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Volume 1
The Medieval Period

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THE MEDIEVAL PERIOD

From a medieval perspective, the very title of this collection is interestingly problematic. The implication of deliberate choice in the term "anthology" (as opposed, for example, to a "miscellany") reminds us that in any such collection decisions have been made about what does and does not "fit," about lines of influence between works, and about defining the boundaries of a literary tradition. Medieval literature written in England, for instance, was by no means entirely, nor indeed mostly, written in English; works in Latin, Anglo-Norman French, Middle Welsh and Old Irish all survive alongside works in the languages now known to us as Old and Middle English. Many of these non-English texts had a profound influence on the literary tradition in English; to the extent that we have had to omit such works here, we have created gaps in the story this anthology tries to tell.

The anthology's designation of its literature as "British," moreover, raises a terminological difficulty that is almost as old as the Middle Ages itself. "British" and "English" are by no means interchangeable terms in the medieval period, and the uses of these terms as labels for a language and literary tradition have always been entwined with political realities and national identities. Broadly speaking, the word "British" derives from the Roman name for early Celtic settlers in what we now call the British Isles; "English" refers to the Germanic invaders and settlers who began arriving in the fifth century, pushed the Celtic inhabitants to the west and the north (now Wales and Scotland) and eventually ruled the central part of the island. For many centuries, the English defined themselves by their difference from the British, and *vice versa*. At the same time those who attempted to claim legitimate rulership of England made strategic use of the "British" tradition, perhaps most obviously in the ongoing traditions surrounding King Arthur, whose origins lie deep in British legendary history. But the intercultural appropriation between "British" and "English" has often worked both ways, and continues to do so: the Anglo-Irish poet Seamus Heaney laces his modern translation of *Beowulf,* a decidedly "English" poem, with idiosyncratic Ulsterisms and Celtic turns of phrase.

Finally, the very word "literature" (deriving from the Latin *litterae,* "letters") implies an existence in writing, but a great deal of what remains in written form from the Middle Ages had a prior existence as, or owes enormous debts to, oral forms. Most of what we now read as literature, from romances to lyrics to sermons, was written to be heard, not read. Texts of vernacular works in the Middle Ages are by no means as solidly fixed—as "textual"—as works of modern literature, or of medieval works in Latin, for that matter; the circumstances of their creation and reception are, at least ostensibly, performative and communal, not silent and solitary like a modern student reading this book. Modern literary culture tends to regard the written text, fixed and inert, as the primary or "real" form of a literary work; for some medieval works, especially those from the earlier Middle Ages, the written text seems to be almost an afterthought, little more than an aid to the memory of the reader/performer who recreates the "real" work by voicing the text out loud.

At the same time, however, the concept of a collection that gathers the authoritative examples of a cultural tradition would have been very familiar to medieval readers, who made extensive use of such collections. Medieval manuscripts that contain multiple works may be anything from carefully planned volumes presented to a patron, to somewhat haphazard gatherings of texts, to collections composed by an individual for his or her own use; our current knowledge of medieval literary culture could rightly be said to rest on medieval anthologies. Thus a reader who first encounters these texts in an anthologized form will encounter them in a format not so unlike their original manuscript context. The single-text "monograph"—one work between two covers—is by no means the most common mode of transmission for medieval texts, and the effort to determine the relationships between texts

in medieval manuscripts, the intentions of the creators of such compilations and their effect upon readers, is one of the most interesting and important areas of contemporary medieval literary studies.

The drawing of artificial lines, whether geographical or temporal, is a profound limitation on one's understanding of the history of western literature. At the same time, we cannot simply ignore the geographical facts—which are historical and political facts as well, insofar as the unity of the island of Britain was imagined and achieved—or the differences between one age and another, although the borders (both of historical periods and of kingdoms) may always be contested. This collection likewise relies on distinctions—sometimes arbitrary, sometimes necessary, some obvious and some obscure—to give it shape and contour, form and structure. In English literary history one of the most obvious divisions lies between the literature of the Anglo-Saxons—the English before the Norman Conquest (1066)—and that of the English after the Conquest. Within these two broadly drawn periods further divisions can be made: early Old English literature, as far as we can reconstruct it, differs markedly from literature after the reign of Alfred the Great (d. 899), who sought to begin a program of vernacular literacy and bestowed a certain royal authority on English as a quasi-official written language.

After the Conquest, although English manuscripts were produced and read in somewhat reduced numbers, Norman French was the language of courtly culture in England. In the absence of schools and pedagogical traditions, English began to manifest the changes that characterize "Middle" English. After this period of "early" Middle English—roughly from the century after the Conquest until the beginning of the fourteenth century—English began to take its place alongside the culturally more prestigious Latin (the language of the church) and French (the language of the court, of law, and of administration); authors increasingly chose to write literary texts in English for aristocratic readers. The fifteenth century saw a gradual re-development of a written "standard" English, and an outpouring of literary works (particularly of a devotional nature) that fostered and responded to rising literacy rates. With the advent of printing in the latter fifteenth century, books became ever more widely available and the language increasingly standardized; in the sixteenth century, with the wider spread of printing in England, the standard became more and more fixed, even as the language was rapidly changing again, into what linguists call early Modern English.

HISTORY, NARRATIVE, CULTURE

Even a set of very broad periodizations like these raises questions about the relation between historical events and literary developments, or more generally speaking between culture and the imagination. Can we understand these literary works better by learning more about their historical context? Or can these works of the imagination shed light on that context and help us fill in its blank spaces? Which partner in the inseparable pairing of text and context will serve as the solid ground from which we can survey the other—which one is beyond interpretation? Has the human imagination changed so much that we only have access to it historically, and not immediately? On the other hand, what can we really *know* about the past, except what is said about it?

These questions vexed the minds of many medieval authors as well. Most modern scholars, like their medieval predecessors such as Isidore of Seville (a Spanish bishop who lived c. 560–636), are careful to note that history is not simply "what happened" in the past, but the *stories we tell* about what happened in the past. Events, objects, even stories, do not speak for themselves; they have to be arranged and explained, looked at and looked into, and gradually placed in a context constructed from our interpretations of other objects, events and stories. In this sense, no matter how great our respect for objectivity or how carefully balanced our analysis may be, our study of the past says as much about us as it does about the past we try to study. And texts help us understand their context as much as contexts help us understand texts.

