

MACMILLAN HISTORY OF LITERATURE

ENGLISH GOTHIC LITERATURE

Derek Brewer



Macmillan History of Literature
General Editor: A. Norman Jeffares

MACMILLAN HISTORY OF LITERATURE

General Editor: A. Norman Jeffares

Published

SIXTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLISH LITERATURE

Murray Roston

SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLISH LITERATURE

Bruce King

TWENTIETH-CENTURY ENGLISH LITERATURE

Harry Blamires

ANGLO-IRISH LITERATURE

A. Norman Jeffares

OLD ENGLISH LITERATURE

Michael Alexander

ENGLISH GOTHIC LITERATURE

Derek Brewer

Forthcoming

EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLISH LITERATURE

Maximillian Novak

NINETEENTH-CENTURY ENGLISH LITERATURE

Margaret Stonyk

THE LITERATURE OF SCOTLAND

Rory Watson

COMMONWEALTH LITERATURE

Alistair Niven

THE LITERATURE OF THE UNITED STATES

Marshall Walker

**A HISTORY OF LITERATURE IN THE IRISH
LANGUAGE**

Declan Kiberd

MACMILLAN HISTORY OF LITERATURE

ENGLISH
GOTHIC
LITERATURE

Derek Brewer

palgrave
macmillan

© Derek Brewer 1983

All rights reserved. No part of this publication
may be reproduced or transmitted, in any form
or by any means, without permission.

First published 1983 by
THE MACMILLAN PRESS LTD
London and Basingstoke
Companies and representatives
throughout the world

ISBN 978-0-333-27139-1 ISBN 978-1-349-17037-1 (eBook)
DOI 10.1007/978-1-349-17037-1

The paperback edition of this book is sold subject to the condition
that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold,
hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form
of binding or cover other than that in which
it is published and without a similar condition including this
condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	x
<i>Editor's Preface</i>	xi
<i>Preface</i>	xiii
1. <i>Continuities and beginnings</i>	1
Invasion	
The Anglo-Saxon literary achievement	
Social and religious bases of literature	
Layamon's <i>Brut</i> : almost an English national epic	
2. <i>The inner life</i>	17
Spiritual instruction as literature	
English recluses: Christina and Wulfric	
<i>The Ancrene Riwe</i> : manuscripts and author	
Other devotional texts	
3. <i>The question of song</i>	30
<i>The Owl and the Nightingale</i>	
<i>The Bestiary</i> as an example of the archaic world-view	
Anecdotal didactic poems and the Church's educational effort	
4. <i>The question of song – lyrics, short poems, ballads</i>	40
Early poems: men speaking plainly to men	
<i>The Love Rune</i> and religious love	
Other Gothic manuscript miscellanies and various poems	
Fifteenth-century religious and secular poems	
Appendix: the ballads	
5. <i>Adventure and love: romances in rhyme</i>	70
<i>King Horn</i> : an archetypal romance	
<i>Havelok</i> and Grimsby	
<i>Floris and Blanchefur</i> and romantic love	
<i>Fabliau</i> and beast fable	

5. *Adventure and love: romances in rhyme – continued*
Sir Orfeo and the Auchinleck Manuscript
 Fourteenth-century Arthurian rhyming romances
 Fifteenth-century romances

6. *Chaucer* 89
The Book of the Duchess and the English and European literary traditions
 Medieval romantic love in English
Le Roman de la Rose: Guillaume
Le Roman de la Rose: Jean de Meung
An ABC
 Chaucer's life and personality
The House of Fame
The Parliament of Fowls
The Consolation of Philosophy
Troilus and Criseyde: the story
The Knight's Tale
The Legend of Good Women
The Canterbury Tales
 Archaic and modern in Chaucer

7. *Chaucer's friends and followers in England and Scotland* 128
 Gower, Clanvowe, Scogan
 Lydgate
 Hoccleve and others
 Scottish Chaucerians

8. *Alliterative poetry* 142
Wynnere and Wastoure
The Parlement of the Thre Ages
 Alliterative romances
 Historical poems

9. *The Gawain-poet* 155
Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: the story
Pearl: the story
Cleanness: the story
Patience: the story
St Erkenwald
 The *Gawain*-poet and his milieu
 The fading of the alliterative chivalric tradition

10. <i>Piers Plowman</i>	181
Medieval provincial culture and the desire for salvation	
The A-text of <i>Piers Plowman</i> : the story	
The B-text	
The C-text	
Poetry based on association	
Allegory	
<i>Piers Plowman</i> as spiritual autobiography	
The materials of the poem	
The absorption of the alliterative tradition	
A note on allegory and typology	
11. <i>Drama</i>	213
The nature of drama	
The beginnings of European and English religious drama	
Early plays in England	
The fourteenth-century growth of drama	
Developing biblical dramas	
Varieties of dramatic experience	
Morality plays	
The secular play <i>Dux Moraud</i>	
The miracle plays	
12. <i>Later religious prose</i>	241
The nature of prose	
Richard Rolle	
<i>The Cloud of Unknowing</i>	
Walter Hilton	
Julian of Norwich	
Margery Kempe	
<i>The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ</i>	
The Lollard Bible and sermons and tracts	
Saints' legends	
Expository prose	
Fifteenth-century consolidation and religious anti-intellectualism	
13. <i>Secular prose: Malory and Caxton</i>	263
Translation and the development of prose for practical purposes	
Malory's <i>Le Morte Darthur</i>	
Caxton	

14. <i>The re-making of English</i>	280
The demotion of English	
The continuity of English	
‘Old’, ‘Middle’ and ‘Modern’ English	
The written form of the language	
Development and variation of forms	
Development of the English vocabulary: French words	
The direct relation of Latin to English	
Fifteenth-century English: a summary	
<i>Further reading</i>	300
<i>Chronological table</i>	303
<i>Index</i>	310

List of Plates

1. God and Devils © British Library, Royal 2B VII f.1b.
2. The Nativity © British Library, Additional, 1819 2f 52.
3. The Crucifixion from the Evesham Psalter © British Library, Additional 44874 f.6.
4. The Resurrection from the York Psalter © British Library, Additional 54179 f.59b.
5. A Tournament from Froissart © BBC Hulton Picture Library.
6. Lovers in a Garden © British Library, Harley 4431 f. 376.
7. A Hunt from the Hardwick Hunting Tapestry in the Victoria and Albert Museum.
8. A Feast © British Library, Royal 14E IV f.224b.
9. Lydgate presenting a book © British Library, Harley 4826 f.1.
10. Chaucer © British Library, Harley 4866 f.88.
11. Conway Castle © British Library, Harley 1319 f.14b.
12. A Ploughman from the Luttrell Psalter © British Library, Additional 422130 f.170.
13. The Entry into Jerusalem © British Library, Additional 17868 f.22b.

