgement) in parish churches.

Morality plays:

- 15th- and early 16th-century allegorical plays about the **human soul** facing death, temptation and God's mercy.
- Suited **travelling actors** who performed in inn-yards and halls.
- Famous examples:
 - ***The Castle of Perseverance*** (c.1405): the earliest and biggest, with **36 actors** and a circular open-air stage. It follows **Humanum Genus** (Mankind) from birth, through a staged battle of vices and virtues, to death and judgement.
 - ***Mankind*** (c.1465): East Anglian. The title character, a countryman, is tempted by vices and the comic devil **Titivillus**. He despairs ("A rope, a rope, a rope!") but is saved by **Mercy**.
 - ***Everyman*** (c.1495): from a Flemish original. **Death** summons Everyman, whose friends Fellowship, Kindred, Cousin and Goods all refuse to go with him. Only **Good Deeds** goes with him and can defend him before God.

End of the plays

- Texts were edited long before the Reformation. In the 1540s–50s, scenes that offended Protestants (e.g. those about the Virgin Mary) were quietly cut.
- By the 1560s authorities wanted to stop them completely. The **York cycle** was last performed in 1569, **Chester** in 1575, **Coventry** in 1580.
- The chapter points out that Shakespeare (born 1564 in nearby Stratford) *could* have seen the Coventry plays as a child.

13. Late medieval religious writing: the mystics:

Alongside public drama, some writers described private, personal experiences of God. Many were hermits or recluses. Most wrote in English.

Writer	Key facts
Richard Rolle (c.1300–49)	Left his studies at Oxford at about 18, appalled by the vanity of the world, and became a hermit in his native Yorkshire . He ended up living near a convent of Cistercian nuns at Hampole . Wrote English letters <i>Ego Dormio</i> , <i>The Commandment</i> , <i>The Form of Living</i> for the nuns, who did not know Latin. Stresses a burning passion for God (love as "byrnand yernyng in God"). Includes love poems to Jesus, and repeats the name "Jesu" almost like a love-mantra.
<i>The Cloud of Unknowing</i> (c.1380, anonymous)	The author may have chosen anonymity on purpose, out of humility. Follows the

Writer	Key facts
	tradition of Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite (a 6th-century theologian). Distrusts "curiosity of imagination". Argues that reason can never "know" God; only love can reach God. A "cloud of unknowing" lies between humans and God and can be pierced only by "a sharp dart of love" from heaven.
Walter Hilton (d. 1396)	Hermit, then Augustinian canon at Thurgarton, Nottinghamshire. His <i>Scala Perfectionis</i> (<i>The Scale of Perfection</i>), written for a woman recluse (printed 1494), recommends moral reform, humility and discipline. The soul must pass through a "dark night" of detachment from earthly things; the "murkier the night, the nearer is the true day of the love of Jesus". T. S. Eliot quoted it in <i>Little Gidding</i>.
Julian of Norwich (c.1342–after 1416)	A woman recluse. In 8 May 1373, aged about 30 and gravely ill, she received a series of visions ("showings"). Two versions of her <i>Revelations of Divine Love</i>: a short one soon after, and a much longer one written about twenty years later after reflection. In the first showing Christ shows her something the size of a hazelnut in her palm: "It is alle that ys made", the whole universe held in her hand. She sees the Virgin Mary as a meek young girl. In the twelfth showing she asks why evil exists; Christ answers "all thynges schalle be wele" ("all shall be well"). Her style is sophisticated despite calling herself "a simple creature unlettered".
Margery Kempe (?1373–after 1433)	A married woman, mother, and widely travelled pilgrim (Jerusalem, Rome, Compostela, Norway, Germany). <i>The Book of Margery Kempe</i> (c.1432, revised 1436–8) is one of the earliest English autobiographies. It describes her mental disorders, visions and her tendency to weep loudly, which irritated the Archbishop of Canterbury and others. Julian advised her to follow what God put in her soul, as long as it did not go against God's honour or her fellow Christians' wellbeing. Vigorous but disorganised; she argued openly with bishops and others.

- **Julian's tact:** after the 12th showing she says that it is God's will that we know "all shall be well", but that it is not his will we know everything now, only what the Church teaches. The chapter reads this as her retreating into the Church's safe teaching after receiving an explosive message.
- Julian is **distinctive:** where Rolle and Hilton gave advice to women, she shows a **distinguished female spirituality**.