In his poem *Ars Poetica* the modern author Archibald MacLeish insisted that "A poem should not mean / But be," but readers of literature from the distant past cannot indulge in the soothing luxury of that misconception. A rock can simply "be"; the remains of a stone wall, however, must "mean" something—they

mark a boundary, claim a space, indicate a settlement. A rough diamond lying underground might "be"; but when it has been mined, cut, polished, weighed, set, valued, bought, and worn as jewelry, it is no longer "palpable and mute / as a globed fruit"; it has entered the noisy world of meaning. Similarly, a poem like *Beowulf* or *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* does not simply exist as a self-evident story; like any work of the human imagination, it responds to and acts on the world in which it was created. Objects and events—the Sutton Hoo ship burial, Durham Cathedral, the Magna Carta, the Black Death of the fourteenth century—positively hum with meaning and intention and human consequences; they are inextricably caught in the web of signification and interpretation. Nothing goes without saying. Even a thing of astonishing beauty which we may enjoy simply for the aesthetic pleasure it gives us is not a self-contained object; it had a function in the society that made it, and part of its meaning—even the meaning of its beauty—lies in that function, which might range from the deepest of spiritual blessings to the purest gaudy display of its owner's ability to possess and appreciate expensive objects. To ignore the cultures that surrounded, created, and consumed these objects—whether they are artifacts in a museum or texts in a book— would be a fundamental mistake.

The famous CHI-RHO page of the early eighth-century Lindisfarne Gospels (London, British Library, MS Cotton Nero D.iv, a color illustration of which appears elsewhere in this volume), offers one example of the kinds of context we might consider when looking at a medieval artifact. We may begin by admiring its beauty, enjoying its exotic strangeness or Celtic "alterity," and marveling at the skill of its creators (whose names, as it happens, are recorded in the manuscript). Such an image could have a number of different effects on its viewers: it might impress those who can't read with the beauty and value of God's Word; it might attest to the devotion of the artists who made such a complex design, as well as their sophistication and expertise as craftsmen; it might display a religious house's capability for such 'conspicuous consumption' in the service of God. As we consider it more closely, we may find ourselves puzzled by the presence of a Greek monogram in a Latin text,

decorated in a distinctively "Insular" style in Northumbria c. 700. At least three cultures are on display here. The page insists on the intersection of English, Irish and Latin cultures—as intricately woven together as the knotty patterns of its own design. Looking more closely, we can see an English interlinear gloss to the Latin text, written in much smaller script, added some 200 years later. Its presence creates yet another layer of meaning and raises further questions. Who would write in such a rich and beautiful book? Is the gloss a necessary addition, suggesting that the Latin text was not sufficiently accessible to those using the book? What might its presence tell us about the status of Latin as a learned language, or a sacred one, in medieval England? The questions arising from this single page of a manuscript remind us that it is not simply a work of remarkable beauty, but a complex artifact of cultural history.

Saint Luke, Lindisfarne Gospels.
This page and a decorative "carpet page" precede the text of the gospel itself.

First text page, Gospel of Saint Luke, Lindisfarne Gospels. The text reads as follows: "Quoniam quidem multi conati sunt ordinare narrationem," "Since many have undertaken to put in narrative order …"

Note: A reproduction of the CHI-RHO page from the Lindisfarne Gospels appears in the section of color illustrations.

The CHI-RHO page embodies, in a particularly striking way, the reciprocal relationship of text and context; while it has much to tell us about the world of its creators, what we know about their world must also be brought to bear on our understanding of the manuscript. To take another example, the poem *Beowulf* has been used to explain other texts (or objects, in the case of the early East Saxon ship-burial at Sutton Hoo; the poem was introduced as evidence in the inquest which determined the ownership and disposition of the priceless objects unearthed from that site in 1939); conversely, other texts and objects can be brought to bear on the obscurities of the text of *Beowulf* and used

as explanatory tools. And of course the poem has a place in a series of cultural moments—the unknown moment of its creation, the moment of its transcription into the manuscript in which it survives, the moment of its rediscovery and publication, the modern moment in which it is studied today. Each of these contributes, in some way, to the 'meaning' of *Beowulf*, and however tempting it may be to give priority to the more distant (and hence less familiar) contexts, no one of these cultural moments, strictly speaking, has a greater claim on the poem than another. We may wish to regard material objects as somehow more 'real' than stories, but from the distant perspective from which we observe them now, they are not: these bright objects on a blank background are as mute and as meaningful, as mysterious and as communicative, as the anonymous stories surviving in single manuscripts by unknown hands.

So the questions we might ask as we approach these texts involve less what they "are" than what they "do", what they might mean not only to their imagined original audience(s) but to us, and how that meaning might change as our knowledge develops. What draws us to these old tales? What do we derive from them? Can we understand them in anything like their original form, with our inevitably modern minds? To what extent can we negotiate the difference between the present and the past? This is a constant problem, a challenge for any reader of early literature. A reader of a contemporary novel is seldom aware of the complex web of cultural assumptions that sustains the narrative; these assumptions are transparent and automatic. For readers of early literature the assumptions are solid, opaque, at times impenetrable—but this awareness of the alterity of the reader to the text is, we think, a very healthy thing. It is always good to be reminded that meanings are not simply "there" in the text, waiting for the reader to stumble over them; they are kindled by the friction between the reader, the story and the world they both inhabit. Medieval texts force this awareness upon us, but it serves us well as readers of any literary work.