14. Christ in Majesty © British Library, Royal 2A XXII f.14.
15. The Battle of Agincourt, 1415. © Snark International.
16. The Black Death © British Library, Additional 17280.
17. Baruch reading before the King, © British Library, Royal 1E IX f.207b.
18. Fortune turning her Wheel. Detail from a 15th Century French manuscript.
19. Salisbury Cathedral. © The British Tourist Authority.

The author and publishers are grateful to the copyright holders listed above for permission to reproduce these plates.

Acknowledgements

I gratefully acknowledge permission from the publishers to quote the passage from Paul Theroux *The Old Patagonian Express* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1979).

Among many debts for comments and ideas incurred over the years to friends with whom I have discussed medieval English literature I should particularly like to mention those to my Cambridge colleagues, Professor J. E. Stevens, Dr. R. P. Axton, Dr. Jill Mann, Mr. A. C. Spearing and Dr. B. A. Windeatt, and to my wife.

The book itself could not have been produced without the unfailing help and co-operation of Ms. Linda Mitchell and Mrs. R. M. Bruce, to whom my thanks.

The author and publishers are grateful to the Council of the Early English Text Society for permission to reproduce quotations from their publications.

Editor's preface

THE study of literature requires knowledge of contexts as well as of texts. What kind of person wrote the poem, the play, the novel, the essay? What forces acted upon them as they wrote? What was the historical, the political, the philosophical, the economic, the cultural background? Was the writer accepting or rejecting the literary conventions of the time or developing them, or creating entirely new kinds of literary expression? Are there interactions between literature and the art, music or architecture of its period? Was the writer affected by contemporaries or isolated?

Such questions stress the need for students to go beyond the reading of set texts, to extend their knowledge by developing a sense of chronology, of action and reaction, and of the varying relationships between writers and society.

Histories of literature can encourage students to make comparisons, can aid in understanding the purposes of individual authors and in assessing the totality of their achievements. Their development can be better understood and appreciated with some knowledge of the background of their time. And histories of literature, apart from their valuable function as reference books, can demonstrate the great wealth of writing in English that is there to be enjoyed. They can guide the reader who wishes to explore it more fully and to gain in the process deeper insights into the rich diversity not only of literature but of human life itself.

A. NORMAN JEFFARES

Preface

My story is told differently from other histories of earlier English literature already available. I assume no specialist knowledge in the reader and describe in detail a relatively few outstanding or exemplary texts so that the reader may gain some direct feeling of actual medieval works, and not be encumbered with lists or mere opinion. This emphasis inevitably leads to the omission of or only very brief reference to a number of interesting texts. The book is designed as a readable unit and not as a reference manual.

In the medieval period, literacy develops, and even some literalism. There is a strong growth in the concept of the individual as set against the archaic collective social group. Notions of religious and secular love take on special configurations. Medieval works of literary art are based on manuscripts which are intrinsically variable and are related to the nature of what is heard and spoken in a group; they are therefore different in style and attitude from the literature with which the modern world is familiar through the medium of print, for print disperses multiple identical copies of a text to isolated solitary readers largely unknown to each other or the author. Hence the different feeling of medieval literature. Medieval rhetoric, also, though bookish, is more closely related to natural speech, to the devices of folk-tale and traditional narrative, than it is to print-culture. Folk tradition is important, as well as the learned tradition. This historical amalgam, developing from the twelfth to the sixteenth century, is not unreasonably summed up as 'Gothic'.

We are paradoxically now in a more favourable position to understand medieval 'Gothic' literature, than we have been for a long time. Contemporary non-naturalistic developments

in literature and the visual arts, the popularity of song and dance on radio and television, enable us to see and respond to many 'Gothic' or traditional, non-realistic oral characteristics in our own culture that were often misunderstood from the seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries. At the same time we can still respond, as all centuries have, to the remarkable continuity of English literature, to the humanity, love, pathos and comedy of many medieval texts.

There is no such thing as 'progress' in works of art. Homer, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Dickens and James Joyce cannot be put on a scale of progressive improvement. On the other hand, there may be progress in general literary *culture*, in the wider spread of literacy, in greater learning, in the range and depth of literary education. The medieval period, besides producing great works of art, was also one of great general progress in literary culture as in society as a whole. The Norman Conquest had dealt an almost mortal blow to English, the most advanced vernacular culture in Europe, at the beginning of our period. By the end of the medieval period the general state of England, and the achievement of English literary culture, were vastly improved. During the medieval period the main structures of the national culture were formed; they maintained themselves for many centuries after and not all are yet passed away. The history of English medieval culture is a remarkable success story which culminates in the sixteenth century.

Part of this story is the history of the English language, whose vicissitudes in the medieval period were crucial to its present supremacy as a world-language and cannot be understood in separation from the facts of language. The passage of time, as with all things, has much changed the language. For this reason the language of medieval English literature is sometimes difficult. Readers may therefore have to exert some energy and patience at first when they explore medieval literature further, though they will not find anything in medieval English as difficult as some modern English texts. Since my story is of literature the history of the language occupies a subsidiary place, but its fundamental importance must not be neglected. The passage of time, the various

disasters which occurred, all cause the language of medieval English literature on first acquaintance to appear strange in spelling, vocabulary and, sometimes, grammar. But the strangeness disappears with a little familiarity, and the language soon reveals its special beauty and interest.

In the present book when quoting texts I have as often as possible gone back to the manuscripts or in some cases facsimiles. In order to minimise the apparent quaintness of the first appearance of these texts, which may give a new reader a misleading impression that the literature is quaint or naïve, I have regularly modernised such obsolete letters as 'thorn' (representing *th*), and 'yogh' (which I transcribe as *y* or *gh* or *s* as appropriate). I follow modern usage of *i/j*, *u/v*, and modern capitalisation and punctuation. In a few instances spelling is clarified, as for example by transcribing *the* as *thee* where necessary. I have sometimes supplied final *-e* where required by the metre, and made minor emendations without note. These are the conventions of most editions of Chaucer. For quotations from Chaucer I use F. N. Robinson's second edition (London: O.U.P., 1957).