14. Malory and Caxton:

In short: Malory wrote the greatest English prose version of the Arthurian legend, while the Wars of the Roses tore England apart. William Caxton printed it, and was the real herald of a new age: printing.

Historical background: the Wars of the Roses

Background: The Hundred Years' War A long series of wars between England and France (1337–1453). Henry V's great victory at **Agincourt** (1415) raised English hopes of ruling France, but they ended after the defeat at **Castillon** (1453). England kept only **Calais**.

- **Henry V** died in 1422, leaving a **9-month-old son, Henry VI**.
- Henry VI was devout, but a weak ruler. He believed more "in the power of prayer than in the advantages of policy". He founded **Eton** and **King's College, Cambridge**. After a brief lapse into **insanity in 1453** and a serious collapse in 1455, power struggles broke out between noble factions.
- The dispute was over the **legitimacy** of Henry's claim (through descent from Edward III's son, **John of Gaunt**, Duke of Lancaster) against the claim of **Richard, Duke of York**.
- The "**Wars of the Roses**" (named from the red rose of **Lancaster** and white rose of **York**) began at the battle of **St Albans (1455)**. Key events:
 - **1461:** Henry VI deposed; Yorkist **Edward IV** takes the throne.
 - **1470:** Henry restored briefly.
 - **1471:** Henry murdered under the restored Edward IV.
 - **1483:** Edward IV dies; his brother **Richard III** seizes the throne.
 - **1485: Henry Tudor** invades, wins at Bosworth, and becomes **Henry VII**, ending the wars. He and his propagandists stressed his Welsh blood and a (somewhat improbable) descent from **King Arthur**.
- The wars killed some 12 princes, 200 noblemen and around 100,000 gentry and commoners.
- The **Paston Letters** (a family of Norfolk gentry, first published 1787) give first-hand views of the turbulence. In 1471 Margaret Paston described armed men sent by the Duke of Norfolk attacking their property and desecrating the parish church.

Sir Thomas Malory (d. 1471) and *Le Morte Darthur*:

- Wrote *Le Morte Darthur* ("The Death of Arthur") in **1469–70** while in **prison** on charges of violence, theft, extortion and rape (if this is the same man; the chapter says it is generally believed). A strange irony for a book praising chivalry.
- He served successive earls of Warwick, whose conduct was not always chivalrous.
- He translated and reworked many **English and French** sources, in verse and prose, into a **prose epic**: vigorous, formal, supple, rhythmic English, with great skill in dialogue.
- His Arthur rules a land that is both a **never-never land** and a real Christian England (Winchester, Salisbury, Canterbury, Carlisle).
- **Story**: begins with Arthur's conception and birth, his pulling the **sword from the stone**, and his rise. Long sections cover **Lancelot, Gareth and Tristram**, the quest for the **Holy Grail**, and the adulterous love of **Lancelot and Guinevere**. It ends with the **fall of Arthur's kingdom**, his terrible dream, and the recurring phrase "the noble felyshyp of the Rounde Table is brokyn for ever".
- Arthur is carried off in a barge to **Avlylon** (Avalon) to heal, and is buried at **Glastonbury** under the Latin inscription *Hic iacet Arthurus, rex quondam rexque futurus* ("Here lies Arthur, king once and king to be"). The idea of a **once and future king** who may return might have comforted people during the troubled 1470s, and was later useful to the **Tudors and early Stuarts**.
- The Arthur story of conquests in Europe and his coronation by the Pope (section 2) seems to shadow **Henry V's victories**, but there is little similarity between Arthur's courteous knights and those responsible for the disasters of Henry VI's reign.
- Malory looked back on the glorious beginning of chivalry while his own England witnessed the **bloody decline of military aristocracy**. Fittingly the chapter says he wrote "a prose elegy to the dying age of aristocratic chivalry". He is called "the greatest prose writer of the fifteenth century".
- Influence: Spenser (who saw himself as heir to the last chivalric enchantments) to Tennyson.

William Caxton (?1422–91):

- A **merchant and printer**, the first to bring printing to England.
- Printed *Morte Darthur* in **July 1485**. He **edited and cut** Malory's text and reordered it into **21 books** (Malory's own original had eight sections).
- Caxton recognised the book's value: "Herein may be seen noble chivalrye, curtosye, humanyte ... love, frendshyp, cowardyse, mordre, hate, vertue, and synne."
- The **original manuscript** (the "Winchester manuscript") was only **rediscovered in 1934**.
- Irony: it was a **merchant**, alert to profits from courtly literature, who made Malory's

work famous. The chapter says Caxton, not Malory, is the real **harbinger of a new age** in which the printed word would play a "revolutionary role".