The cultures of the Middle Ages are as varied as they are numerous, and diverse as well in the ways in which they interacted with one another. Moreover, the medieval period was one of continual change. Such

change tended to occur at a slower pace than it does in our own time, but the medieval era saw vast and violent upheavals, and great cultural and social developments. From long habit, however, we refer to the millennium following the collapse of the Roman Empire in the fifth century CE as one period, the Middle Ages (or, using the Latinized form of the same phrase, the medieval period). At the end of this long expanse of time falls what we still sometimes call the Renaissance (or "rebirth"). This term reflects Renaissance writers' and thinkers' view of their own time. Many modern historians and literary scholars see the Renaissance of the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries as representing the final flowering of medieval culture rather than a dramatic break with the past; where historians *in* the Renaissance saw difference and division, historians *of* the period tend to see continuity and development.

Even so, many readers coming to the study of medieval literature or culture for the first time will be struck by a sense of strangeness in much of what they encounter. They will enter worlds in which nature is malevolent, not benign; in which Christ fights as a warrior; in which the walls of an ancient city are said to have been broken by fate; in which it is possible to have one's head sliced off and carry it around before putting it back on; in which doubtful legal claims may be decided by the judgment of God through trial by ordeal or by battle; in which water may be thought to flow upward; and in which the middle of a literary text can be said to be inherently better from a moral point of view than the beginning or the end. Much as this introduction aims to convey, and offer a context for, the complexity and sophistication that often characterize medieval texts, it will also recognize that it is difficult —and perhaps even undesirable—for modern readers to lose entirely their sense of strangeness and even wonder in experiencing the products of medieval literature and medieval culture.

Just as the literature of the Middle Ages may seem unusual to us, many modern readers may be surprised by the marginal political status of England and the English language in the Middle Ages. Britain was geographically on the edge of the world, and at the periphery of the political life of the continent; England was for many centuries the object rather than the subject of imperial ambitions. The status of English varied considerably from one century to another, but it was never at any time the dominant global force it is today. The ways in which an extraordinarily diverse cultural and linguistic mix began, over the course of the Middle Ages, to produce the works presented here—as well as, ultimately, the language of this introduction—will be a major theme of these pages.

ENGLAND BEFORE THE NORMAN CONQUEST

ROMAN AND CELTIC BRITAIN

We know little or nothing of the inhabitants of Britain before 500 BCE, when groups of people that we now call the Celts began to migrate from continental Europe to Britain and Ireland. We have come to think of these peoples as a unified group in large part because the artistic and literary heritage of Celtic culture that has come down to us displays considerable unity in the characteristics of its narratives, in the bold decorative style of its visual arts, and in the close ties among Celtic languages. But the Celts, who had spread throughout much of Europe in the centuries before they began to inhabit Britain, were very much a loose grouping of societies, often at odds with one another, with no overarching administrative authority or social coherence.

The Romans invaded and conquered Celtic Britain in the first century CE. Britain lay at the edge of the Roman Empire; the Romans never managed to conquer Ireland or what is now Scotland, then largely inhabited by a Celtic or possibly pre-Celtic people of particularly fierce reputation known as the Picts. (In the early second century CE the Romans constructed the rampart known as "Hadrian's Wall" across the island as a defense against them.) Throughout most of what is now England and Wales, however, the Romans were successful in establishing administrative structures that made *Britannia* a province of the Roman Empire. Though far from the heart of the Empire, Britain was clearly a rich and valuable province, and much of the population, at least in the centers of the island, was thoroughly Romanized. It is now thought that the island was densely populated; it enjoyed a thriving

money economy and commerce, with a number of large urban centers including a settlement on the banks of the Thames River named *Londinium*, a network of roads, large villas in the Roman style, heated baths, water and sewage service in some areas, and sturdy traditions of Roman administration, education, and literacy. When Christianity spread throughout the Roman empire, it spread in Britain as well—Christian mosaics have been discovered on the site of a large fourth-century villa, and in 314 three British bishops attended a council in Arles, France. In the early years of the fifth century Saint Patrick, a Roman Briton, traveled through Ireland as a missionary bishop, spearheading the conversion of that island. In many respects Britain in the fourth century had a prosperity it would not see again until the fourteenth century.

Roman Britain was highly fortified and well defended from its hostile neighbors, but at the turn of the fifth century the Roman legions stationed in Britain were withdrawn for deployment in the heart of the Empire, in part to defend Rome from the various barbarian tribes pouring across its eastern frontiers. Soon afterwards, the Scots and the Picts began to encroach upon the territories of the Romanized British. It is unclear who ruled the island during these years or how it was defended; the Britons were left to their own devices, and tradition portrays them as hapless and virtually helpless. The traditional story, told among other places in the writing of a sixth-century Briton named Gildas, tells how the Britons turned to the Germanic peoples of continental Europe for assistance. The Angles, Saxons, and Jutes, Germanic tribes who occupied the coastal areas of what is now northwestern Germany and Denmark, were quite willing to work as soldiers for hire, but once they had established themselves in Britain as allies of the Britons, they began to demand land of their own, seized power from their employers, slaughtered and dispossessed them, and soon established themselves in the eastern parts of the island.

Contemporary archaeological evidence suggests, however, that the Germanic migrations actually took place in numerous waves from the later fourth century on. Relations between these Germanic invaders, who were probably not numerous, and the British are hard to reconstruct, but it appears that British culture was eventually supplanted not simply because the British were driven out, but because many of them intermingled with their Germanic conquerors and adopted the dress, language and culture of their new ruling class so that whatever their cultural heritage, they became, to later archaeologists and historians, indistinguishable from the Germanic Angles and Saxons. When the Romans had ruled, the Britons were Romanized; when the Saxons ruled, they were Saxonized. On the other hand, there are few words of British origin in Old English, the language of the Germanic invaders, and it is certainly significant that the Old English word *wealh* means both 'slave' and 'Welshman'. But whatever the reasons for its erosion, by around 600 CE a distinctively British culture was largely confined to Wales and Cornwall. On the continent a parallel series of events occurred, with groups of Franks pushing the Celtic peoples of Gaul to the geographical margin of Brittany. Although they had been marginalized geographically and politically, however, the Celtic peoples continued to exert a powerful shaping influence on what would become English literature, which persisted even after the Norman Conquest, in the retelling of Irish and Welsh legends, in the survival of the genre of story known as the "Breton lay," and in the fragmentary memories of British kings and warlords who led a temporarily successful resistance against the Saxon invaders—stories which formed the kernel of truth at the heart of the legends of King Arthur, arguably the great political myth of the Middle Ages.