The reader unacquainted with the pronunciation of Middle English can achieve a very rough approximation by pronouncing the vowel letters as in modern Western European languages and by pronouncing all the consonants. A more correct pronunciation is worth attaining since the purity of most Middle English vowels and the strength of the consonants make the language more musical than Modern English.

Verse varies in metre. Alliterative metre broadly speaking follows the normal stress patterns of modern English and is therefore not difficult. Other metrical verse often scans regularly, and Chaucer in particular does so. As in all such metrical verse in English there is an interplay between the underlying regular metrical beat and the normal pattern of speech-stress as dictated by meaning, so that the resultant rhythm is not monotonous. In order to achieve metrical regularity it may be necessary to sound final *-e* at the end of a noun, or inflexions of the plural, as *-es*, or of verbs, as *-eth*. Some verse may be less polished than Chaucer's, partly because of faulty transcription by scribes, but non-alliterative verse normally has an underlying regular metrical beat.

In writing literary history much has to be explained that is only preliminary to literature, and much more of great interest has to be omitted for lack of space. I conclude with Chaucer's Knight's words:

But al that thyng I moot as now forbere,
I have, God woot, a largè feeld to ere plough
And waykè been the oxen in my plough, weak
The remenaunt of the tale is long ynough.

(*Canterbury Tales* I, 885–8)

DEREK BREWER
CAMBRIDGE
1982

Continuities and beginnings

Invasion

IN 1066 the English people fell for the first and we hope the last time to the ever-eager invader. In the use of their mother-tongue for literature and records, the English were the most advanced people in Europe. England was prosperous and relatively orderly, with a high level of freedom and culture. But prosperity, internal division and ignorance of advanced military technology invited attack from two Continental enemies, from Scandinavians on the north-east coast, and Normans from France on the south-east. Harold of England defeated the Danish Tostig at Stamford Bridge, then to meet the Norman assault rushed by forced marches to the south-east coast near Hastings, where the abbey of Battle, founded by a grateful William, the Bastard of Normandy, Conqueror of England, now stands. On that low hill Harold was defeated by the superior tactics of Norman cavalry and himself killed.

The Normans were far from unknown, for England had many connections with Europe. An earlier visit by Harold to Normandy and a rash promise made in the time of Edward the Confessor had given William the Bastard some legal right to succeed to the throne of the francophile Edward the Confessor. But the English people did not want William. He and some six thousand French-speaking Norman fighting-men came for English loot and came to stay. The result was a savage pruning of a native culture superior in many respects, if not in military power and organisation, to that of the invader. Foreigners ousted the English secular land-owners, and almost all the English bishops and the abbots of monasteries, who were the natural leaders of English society. A few English remained, like the long-lived Bishop Wulfstan of Worcester (d. 1095), and the turbulent young English

nobleman Hereward, who for years waged a doomed guerrilla war in the Fens. The recalcitrant north of England was laid waste by William, not to recover for a generation.

William had no racist policy. When the Norman knights seized a man's property, they sometimes married his widow or daughter, and had children who naturally spoke English. English remained the language of the English people. English literary culture seems to have lasted longest in the west, furthest from the origins of invasion and the centres of government, and where the doughty Wulfstan survived longest. But the flourishing of English language and culture was cropped down. Latin was the official language of the Church, which was the only international organisation in Europe and was the driving power of intellectual culture and education. The English language rapidly lost status as the language of government and education. The ruling class spoke French, which became the dominant language of law and of social and literary culture throughout the thirteenth century and half of the fourteenth century. English was temporarily maimed; on it had to be grafted many new words and structures. In the end, disadvantage was turned into benefit. Part of the story of the medieval centuries of England is of the successful struggle to achieve unity of language as part of the unity of the English people (see chapter 14). Yet if in the long run most of the effects of defeat could be turned to advantage, the division of languages, causing among the great majority of the people difficulty of access, and consequently hostility, to the higher levels of culture, seems never to have quite been healed in England. The surrounding Celtic cultures, which never knew such division, have never shown the hostility to education and culture of which traces have survived in England for many subsequent centuries.

The Anglo-Saxon literary achievement

The English have always called themselves the English from their arrival in the fifth century in that part of the island which is named after them, and their language has always been English. It has become a convention to refer to the English people before the Conquest as the Anglo-Saxons, but it is preferable to call their language Old English. They had a rich and varied literature. Some 30,000 lines of verse,

including the great poem *Beowulf*, have survived. The prose is even more extensive and varied, including much translation from the Bible and Latin works of learning, many sermons and saints' lives and, amongst other material, a considerable number of charters. Some of the prose religious texts continued to be copied as late as the twelfth century in the west of the country, where Worcester Priory, amongst other places, gave some continuity. The descendants of the rhythmic prose of Aelfric (*fl. c.* 1000) are found in the religious writings of the writings called the Katherine Group in Herefordshire about 1200 (see below, p. 29). Old English verse must have survived the Conquest in looser oral forms. Its metre is a selection of rhythmic stress-patterns from the ordinary spoken language, with four stressed syllables, interspersed with an irregular number of unstressed syllables, making up each line. You can often hear this beat under the regular ten-syllable five-stress lines of later verse, such as that of Shakespeare and Milton, and in modern English verse. In the Old English verse line, three of the four stresses are marked by beginning with the same sound, and it is therefore called alliterative verse, though alliteration is not so crucial as stress-pattern. Alliterative verse of a looser type than the Old English appears in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and reaches great heights in the fourteenth, but surviving Old English verse itself had almost no influence on later poems. Its artistic practice was lost.