Background: Printing Before printing, every book was copied by hand, so books were rare and costly. Printing with movable type was invented in Europe in the mid-15th century. Caxton set up England's first printing press in the 1470s. Printing helped standardise English and spread literature more widely.

15. Quick-revision timeline:

Date	Event
1066	Norman Conquest (Battle of Hastings)
1077	Bayeux cathedral consecrated
1086	Domesday Book
1087	William the Conqueror dies
c.1099	Crusaders capture Jerusalem; Hospitallers founded
c.1130–8	Geoffrey of Monmouth, <i>Historia Regum Britanniae</i>
1170 / 1173	Becket murdered / made a saint
1174	Fire at Canterbury; French Gothic choir begun
c.1200	Layamon's <i>Brut</i>
c.1225	<i>King Horn</i>
1264	Corpus Christi feast instituted
c.1344	Order of the Garter founded
1348–9	Black Death
1377–99	Reign of Richard II ("Ricardian" revival)
1381	Peasants' Revolt
1380s	Wycliffite Bible; Langland's B- and C-texts
c.1387	<i>Canterbury Tales</i> begun
c.1386	Gower's <i>Confessio Amantis</i>
1399	Richard II deposed; Henry IV reigns
1415	Henry V wins at Agincourt; Wyclif's remains burned
c.1435	James I of Scotland, <i>The Kingis Quair</i>
1453	Battle of Castillon ends English hopes in France
1455–85	Wars of the Roses
1469–70 / 1471	Malory writes <i>Morte Darthur</i> / dies
1478 / 1483	Caxton prints <i>Canterbury Tales</i> / <i>Confessio Amantis</i>

Date	Event
1485	Caxton prints <i>Morte Darthur</i> ; Henry VII wins
c.1495	<i>Everyman</i>
c.1513	Gavin Douglas finishes his <i>Aeneid</i> translation
1569–80	Last performances of York, Chester and Coventry cycles

16. Glossary of key terms:

- **Allegory:** a story where characters or places stand for ideas (Reason, Truth, the Seven Deadly Sins).
- **Alliteration / alliterative verse:** repeating the same starting sounds in a line; used instead of end-rhyme in Old English and "alliterative revival" poems.
- **Alliterative revival:** 14th-century burst of alliterative poetry in northern and western England (*Gawain*-poet, Langland).
- **Anchoress:** a woman who lives enclosed in a cell attached to a church, devoted to prayer.
- **Chivalry:** the knight's code of honour (loyalty, bravery, protecting the weak, honouring women, defending the faith).
- **Courtly love / fin'amors:** the medieval idea of a lover serving and adoring his lady like a vassal serving a lord.
- **Dream vision:** a poem narrated as a dream (*Roman de la Rose*, *Pearl*, *Piers Plowman*, *Kingis Quair*).
- **Estates (the three):** the clergy, the nobility, and the workers.
- **Fabliau:** a short, comic, often bawdy story (e.g. the Miller's Tale).
- **Feudalism:** system in which land is held in return for loyalty and service.
- **Guild:** an association of craftsmen or merchants; in drama, guilds produced the mystery plays.
- **Harrowing of Hell:** Christ's descent into hell after his death to rescue the righteous.
- **Lai:** a short verse tale (Marie de France).
- **Lollards:** followers of John Wyclif.
- **Matter of Britain / France / Rome:** three categories of romance subject.
- **Moralitas:** moral lesson at the end of a fable.
- **Morality play:** an allegorical play about one person's struggle for salvation (*Everyman*).
- **Mystery (cycle) play:** a play (or set of plays) staging stories from the Bible,

performed by guilds.

- **Mystic:** someone who seeks direct personal experience of God.
- **Negative capability** (Keats): being comfortable with uncertainty and conflicting views.
- **Passus:** "step"; a section of *Piers Plowman*.
- **Romance:** a story (usually verse) about knights, love, quests and magic.
- **Transubstantiation:** the Catholic belief that bread and wine in the Mass become Christ's body and blood.
- **Vernacular:** the everyday language of a region (English, French) as opposed to Latin.
- **Vulgate:** the standard Latin Bible.
- **Wyrd:** Old English idea of fate.