MIGRATION AND CONVERSION

The culture of the Angles, Saxons and Jutes was quite different from that of the Romanized Britons. Though there is some evidence for continuing populations in Roman cities, the Germanic migrants were largely rural rather than urban, and built primarily in wood rather than stone—most of the great buildings of the Romans fell into ruin or were plundered for building materials. Their society were apparently organized, at least during the migration period, around a male leader and warrior band rather than the hearth and family, or the city or state. If the characterization of the first century CE Roman historian Tacitus is to be believed, the

continental Germanic tribes were a notably warlike culture: "they are not so easily persuaded to plow the earth and to wait for the year's produce as they are to challenge an enemy and earn the honor of wounds," Tacitus comments. "They actually think it tame and stupid to acquire by the sweat of toil what they might win by their blood." Certainly later centuries regarded the Germanic tribes as particularly fierce. The Angles and Saxons had a writing system—runic carvings—but no culture of literacy in which it might be put to more than the simplest uses. Their economy was based on barter and gift-exchange, not money. Perhaps most importantly, the Angles and Saxons were pagan, worshipping a pantheon of northern gods such as Woden and Thor, and as they came to dominate Britain so the influence of Christianity moved (with the Britons themselves) to the margins.

But Christianity did not disappear as Britain became England (from *engla-land*, the land of the Angles). When Pope Gregory the Great sent Augustine (now known as Augustine of Canterbury, not to be confused with the more famous Augustine, bishop of Hippo in north Africa) on a mission to convert the English in 597, he met with extraordinary early success, in part no doubt because Christianity already had a strong presence in Britain. King Æthelberht of Kent, for example, who was Augustine's first notable convert, was married to a Frankish Christian named Bertha. The expansion of English power over the west and southwest of the island undoubted brought many British Christians under English rule. Apart from its spiritual benefits, conversion to Christianity offered the appeal of new political alliances with other Christian kings, and the considerable power of Latin literacy, law, science, philosophy, and education. Nonetheless conversion was a significant cultural change, and the momentum of conversion wavered back and forth for a century or so, with large areas of resistance and a good deal of back-sliding; Christianized England was not everywhere peaceful and prosperous or even thoroughly converted. By the beginning of the eighth century, however, the English were Christian enough to send missionaries like St. Boniface to preach the gospel to the pagan Saxons in Germany.

Alongside the Franks, the native British Christians, and the Roman missionaries, the Irish were busy in this period establishing monasteries in northern England. St. Columba founded the important monastery of Iona in Scotland in the mid-sixth century. This early insular monastic culture produced an extraordinary flourishing of Christian decorative art that finds its greatest expression in the Book of Kells. Tensions between the churches of the Roman mission and the idiosyncratic and relatively independent Irish churches were often high, but many of the most enduring Christian documents from the first centuries following the conversion of Britain, even those made in Northumbrian monasteries after the official rejection of the 'Irish' model of Christianity at the Synod of Whitby (664), are manuscripts in the Celtic tradition.

One of the most remarkable of these is the Lindisfarne Gospels, mentioned above, dating from around 700 (of which illustrations appear elsewhere in this volume). Like the Book of Kells, this manuscript of the gospels is remarkable for the profusion and richness of its detailed illustrations; the motifs of intertwined lions of different colors, the zoomorphic shapes, and the sheer density of intricate detail of these gospel manuscripts make them central documents in the history both of Christian and of Celtic art. It would be misleading to mention the visually impressive Lindisfarne Gospels, however, without placing it in context with other manuscripts such as the Codex Amiatinus, a massive (75 lbs) copy of the Bible now in Florence. This manuscript, though visually more sedate than the Lindisfarne Gospels, contains a biblical text so closely similar to the original Latin translation of St. Jerome (known as the Vulgate Bible) that today it forms the basis for the scholarly reconstruction of Jerome's text. The Codex Amiatinus was made at the same time as the Lindisfarne Gospels, in the monastery of Wearmouth-Jarrow; while the Lindisfarne Gospels are a strong testimony to the Irish influence on Christian culture in England, the Codex Amiatinus it is a powerful statement of Northumbrian monasticism's aspirations to pure *romanitas* as opposed to the provincial practices of the Irish and British. Between the shifting forces of these various traditions—the ideals of Roman orthodoxy, the influence of the Irish
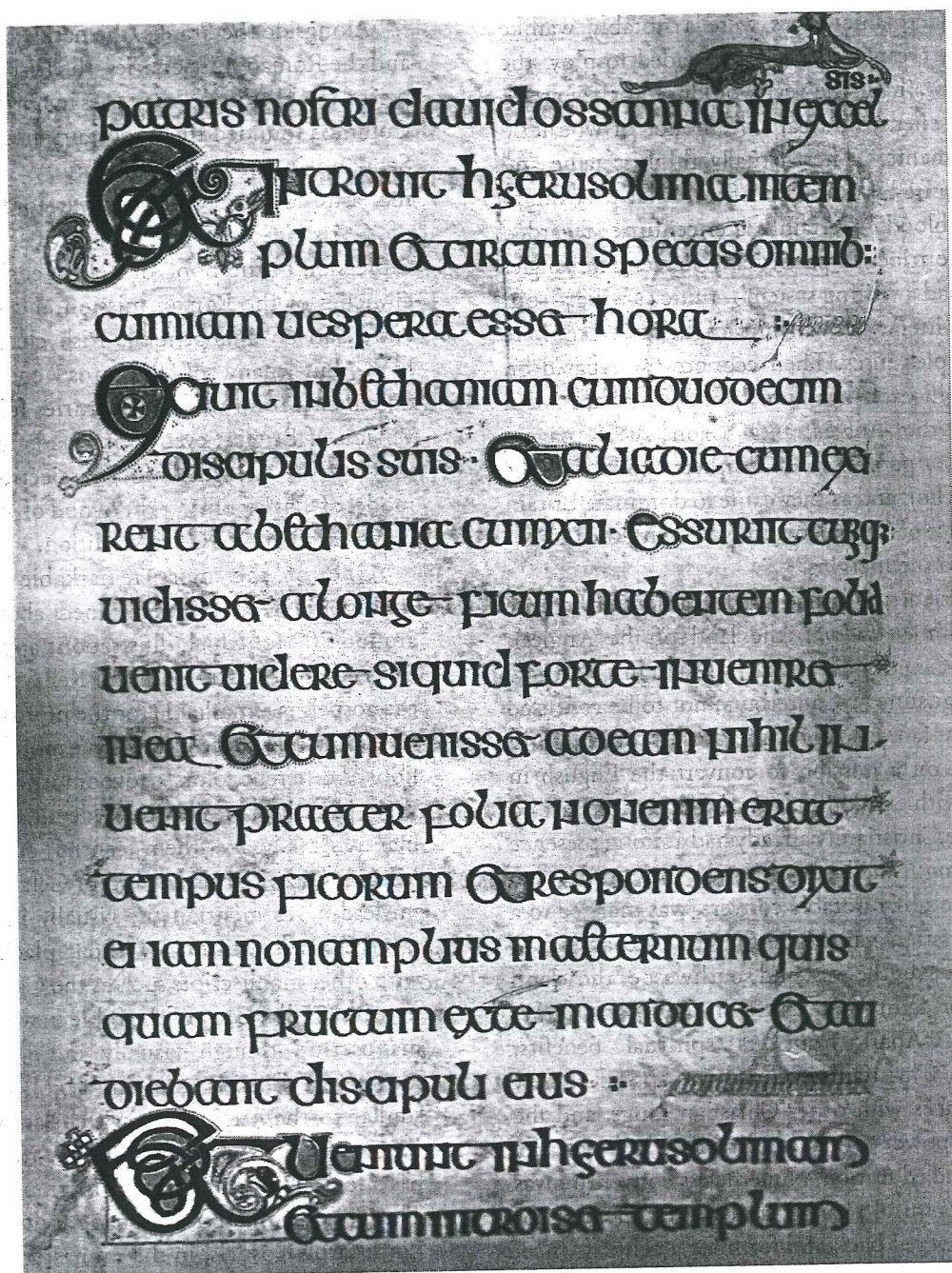
Page from the Gospel of St. Mark, Book of Kells (ninth century). The page size of the original is 9 ½ inches by 12 ½ inches. Like many early Insular manuscripts, the provenance of this book is uncertain. The monastery at Kells in County Meath, Ireland, was established at the time of the Viking invasions early in the ninth century by monks from the large monastery at Iona, off the coast of Scotland. Among the many hypotheses as to the book's origin are theories that the monks brought the book with them from Iona in its present (unfinished) state; that some work was done at Iona, some at Kells; and even that the book originated at Lindisfarne in the north-east of England. This uncertainty indicates the high degree of interaction among the monasteries of Ireland, Scotland, and northern England during this period.