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle

The most remarkable part of the Old English literary record is the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. It is unique in European literature; in itself it is the main index of Anglo-Saxon cultural consciousness. It arose out of notes made in monasteries to mark the separate years and developed in Alfred's reign (871–99) into a national historical record of major literary importance, various versions being written in a group of monasteries which to some extent circulated their copies and notes. It includes some poems as well as a saga-like passage of prose, together with more usual prose. The Conquest dealt it a fatal blow, though it died a lingering death. The *Chronicle* survived longest at Peterborough Abbey, and though the quality of the post-Conquest entries varies, at their best they make a

moving historical record, which lasts until 1154. It gives us the first and a continuous record of the post-Conquest English language, known as Middle English. The manuscript of the surviving version, Bodleian MS Laud Misc 636, comes from Peterborough Abbey and contains various subject matter, but the *Chronicle* was written up to 1121 by one scribe, and was then continued by others, of whom the last wrote, and perhaps composed, about 1155, the unified passage for 1132-54. He gives the famous, moving account for the year 1137 of the Anarchy under King Stephen (1136-54), from which the following sentences are quoted, followed by two more in translation.

This gaere for the king Stephne ofer sæ to normandi & ther wes underfangen forthi that hi wenden that he sculde ben alsuic the eom wes . . . Tha the suikes undergæton that he milde man was & softe & god & na iustise ne dide tha diden hi alle wunder.

[J. Hall (ed.), *Selections from Early Middle English* (Oxford: O.U.P., 1920), vol. 1, pp. 6-7]

(This year king Stephen went oversea to Normandy and was welcomed there because they thought that he would be such a man as the uncle [Henry I] was . . . When the traitors saw that he was a gentle soft and good man and gave no punishment then they all committed atrocities.)

We are then told the terrible story of how, under this good weak king, the barons broke their oaths of loyalty and filled the land with castles in which they imprisoned innocent men in order to get their gold and silver, and

tortured them; indescribable torment, for never were any martyrs so tortured as they were. They were hung up by the feet and smoked with foul smoke. They were hanged by the thumbs or by the head, and armour was hung on their feet. Knotted strings were put round their head and twisted so that it went to the brains. They put them in cells where there were adders and snakes and toads, and so killed them. Some they put in a torture box [*crucethus*], that is, in a chest that was short and narrow and not deep, and they put sharp stones in it, and crushed the man in it, that all his limbs broke . . . They laid taxes on the villages at times and called it protection money [*tenserie*]. When the miserable people had no more to give they robbed them and burnt all the villages, that you might well go a whole day's journey and you would never find anyone staying in a village, or land tilled . . . Wherever one tilled, the earth bore no corn, for the land was all ruined by such deeds, and they said openly that Christ slept, and his saints. Such, and more than we can say, we suffered nineteen winters for our sins.

The style is vivid, personal, emotional, even extravagant. It is passionate but not artless; inversion, parallelism, repetition, metaphor, give emphasis and colour, as Cecily Clark points out (*The Peterborough Chronicle 1070-1154*, 2nd edn., Oxford: Clarendon Press 1970). Many of the characteristics of later English, such as the decay of word-endings, fixed word-order and many spellings, begin to appear in the text, and a number of new words from French have been introduced, like *carited*, 'almsgiving'; *iustise*, 'just punishment'; *tenserie* 'protection money'; (not found elsewhere); *pais*, 'peace'. There is the linguistically curious *crucethus*, from the Latin *cruciatu*s, though the ending was probably thought to be *hus*, the Old English word which gives us 'house'.

The development of language is discussed more fully later (pp. 280 ff.) and it is enough here to remark that Standard Old English has been lost, and spelling may vary even from line to line. Modern readers, used to the blessed regularity of print and unused to Middle English, will wish to be on their guard against thinking that because the language is variable it, and its contents, are for that reason inferior, quaint or absurd. The loss of a national written standard was all the same a disadvantage, and its re-creation took centuries of effort, to be achieved by the end of the fifteenth century, when it was then reinforced by the introduction of printing.

Social and religious bases of literature

Though the area around Peterborough, terrorised by the local warlord Geoffrey de Mandeville, may have suffered worse than elsewhere, there was savage banditry in much of the rest of England. In the twelfth century one ill-named Philip Gai who held Bristol Castle had a reputation for inventing new tortures. Robert Fitzhubert of Devizes boasted of burning monks alive in their church, and of his intention of grieving God by destroying Winchester and Malmesbury churches. The plight of the martyrs, the suffering of saints and the horrors of civil war were known in twelfth-century England. A fear of such anarchy still haunts Shakespeare's interpretation of the history of England. In the twelfth century and still, though diminishingly so, in subsequent medieval centuries, the risk to peaceful men and women of horrible and arbitrary suffering caused by both men and nature was great.

In considering medieval literature we must remember its part in the general flow of life. The constant danger of violence and the natural needs of defence and maintenance of order made the power of kingship and the ethos of the soldier the most noble secular ideals. As late as the eighteenth century Dr Johnson could say that every man thinks the worse of himself for not having been a soldier. The tremendous labour involved in an agricultural economy with primitive technology required the vast majority of the population to toil and suffer on the land. Harvest surpluses were small and a bad summer could bring famine, disease and death. The plague, or pestilence, the worst epidemic of which struck in 1348-9, and was called the Black Death, was an intensification of a normally hard life. Infant mortality was prevalent and probably four out of five children born alive died before the age of five. In an era without modern medicine, death could follow a broken arm, or drinking from a well of sparkling water. Everyone knew death at first hand.

Yet happiness and joy were also available, and perhaps more intense. The worse one's position, the smaller an improvement needed to be to bring pleasure and hope. The worse a position men find themselves in, short of absolute powerlessness, the more likely it is that most will struggle for life. Purpose in life is self-evident. Morbidity or even despair may occur, but rarely nihilism. God may sleep, but the universe is not felt to be a purely arbitrary valueless accident. Medieval so-called pessimism is too often exaggerated by modern literary critics; it was rather a grim realistic assessment of likely changes, based on a stoical religious acceptance of the inevitable suffering in this life. (People in modern advanced industrial states should remember how prevalent such conditions still are in the twentieth century in much of the world.) The existence of suffering does not make men in general less religious. The medieval thought-world, like that of all traditional societies, was naturally 'religious'; that is, it perceived a world in which material values and factors were penetrated by spiritual or, if the word is preferred, psychological elements. Christianity is itself based on the suffering of God, who is man in Jesus; he is the Redeemer who will in the end, and in one sense already has, overcome suffering. Robert Fitzhubert and other cruel men like him were not

modern atheists or nihilists who did not believe in God; rather, they fought against him. Others, sometimes cruel men who had repented, fought against the Devil, whom they saw in physical shape. Devout recluses like St Wulfric of Haselbury in Somerset, and St Godric of Finchale in Durham, wore real armour, partly as penance but partly in aid of a real battle, as they saw it, against devils. They are good examples of how external to most medieval men was what seems to us mental. For us, such battles are symbolical, metaphorical, psychological, in a word subjective, though they need not be therefore less real. For them, such phenomena seemed largely objective. Hence so many miracles. There was less distinction between religious and non-religious spheres, between physical and mental. The 'mind' of a traditional society is less differentiated and specialised than Western culture has become since the seventeenth century.

The central symbols of Christianity remain largely the same through many centuries, but they were felt differently in the Middle Ages. Since traditional religion has become largely incomprehensible to those of us lapped in the comfort and *angst* of advanced industrial societies, and because a sympathetic understanding of religion is necessary for understanding all traditional cultures including medieval English, it may be helpful to take as an illustration a modern report on a poor traditional culture. The traveller and novelist Paul Theroux has recorded the conversations and attitudes of ignorant modern Western tourists travelling in a train in Peru in the mid-1970s. Their attitudes are sometimes matched by impatient modern readers of medieval literature.

Those gold altars really get me, said one. I don't understand why they don't melt them down and feed some of these starving people. And the statues, said another: they're so exaggerated, always bloody and skinny. Everyone was shouting and argufying at once: the Christ statues were the worst, really gory; the Mary ones were chubby and dressed up like dolls in lace and velvet; Jesus on the cross looked horrible among the gold carvings, his ribs sticking out; you'd think they'd at least make them look human. It went on: blood, gold, suffering, and people on their knees. Why did they have to exaggerate, said one man, when it only ended up looking vulgar?

I had been hearing quite a lot of this. There was patronizing mockery in the pretense of bafflement and disgust. *I just can't understand it*, they said, but they used their incomprehension to amplify their ignorance. Ignorance licensed them to indulge in this jeering.

I felt my moment had come to speak. I had also seen those churches, and I had reached several conclusions. I cleared my throat.

'It *looks* exaggerated because it *is* exaggerated,' I said. 'It's possible that the churches here have bloodier Christs than those in Spain, and they're certainly a lot bloodier than anything you'd see in the United States. But life is bloodier here, isn't it? In order to believe that Christ suffered you have to know that he suffered more than you. In the United States the Christ statue looks a bit bruised, a few tear-drops, some mild abrasions. But here? How is it possible to suffer more than these Indians? They've seen all sorts of pain. Incas were peace-loving and pious, but if anyone broke the law he got unbelievable punishment – he might be buried alive, clubbed to death, staked out on the ground and ritually trampled, or tortured. High officials who committed an offence had heavy stones dropped on their backs from a high cliff, and virgins caught speaking to a man were hung by their hair. Pain wasn't brought here by the Spanish priests, but a crucified Christ was part of the liturgical scheme. The Indians were taught that Christ suffered, and they had to be persuaded that his suffering was worse than theirs. And by the same token that Mary, the world's mother, was healthier and better dressed than any woman in their society. So, yes, the statues are exaggerations of their lives, because these images represent God and the Holy Mother. Right?'

Convinced I was right, I warmed to my theme. Mary in the Church of San Francisco in Lima, in her spangled cape and brocade gown and holding a silver basket, had to outshine any Inca noble and, at last, any Spanish woman of fashion. These divine figures had to be seen to exceed the Spaniard or Peruvian in suffering or wealth – they had to seem braver, more tortured, richer or bloodier in order to seem blessed. Christ in any church was more battered than the very battered leper in the plaza; he had to be. The lesson of the Peruvian – perhaps Latin American – Church demonstrated the extraordinariness of the Saviour. In the same way, the statues of Buddha as a mendicant showed a man who was hungrier and skinnier than the skinniest Buddhist. In order for you to believe in God it was necessary to see that God had endured a greater torment than you. And Mary had to look more motherly, more fecund and rich, than any other mother. Religion demanded this intensity in order to produce piety. A believer could not venerate someone like himself – he had to be given a reason for the holiness of the God statue. And he responded by praising it in the most appropriate way, by enshrining it in gold.

[Paul Theroux, *The Old Patagonian Express* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1979) pp. 266–7]

Medieval Europeans and English in a similar way created the intensities of medieval Christianity out of the suffering and the hope of glory in their lives.

The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* died in its last flame of passion, and then there is hardly any English recorded until the end

of the twelfth century, when a group of works of high quality appear. Also around 1200 we find a beginning of new historical documentation, a spread of literacy, as M. T. Clancy has shown. Songs and spoken tales in English must have continued without break from earlier times, but oral culture perishes with the men on whose lips it lives. Literacy is the key to literary culture. Around 1200 appear Layamon's *Brut*, *The Ancrene Riwe* (*The Anchoress's Rule*) and *The Owl and the Nightingale*, besides devotional works of various kinds, a collection of proverbs, and some early lyrics. From now on the record is continuous, and the polish of these early works suggests that even they are not the first of their kinds. Yet they are very different from any Old English works.

Layamon's 'Brut': almost an English national epic

The name Layamon is of Scandinavian origin, meaning Lawman, but he tells us he was the son of Leofnath, a not uncommon Old English name. The poem was composed in the late twelfth century in Worcestershire near Areley Kings, as Layamon tells us. Its metre is a loose alliterative line, reminiscent of Old English poetry. It is a history, but for all his historical interest Layamon introduces himself and his poem with a quite novel personal enthusiasm, as different from the tone of any surviving Old English poetry as it is from the prose of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. His alliterative verse, though derived from Old English, has a less majestic movement, and much internal rhyme.