monasteries, the political pull of the Frankish world, and the remnants, however tattered, of the native British church—England became a Christian nation.

When the Northumbrian historian Bede wrote his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* around 725, in fact, religion was the only unity the English had; political unity had to grow out of this unity of religious practice. Near the beginning of his history, Bede states that "At the present time [i.e., the early 700s], there are five languages in Britain, the English, British, Irish, Pictish, and Latin, just as the divine law is written in five books, each in its own own way devoted to seeking out and setting forth one and the same knowledge of sublime truth and true sublimity. The Latin tongue, through the study of the Scriptures, has become common to all the rest." By "English" Bede refers to what we now call Old English; by "British" he means the Celtic language of the Britons, ancestor of modern Welsh. The fact that Bede counts Latin, the learned language of religion and science, among the languages of Britain, however, suggests that he is not speaking of cultures or ethnic divisions in the modern sense. His point is not so much anthropological as it is spiritual—Britain was the fortunate recipient of the unifying force of Latin Christianity—but it does remind us of the linguistic, cultural and intellectual diversity to be found in Anglo-Saxon England.

The story that Bede recounts of the period from 597 to 700 is in some respects parallel to the story of Britain under Roman rule. As it had under the Romans, the island became an outpost at the edge of an empire—in this case, however, an empire founded on religion rather than on secular power. Just as Roman administrators in Britain had reported to their superiors in Rome, so too the archbishops of Canterbury and of York (the two pre-eminent centers of Christianity in Britain, as ordained by Pope Gregory the Great) derived their authority from the pope in Rome; the Roman church had inherited many of the bureaucratic systems, and some of the universalizing aspirations, of the Roman Empire, and the Pope assumed the role and name of *pontifex maximus* (from which he retains the modern title "Pontiff"), the sacerdotal aspect of imperial power. England's was, to be sure, a missionary church, not always willing or able to follow the Roman church in all

respects; the English church developed in a relationship, with varying degrees of tension and accommodation, between Christian conversion and secular Germanic culture, and from an early date the English church displayed distinctively local features. As a purely practical matter, too, communication was an enormous challenge in an era when a courier traveling across Europe on horseback could typically cover little more than thirty miles (fifty kilometers) per day. To send a message from London to Rome and receive a reply could thus be expected to take the better part of two months. And yet many people made the journey, and were expected to make it—the roads between England and Rome were familiar to bishops, pilgrims, penitents, monks, messengers, and merchants. Within Britain, too, transportation and communication—and thus any form of centralized control—were made problematic by purely logistical considerations.