An preost wes on leoden, Layamon wes ihoten.	1
He wes Leovenathes sone – lithe him beo Drihten.	
He wonede at Ernleye, at æthelen are chirechen,	
Vppen Sevarne stathe – sel thar him thuhte –	
Onfest Radestone. Ther he boc radde.	
Hit com him on mode, & on his mern thonke,	
Thet he wolde of Engle tha æthelæn tellen,	
Wat heo ihoten weoren, & wonene heo comen	
Tha Englene londe ærest ahten. . . .	9
Layamon gon lithen wide yond thas leode,	14
& bi-won tha æthela boc tha he to bisne nom.	
He nom tha Englisca boc tha makede Seint Beda,	
Another he nom on Latin the makede Seinte Albin,	
& the feire Austin the fulluht broute hider in.	
Boc he nom the thridde, leide ther amididen,	

Tha makede a Frenchis clerc,
 Wace wes ihoten, the wel couthe writen,
 & he hoe yef thare æthelen Ælienor,
 The wes Henries quene, thes heyas kinges.
 Layamon leide theos boc & tha leaf wende.
 He heom leofliche biheold – lithe him beo Drihten.
 Fetheren he nom mid fingren & fiede on boc-felle,
 & tha sothere word sette to-gadere,
 & tha thre boc thrumde to are.

[1–28: Adapted in spelling from MS Cotton Caligula A ix ff. 3r and 3v, ed. G. L. Brook and R. F. Leslie, *Early English Text Society* 250 (1963), and vol. II, *EETS* 277 (1978), from which quotations are taken.]

(There was a priest amongst the people called Layamon. He was the son of Leofnath – to whom may God be gracious. He lived at Areley, at a noble church, on the bank of the Severn by Redstone – delightful it seemed to him there. There he read books [*or he read the church services*]. It came into his heart, into his eager [*literally splendid*] mind that he would tell about the noble English, what they were, and where they came from who had earliest possessed the land of the English . . . Layamon travelled far throughout the land, and obtained the noble books which he took as guides. He took the English book which St Bede made; he took another in Latin made by St Albin and the fair Augustine who brought baptism [i.e. Christianity] here. He took a third book, placed it in the middle, which a French clerk made who was called Wace, who could write well (and he had presented it to the noble Eleanor who was queen of Henry the high king). Layamon laid out these books and turned the page. He looked at them lovingly – may God be gracious to him. He took the quill with fingers and wrote on the parchment and put the truer words together and compressed the three books to one.)

Layamon conveys the primal joy of having an idea, finding books, the sheer pleasure of turning the page, of writing, of elucidating a single narrative from multiple sources. His untiring gusto carries him through 16,000 lines. This is an archaic directness rather than naïvety, and it is not as artless as it may appear. The English Bede must have been the Old English translation; the Latin book is unknown; Layamon's principal and almost single source is Wace, a crisp and lively narrative in French octosyllabic verse, of which more later.

The poem survives in full only in the British Library MS Cotton Caligula A ix, which also contains *The Owl and the Nightingale* and other poems (see below p. 40), and was written in the early thirteenth century. One other text, in

British Library MS Cotton Otho C xiii of the late thirteenth century, is modernised and cut, which indicates that Layamon's mixture of the modern and the archaistic was already giving trouble.

Layamon demonstrates the trilingualism, the knowledge of books as well as of oral tradition, the developing self-awareness and individualism of a new era. His endearing relish for the act of writing, the solitary author eagerly taking up his (quill) pen, with no address to audience or patron, in order to relate the truths of the history of his people for his own people (since it is in English) is modern in spirit. Yet he evokes much that is traditional. His work is at the meeting-place, and margins, of several countries of the mind.

The River Severn near Areley Kings is a big river winding through a broad vale of fresh pastures, old woods and small hills. The ancient waterway has cut beautiful cliffs into the New Red Sandstone of the hills, giving the name of Redstone to the little village nearby. Areley Kings is on a hill, and from it you can see to the east the low green hills of England and to the west the Black Mountains of Wales. It had a little Romanesque (Norman) church in Layamon's time, now replaced by a more modern one of the fifteenth century. From the church you can still see much the same view that Layamon saw, though now with industrial encrustation. In Wales dwelt the earlier, though not the first comers to what is now called England. They were then called the British, and they are the heroes with whom in his narrative Layamon identifies himself and us. 'We' are the landholders, whether British or English, and our fight is against the invader, once we ourselves have possessed the land. In the story the worst villains are actually the 'Saxons', the historical English, who are defeated by Layamon's greatest hero, Arthur.

Story and style

The poem begins with Aeneas's flight from Troy, not, as a monastic chronicle would, with the Creation. We are in the secular world. Aeneas founded Rome, and his grandson Brutus came to Britain, previously called Albion, and to which he was thought (wrongly) then to have given his own name, occupying it with his people and killing the few giants already there. Then proceeds the long sequence of British

kings, including Lear and Cymbeline, which is eventually spliced into actual English history of the seventh century.

Layamon is interested in good and bad kings and their effect on the country. He praises the beauty of Britain (a stock theme with medieval historians) (ll. 620 ff.) and the British are always in the right except when misled by bad kings. There is no 'narrator's voice' different from and in ironic relationship to the 'real' poet. Like almost all traditional poets Layamon speaks the action like a whole man, not a puppet, sharing and judging, as he communicates his information, joy and sorrow. He is pious, sententious and moralistic, condemning treachery above all, denouncing traitors and assigning them cruel deaths. Layamon has some sense of motive, of causal connection, of mood, but does not usually give us a richly encrusted realistic narrative. He is more archaic. He retails a somewhat repetitious sequence of the actions of kings both good and bad, their councils, speeches, battles (with more speeches), journeys, feasts; major images of human life that still have powerful appeal, all conveyed in a vigorous style which plays variations on a small but clearly formulated vocabulary. In deploying these images of stirring events he shows clearly his derivation from Old English poetry. For example, he describes fifteen feasts, all of much the same pattern, often introduced with the heart-stirring strains of the trumpet, with plenty of joyous food and drink (*heo drunken heo dremden*, 'they drank, they rejoiced': 1.6719 repeated 1.7024) when gifts were given. This is a note familiar in Old English poetry, especially in *Beowulf*. Brutus is a heathen and as such to be condemned, but the expression of joy in hall, at the feast, with the company of warriors, is common to all. It is both concrete, even materialistic, and highly symbolic and expressive, part of the general pattern of deprivation, suffering, conquest, joy, and it is natural for Layamon to return to these basic constants and high points of human existence. His enthusiasm never flags. It reaches its heights in the fortunately disproportionately long section on Arthur 'the darling of the British' (1.12356). Layamon must have known the medieval expression for King Alfred, 'England's darling', though his story does not come down as far as Alfred, and surely he sees Arthur as an earlier Alfred. In Layamon's Arthurian section the texture is even

more enriched with descriptions of battle and festivity. Arthur is wondrously born and crowned, defends the kingdom against invaders, establishes the Round Table of his knights, resists and overcomes the might of Rome, creating a continental British Empire, then is betrayed by Modred and dies. The battles against the Saxon foemen, who are defeated as, we may feel, the Normans *should* have been defeated, have in particular a fierce poetic zest (ll. 9978 ff.). The Saxon leader Colgrim, with his huge army, attacks Arthur *athelest kingen*, 'the noblest of kings', as Layamon often calls him. Colgrim thinks to kill King Arthur with his people, bury them all and take this kingdom for himself, to fell the young Arthur to the ground. They fight by the river Duglas, *feollen tha væie, volden to grunde*, 'the doomed men fell, crumpled to the ground' (l. 10018). There is much bloodshed. Then Arthur says, 'See, my British, on this side, our utter enemies – may Christ strike them dead! – Colgrim the strong, out of Saxland' etc. (ll. 10030 ff.). Arthur raises his shield before his breast and he rushes out like the gray wolf when he comes out of the wood hung with snow, and thinks to devour such animals as he likes. Arthur drives Colgrim and his men into the deep water – there seven thousand Saxons are drowned. Some wander around as does the wild crane in the moorland fen when his power of flight is damaged, and swift hawks hunt after him and hounds meet him among the reeds with cruelty. Then neither land nor water is any good to him, hawks smite him, hounds bite him, then the royal bird lies doomed on his side (ll. 10040–67).

This simile is one of the famous half-dozen occurring in the passage between lines 10000 and 11000 which may derive from a lost Old English poem. The best of these similes is the one of the dead men's armour in the river Avon glinting like steel fishes (ll. 10639–45). Another passage in the same section describes a lake which recalls the deadly pool in *Beowulf*. Exceptional as such passages are in the poem as a whole, they are at one with a style whose plain narrative is continually enlivened with brief comparisons that have an archaic archetypal flavour even though they may be peculiar to Layamon himself. His stern epic enthusiasm derives its strength from the evocation of the ancient language and metre, developing the hammer-like style of such phrases as

Godes withersaka, 'God's enemy' (l. 906); *mid orde and mid egge*, 'with point and edge' (l. 2594). To complain of repetitiveness or ask for realism is to reject the essence of its poetry and of all the, to us, unfamiliar echoes and nuances of an archaic society. The recognition of the atrocities suffered in Britain from the invasion of Childric from Normandy, while Arthur is in the North, is cause both of the fierceness and the pity (ll. 10428 ff.). Notwithstanding the fierceness, there is also compassion. Arthur, for example, having thoroughly beaten the Scots, when appealed to as a Christian king, spares them in their misery (ll. 10944 ff.). The whole poem has a noble vigour of feeling; nothing is mean.

Layamon can also create a calm archaic sense of wonder, without fancifulness, as with the elves who enchanted Arthur at birth (ll. 9608 ff.) and perhaps above all in the superbly elegiac account of Arthur's death after the battle against his treacherous nephew (not, in this version, his bastard) Modred. As he dies Arthur bequeaths his kingdom to Constantine, and says:

And ich wulle varen to Avalun to vairest alre maidene,
To Argante there quene, alven swithe sceone
And heo scal mine wunden makien alle isunde,
Al hal me makien, mid haleweiye drenchen.
And seothe ich cumen wulle to mine kineriche
And wunien mid Brutten, mid muchelere wunne.

[ll. 14277-82]

(And I will go to Avalon, to the loveliest of all
maidens, to Argante the queen, most beautiful of elves,
and she shall make my wounds well, and make me whole
with healing drinks. And then I will come to my
kingdom and live with the Britons with great joy.)

Profound, complex image of the death of the king! It is very archaic, not internalised, nor spiritualised, not even Christian, though not anti-religious. We recognise the image but have no modern words or concepts easily to match it. The modern *elf*, though descended from *alva*, is hopelessly inadequate to convey the image of the beautiful supernatural women in the Happy Land of the dead. So the mysterious boat comes from the sea, and the British still await Arthur's return.

King Arthur

Thus Arthur makes his first and one of his grandest appearances in English literature; the British hero of one of the most English of authors. Layamon gives his Arthurian story an archaic flavour, as so many later English poets have done. But Arthur is a new hero for English. Where does he come from? He is certainly not in that great and sober Anglo-Saxon historian, Bede. Leaving aside much else of interest in the *Brut* we must follow his sources to their potent origin.

Of Layamon's three named sources, he makes no use of Bede, the second may be bogus, and (apart from the possible lost Old English poem) he really uses only Wace's crisp and lively narrative in French octosyllabic rhymed verse, transforming and modifying Wace's tone and sometimes his content.

Wace is more modern in tone though older in time. He was writing, if Layamon is correct, for King Henry II's Queen Eleanor, reference to whom opens up the whole twelfth-century world of the Angevin Empire from the Cheviots to the Pyrenees, Eleanor's own brilliant French court, the new world of troubadours and love and luxury. Wace has touches of French courtly brightness, frivolity and even tenderness. Not so the serious English enthusiast, Layamon. But he was responding, nevertheless, to the newer history to which Wace had responded, for Wace himself was translating and modifying the great secular literary success of the twelfth century, Geoffrey of Monmouth's Latin *History of the Kings of Britain*. Geoffrey was perhaps of Welsh parentage, presumably born or early resident in Monmouth, educated and possibly a teacher at what was still only the pre-university of Oxford. He completed in 1135 his 'history', largely invented or cobbled up from fables, as a scornful contemporary historian, William of Newburgh, remarked. Latin, the language of the Church, of higher culture, and of sober history, is used for a fantasy about 'British' history which not only captivated Europe but was seriously adapted as their own history by most Englishmen from the twelfth to the early seventeenth centuries. (Milton, when he wrote his history of England, abandoned it only with reluctance.) Up to Shakespeare's day Englishmen regarded themselves as 'Trojans', and London was Troynovant, 'New Troy', as in Spenser's *Faerie Queene*.