It was also in accordance with the church's own inclinations to make some effort to preserve traditional culture and customs, reinvesting existing practices with a Christian meaning. Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* preserves a letter written by Pope Gregory to the Abbot Mellitus in 601, as the latter was going to join Augustine's mission in Britain; Gregory instructs him to tell Augustine that

> the temples of the idols in that nation ought not to be destroyed; but let the idols that are in them be destroyed; let holy water be made and sprinkled in the said temples, let altars be erected, and relics placed. For if those temples are well built, it is requisite that they be converted from the worship of devils to the service of the true God; that the nation, seeing that their temples are not destroyed, may remove error from their hearts, and knowing and adoring the true God, may the more familiarly resort to the places to which they have been accustomed. And because they have been used to slaughter many oxen in the sacrifices to devils, some solemnity must be exchanged for them on this account, as that on the day of the dedication, or the nativities of the holy martyrs, whose relics are there deposited, they may build themselves huts of the boughs of trees, about those churches which have been turned to that use from temples, and celebrate

the solemnity with religious feasting, and no more offer beasts to the Devil, but kill cattle to the praise of God in their eating, and return thanks to the Giver of all things for their sustenance; to the end that, whilst some gratifications are outwardly permitted them, they may the more easily consent to the inward consolations of the grace of God.

Gregory may not be entirely clear on the precise nature of English paganism—he seems to imagine England to be like Rome, with temples and priesthoods—but his strategy permits many sorts of accommodations of Christian practice to English culture, and *vice versa*. Doubtless this hastened the process of conversion; Bede himself, writing barely a century after the beginning of the Roman mission to England, does not seem to regard lingering paganism among the English as a contemporary problem worth mentioning. The old pagan gods of the north were abandoned along with pagan temples and rituals—though remnants of their importance persisted, as they do today in our days of the week: *Wednesday* is 'Woden's day', *Thursday* is 'Thor's Day', and so on. But the Anglo-Saxons managed to adopt the civilization offered by Christianity and at the same time adapt it to their own Germanic heritage. From the perspective of literary history, this policy of "cleansing the temples" fostered an amazing interpenetration of Germanic and Christian ideas; each is re-thought and revised in terms of the other, and it is impossible as well as inappropriate to separate 'Christian' from 'pagan' elements in the literature of the Anglo-Saxons. A longing for the heavenly home could be expressed in the tones of traditional elegy, Christ could be portrayed as a mighty warrior and his crucifixion as a heroic battle, and the pagan past could be depicted with regretful admiration and poignant sadness in a long poem like *Beowulf*.

Throughout this period monasteries were the most important outposts of Christian culture in England. The institutions of monasticism had their roots in the ascetic tradition of early Christianity, the belief that one could serve God best by living apart from the world in a state of constant prayer and self-denial. A monastery, as the concept developed in the third and fourth centuries CE, was a place where ascetically minded Christians could live together, supporting one another in prayer and penitential practice while mitigating some of the harsher aspects of the solitary life. As monastic communities grew various rules were devised, some no more than collections of observations and advice. In the sixth century the *Rule* of St. Benedict outlined a clear and codified plan for the communal life, a plan that is still followed today in monastic communties around the world. The Benedictine rule—which, however rigorous it might seem to a modern reader, was meant to curb some of the ascetic extremes seen in Benedict's own time—was the foundation on which the great monastic establishments were built, where work, communal prayer, and study comprised the *Opus Dei* or 'work of God', and which spread what Jean LeClercq has called "the love of learning and the desire for God" throughout early medieval Europe.

Many different rules and monastic orders developed throughout the Middle Ages; their practices differed from one order to another and one house to the next, but the general principles were constant. Monks were not usually ordained as priests, and had no pastoral responsibilities to minister to a congregation (though monasteries often did, especially in the early Middle Ages, provide pastoral care in areas without an established system of parishes). Monks were obliged to give up worldly wealth, their position in society, and their connections with family and friends so as to live in a community of individuals devoted to the same goals; at the same time, however, abbots were often from the same families as the secular rulers, and became powerful rulers and possessors of great wealth. Monastic communities always observed, at least in theory, a strict separation of the sexes, but the monastic life was open to women as much as to men; the English practice in the century before Bede was to have double monastic houses of monks and nuns, in almost all cases headed by an abbess such as the famous and noble Hild of Whitby. The monasteries, as the most important locus for intellectual activity and for the preservation and creation of cultural artifacts, became essential to the continuance of Latin culture, the practices of literacy, and the texts both of the church fathers and of classical authors, which were copied and read even as they were some-

times regarded with suspicion. Monastic culture flourished so vigorously in the north of England that one scholar has described Northumbria in the generations around 700 as a "veritable monastic Riviera."

INVASION AND UNIFICATION

This came to a dramatic end in the 790s with the first waves of invasions by the various Scandinavian peoples known to history as 'Vikings', and organized monastic life in England seems to have fallen into a state of more or less complete disrepair in the course of the ninth century. (It would be restored in the later tenth century by the reformers Oswald, Dunstan, and Æthelwold; by this time, however, the centers of monastic culture were in Canterbury, Winchester and Glastonbury rather than the far north, which was thoroughly Danish and in some places re-paganized.) Among the first targets of Viking attack were the holy island of Lindisfarne, which fell in 793, and Bede's monastery at Jarrow, which was destroyed in 794; the raids would continue on and off for two centuries. The Vikings were in many ways an extraordinary group of peoples. Whereas previous invaders such as the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes traveled relatively short distances, the Vikings constructed longships that proved capable of crossing the Atlantic; the remains of a Viking settlement at L'anse Aux Meadows in Newfoundland, dating from about 1000, are evidence that they even traveled to the New World. They established settlements in Iceland and Greenland, and settled in Ireland, Scotland, and Normandy as well as in England (the territory of Normandy takes its name from the 'northmen'). The popular image of the Vikings is one of raiders who would arrive, plunder, and return to their homeland; in fact, Viking raids were followed in most areas by invasion and settlement, and gradually Viking groups were absorbed into local populations. For most of the tenth century Viking raids ceased; the former raiders had become farmers, and had begun to intermarry with Anglo-Saxons in a process of cultural and linguistic assimilation that continued through the eleventh century.

The ruins at Lindisfarne.

The Viking presence contributed significantly to the unification of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms and the first stirrings of what might be called, for lack of a better term, national feeling, both in Scotland and in England. The centers of political power shifted southward, to Mercia in the eighth century and Wessex in the ninth; smaller kingdoms formed alliances and larger ones expanded their rule, until most of England was united under King Alfred the Great of Wessex, who reigned from 871 to 899. Alfred was able to raise a substantial army and stop the Vikings militarily; while the Vikings maintained control over the north and northeast of England, Alfred and his successors controlled most of the remainder of the country.