The success of Geoffrey's *History* undoubtedly depends on the creation of the story of Arthur, to whom Geoffrey devotes about a quarter of the whole book. Wace followed Geoffrey's structure (inventing, amongst other things, the Round Table, which Layamon further elaborates). A fascinating mixture of Latin, French, English and Welsh strands is being woven into a creative tradition in which the old continually begets the new. For all the rivalries and hostilities there is no racial prejudice in our modern sense. Thus, out of this mixture, Arthur, already known as a Welsh folk-hero even in Europe, became the magnetic image of chivalry which has drawn the Western secular imagination from the mid-twelfth century until today. We return to Arthur and his knights later in this book.

Wace himself is a little detached in his narration, occasionally sceptical, as well as inventive. If one thing about the essential Arthurian story is more striking than its drawing power, it is its malleability. Westerners have found it an invaluable secular mythology, providing a host of motifs, from the power and transience of earthly kingdoms (as in these earlier versions), to the richly varied joys and torments of personal relationships which developed later within this frame. For Geoffrey it was almost history; for Wace, almost a courtly romance; for Layamon almost a national epic. Malory will further blend all these elements together in a more modern way, without eclipsing Layamon's remarkable achievement.

Spiritual instruction as literature

DEVELOPMENTS in the culture of Europe in the twelfth century profoundly influenced modern Western culture. The new religion, science, history, philosophy were in Latin. Englishmen played their part in the sphere of Latin, and some major works in English absorbed the new themes in their own way. One of the most striking is *The Ancrene Riwe*, 'the rule for anchoresses', that is, for women recluses; not at first sight a promising subject for literary treatment. But traditional culture is less specialised than modern. The passage of time turns all documents, even sermons, into fictions, that is, into symbolic verbal structures, which we must first understand literally, but may interpret metaphorically. Thus the highly practical yet spiritual instructions given by a virtually unknown cleric to three well-born sisters who lived near Wigmore in Herefordshire will legitimately claim our attention as a work of literature.

To many nowadays it may seem incomprehensible that three rich healthy girls should shut themselves up for life in the cramped solitude of one or two rooms, in a round of devotions, of reading religious books, of weeping and occasional self-flagellation. But in all periods there is a tiny minority who tire of the superficial changes of sorrow and joy in ordinary life and seek a more intense spiritual reality by limitation of bodily pleasure and freedom. All higher religions recognise the compulsion on a few to follow an ascetic, solitary, meditative life. In England even Anglo-Saxon kings felt the call. A powerful general movement towards the eremitical life of solitary prayer and penance arose in Europe in the eleventh century, with a new intensity of religious feeling. The English seem to have felt it particularly strongly, and the names of many such recluses from the eleventh century onwards are known.

English recluses: Christina and Wulfric

The life of Christina of Markyate is known in such detail from an almost contemporary biography in Latin, C. H. Talbot (ed. and transl.), *The Life of Christina of Markyate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), that it offers an excellent example. She was born in the little town of Huntingdon in East Anglia just before 1100 to well-to-do English parents. Their place even in a Norman-dominated society was assured. Christina's aunt Alveva was the mistress and mother of several children of the famous and ruthless Ranulph Flambard, Justiciar (chief law-officer and administrator) of England. When he became Bishop of Durham, whose noble cathedral he was mainly responsible for creating, he set Alveva up in Huntingdon with a husband and used to drop in during his journeys between London and Durham. Her niece Christina on the other hand, when in her early teens on a family visit to the great cathedral church of St Albans some forty miles to the south, took a secret vow of chastity, and wished to become a nun. When she was about sixteen Ranulph on one of his visits attempted to seduce her. The episode, like so much of the biography, is told with vivid realistic detail, and though told with shame is also not without a touch of unintentional comedy. The story must have come from Christina herself. Ranulph inveigled her into his beautifully tapestried room in her own house; she knew it was useless to scream or resist, or she would certainly be raped. She pretended to agree, swore she would not deceive him, asked if she might bolt the door to ensure their privacy, and quick as a flash slipped out of the room. It was the beginning of a long persecution by Ranulph and even by her family. Finally Ranulph out of malice arranged for her to be married to a young nobleman, Burthred (we note again the English name). She resisted because of her desire for chastity; much family bullying followed. Eventually she was forced into betrothal, which was as good as marriage, but she denied Burthred consummation. Her father Autti and mother Beatrix locked her up or as an alternative made her attend their parties, where she was made to act the part of the hostess cup-bearer, with cloak removed and arms bare, taking around the loving-cup. (Hrothgar's queen performs the same function in *Beowulf* and Layamon frequently mentions it as an

Anglo-Saxon custom.) The parents hoped that since Christina had to take a drink with each guest she would get so drunk that her husband-to-be could easily seduce or rape her. Needless to say she held out. At last the parents secretly introduced Burthred into Christina's bedroom at night; but she was dressed and awake, and she told the young man the popular story of St Cecilia (it is also in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*) who persuaded her husband on religious grounds not to consummate their marriage; both were martyred. Thus a traditional story, in a traditional society, conveys a message. Christina's story-telling was as successful as Cecilia's own eloquence, and her husband, no match for any member of this strong-minded family, departed leaving her untouched. He was mocked for his decency. After several similar episodes, she was imprisoned at home: then taken to the prior and the bishop who, as sensible practical men, at first tried to persuade her to marry, but were then persuaded by her arguments and fervour that her previous personal vow was good and that the betrothal should be annulled. Her father, equally practical, bribed the bishop, who then reversed his decision. At last, not without secret recourse to the Archbishop of Canterbury, Christina escaped, though worried lest the boy who helped her might be killed. One night she had a vision in which he came and reproached her for her empty fears and told her to trust in God. The next day she learnt he had died, and knew that he was now with the elect in heaven. Heaven and Hell were very near in the twelfth century. The account of such visions, often rich in imagery, with their implicit or explicit messages, is an essential part of the story of this twelfth-century Clarissa Harlowe, who was in the end more fortunate than the heroine of Samuel Richardson's eighteenth-century novel. Though the story is told so realistically it is underpinned by the spiritual dimension. Eventually after many further difficulties and severe devotional practices Christina succeeded in becoming a recluse near St Albans, and the fame of her holiness and wisdom spread. She also became a famous embroidress of the work known as *opus Anglicanum*, and one of the great illuminated manuscripts of the twelfth century, the St Albans Psalter, now at Hildesheim in Germany, is associated with her.