With peace secured, Alfred began promoting education and literary culture—what is of incalculable importance for the history of English literature is that he proposed to encourage the translation of Latin works into English and the cultivation of vernacular literacy. Alfred surrounded himself with a learned circle of advisors after the manner of the Frankish emperor Charlemagne (d. 814), and was himself literate in Latin—he translated several works from Latin, including Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, though probably with a great deal of assistance from his advisors. He sets out the reasoning behind his policy of

English translation in the Preface to his translation of Gregory the Great's *Pastoral Care*—and it is significant that he announces his program of education and translation in a book on how to rule and govern:

> I recalled how the law was first composed in the Hebrew language, and thereafter, when the Greeks learned it, they translated it all into their own language, and all other books as well. And so too the Romans, after they had mastered them, translated them all through myriad interpreters into their own language.... Therefore it seemed better to me ... that we too should turn certain books which are the most necessary for all men to know into a language that we can all understand.

Alfred's educational program was designed primarily to help him govern, but one of its legacies is the relatively large quantity of literary, historical, legal, spiritual, and political writing in English (about 30,000 lines of poetry and about ten times as much prose) that has survived, almost all of it in manuscripts from the tenth and eleventh centuries. Under Alfred the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* was probably begun; to this year-by-year historical record we owe a great deal of our knowledge of the period.

The authority of even the most capable and ambitious rulers in the early Middle Ages was seldom able to survive long after their deaths. More often than not family feuding would undo much of what had been accomplished, as happened when fighting among Charlemagne's three sons led to the tripartite division of the Carolingian empire. Alfred had rather better luck with his descendants, who were able to consolidate his accomplishments and even extend them somewhat; his descendant Edgar (r. 959–75) commanded the allegiance of all of the most important English lords, had ties to the most important families on the Continent, and had in his control all senior church appointments. Under the weaker leadership of the next generation, however, in particular Æthelred II (r. 978-1016), and in the face of a renewed series of Viking attacks (dramatically depicted in the poetic *Battle of Maldon*, written some time after the actual battle in 991), the allegiance of the great lords and landholders to the King loosened, and the shameful decline of the English nobility described in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* culminated in the Danish King Cnut (r. 1016–35) taking the English throne.

The end of the tenth century was by no means entirely a period of decline, however; it was also a time of such literary figures as the homilist and grammarian Ælfric, the archbishop Wulfstan, and the scholar Byrhtferth of Ramsey; during these years a number of *de luxe* decorated manuscripts were produced, and important works such as the *Rule* of St. Benedict and the Gospels were translated into English. It is also perhaps a tribute to the strength of Alfred's reforms that much of the administrative, military, and church structures he had put into place survived the conquest of England by a Danish king—as, indeed, they would in part survive the conquest fifty years later by the Normans. That these conquests did not cause more destruction than they did must also be attributed in part to the fact that these invading cultures were far from alien to English culture. In the centuries between the early Viking invasions and the reign of Cnut, Christianity had reached Scandinavia; whereas the early Vikings had raided and destroyed monasteries, Cnut was a Christian who continued to support the monasteries much as Alfred and his descendants had done. Similarly, while the Vikings had conquered Normandy in the early tenth century, by the time the Normans invaded Britain in 1066, the Viking culture there had largely been assimilated to that of Christian France.

ENGLAND AFTER THE NORMAN CONQUEST

THE NORMANS AND FEUDALISM

The Norman Conquest of England in 1066 was the next in the long series of invasions and migrations—Celts, Romans, Angles, Saxons, Jutes, and Vikings—that have shaped English culture. That it has held a special place as a focal point in English history is no doubt partly due to its timing, almost exactly at the point where many scholars see larger forces creating a dividing line between the early and the later Middle Ages. French language and culture never threatened to extinguish the existing Anglo-Saxon culture and English language, although they did exert enormous and lasting

influence on them. The contrast with the Anglo-Saxon migrations is striking: these effectively and permanently imposed an English culture on Britain, while conquest by the Normans never permanently imposed French culture on England. But the Norman invasion helped to change Britain in fundamental ways—most obviously in language, but also in social and economic structure.

From the Bayeux Tapestry (late eleventh century). This object is actually an embroidered banner, around 20 inches high and 230 feet long, rather than a woven tapestry. It was probably created by English embroiderers, who were particularly skilled in this kind of work. This section of the tapestry shows the Norman ships landing at Pevensy, Sussex, 28 September; several ships have already landed on the beach, and horses are being unloaded from another ship that has just arrived. The text of the tapestry at this point (translated from the Latin) reads as follows: Here the horses are getting out of the ships. And here the soldiers [hurry to Hastings to seize supplies].

For all its far-reaching consequences, the invasion itself was a relatively modest affair. When Harold was crowned as king following the death of King Edward, the succession was disputed by William, Duke of Normandy, who settled the matter militarily; with a force probably numbering no more than 8,000, he crossed the channel, and had soon defeated and killed Harold in a day-long battle just outside Hastings. His victory brought England under the rule of a French-speaking king with substantial territorial claims in France, a situation that would persist for roughly the next three hundred years. Despite this obvious shift, and despite the triumphant narrative of the Bayeux tapestry, probably made within a generation of the battle for a Norman patron, the effects of the Conquest, particularly as it was viewed at close range rather than years later, apparently did not always loom so large. In this connection it is interesting to compare the five different accounts in different manuscripts of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* that have come down to us. At one extreme is the remarkably brief account of a scribe writing at Winchester in the manuscript known as the Parker MS: "In this year King Edward died and Earl Harold succeeded to the kingdom, and held it forty weeks and one day; and in this year William came and conquered England. And in this year Christ Church was built and a comet appeared on 18 April." By contrast, a scribe writing a generation or more later in Peterborough presents a much fuller account of how Harold was forced to fight a Norse invader in the north of the country before meeting William at Hastings, and conveys more of the immediate effects of William's conquest. Yet even here one has the sense that the death of a local abbot is regarded as being of almost as much importance as the Norman invasion:

> And King Harold was informed [of the victory of a Norse King near the town of York], and he came with a very great force of English men and met him at Stamford Bridge, and killed him and Earl Tostig and valiantly overcame all the invaders. Meanwhile

Count William landed at Hastings on Michaelmas Day, and Harold came from the north and fought with him before all of the army had come and there he fell and his two brothers Gyrth and Leofwine; and William conquered this country, and came to Westminster, and Archbishop Aldred consecrated him king, and people paid taxes to him, and gave him hostages and afterwards bought their land. And Leofric, Abbot of Peterborough, was at that campaign and fell ill there, and came home and died soon after, on the Eve of All Saints. God have mercy on his soul. In his day there was every happiness and every good at Peterborough, and he was beloved by everyone, so that the King gave to Saint Peter and him the Abbacy of Burton and that of Coventry which Earl Leofric, who was his uncle, had built, and that of Crowland and that of Thorne. And he did much for the benefit of the monastery of Peterborough with gold and silver and vestments and land, more indeed than any before or after him.

Significant here is the mention of people paying taxes to William and "buying" their lands. William exacted tribute from the conquered both in the immediate aftermath of his invasion and on an ongoing basis, keeping as much as a fifth of English lands for himself and dividing much of the rest among members of his family and the barons who had supported him, who in turn maintained their own followers. While neither the lords nor the peasants of Anglo-Saxon England had held legal title to their land in quite the way that we conceive of it today, they had in practice exercised rights over that land similar to those that we would describe as the rights of ownership. Under the Normans, by contrast, nobles held the land that they occupied not on any permanent basis but as part of a system of exchange. The king granted land to a nobleman as a *fief*; in return for the right to its use the nobleman was obliged to perform services for the king, including making payments at various times and providing armed knights whenever the king might demand them. The nobleman, in his turn, would grant land—again, as a fief—to a knight, who in return would owe to the nobleman military service and other dues. The knight would typically retain a substantial portion of this land, and then divide the rest among the peasantry. There were obligations in the other direction, as well: knights were obliged to provide protection for the peasantry, nobles for the knights, and the king for the nobles. The relationship at each level was, in theory at least, entirely voluntary and often publicly proclaimed, with the "vassal" (or holder of the fief) kneeling and promising homage and fealty to his lord, and a kiss between the two then sealing their mutual obligation.

The institution of this new system was marked in a unique way by William through the compilation of the Domesday Book (so-called in reference to the "Day of Judgment" at the end of the world), an extraordinary survey on a county-by-county basis of all the lands held by the king and by his vassals, recording all the obligations of the land holders. Without the sort of commitment to record keeping and enforcement that the Domesday Book represented (a commitment made possible, it must be said, by the underlying social order inherited from the Anglo-Saxons), the Normans might not have succeeded to such a great degree in imposing a new network of obligation on the conquered people. It must be noted, however, that the Domesday book was seldom used to settle disputes or clarify ownership—the two functions for which, one might suppose, such a comprehensive census would be undertaken—in the first century of its existence. The eleventh-century ability to make records outpaced the development of a system in which to exploit them, and it would take some time before the mechanisms of government could make efficient use of such burdensome archives of documents. It has been argued that the Domesday Book, for all the impressive bureaucracy that brought it about, reflects a mistaken idea of the nature of written obligations: William may have imagined that the island of Britain could be granted to him by a written charter, like any other piece of land, and that recording the disposition of property and population would somehow fix them permanently in that state. But even if Domesday was more symbolic than useful, the imposition of feudal obligations was fairly thorough in England; the Anglo-Saxon nobles were quickly assimilated, dispossessed or killed, leaving William in effective control of England. The Norman conquests of Wales and Scotland, however, were much slower and more piecemeal, and the Anglo-Norman kings never exercised very much

control over Ireland.

The late eleventh century in England saw the arrival of the Jews as well as the French invaders. Christian disdain for moneylending—although there were certainly Christian usurers—and the exclusion of Jews from some other professions meant that they tended to become strongly associated with, and very important in, the financial workings of the kingdom. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, until their expulsion in 1290, they served at times as a financial last resort for the king, because their relatively unprotected status as non-Christians made them vulnerable to much more severe forms of taxation and the abrogation of debts incurred by Christians but never repaid. Another important development of the later eleventh century, which would become much more central to civic life in the late Middle Ages, was the rise of guilds—initially merchant guilds that exercised a monopoly over the trade in a particular area, but later craft guilds that established regulations allowing them to control who could practice a given craft and that offered social and financial support to their members, as well as regulating the quality of production. While guilds and confraternities of some description, often purely religious in orientation, had existed since perhaps the seventh century, they became increasingly important in the course of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, particularly in England, and their rise coincided with the growth of urban centers and of new forms of religious devotion.

HENRY II AND AN INTERNATIONAL CULTURE

If William was the key figure in establishing Norman and feudal rule in England, his great-grandson Henry II (r. 1154–89) was the key figure in its preservation and extension through the later Middle Ages. Henry's coming to the throne in 1154 brought to an end almost twenty years of civil war under the disputed kingship of Stephen, in the course of which barons and church leaders had taken advantage of the collapse of royal authority to expand local powers. Many of them began to encroach on land claimed by the crown, and to build private castles to protect their domains. Henry put a stop to these practices, taking back the lands, tearing down the castles, and reorganizing royal authority in a fashion that was increasingly supported by standardized records and documents. Central authority over legal matters, which had previously been largely restricted to capital cases, was now extended to legal matters of all sorts; the first legal textbook was composed in Henry's reign. The expansion of the crown's legal control came in part at the expense of the church, and provoked one of the most famous incidents of Henry's reign, his clash with Thomas Becket (1118–70), Archbishop of Canterbury, who wanted the clergy to retain their right to be tried in church courts independent of the secular legal system. The Archbishop was subsequently murdered, allegedly on the orders of Henry, an event that exercised a tremendous hold on the contemporary imagination. As John of Salisbury tells the story (in the earliest surviving account of the murder, written in 1171), Becket was standing before the altar when the knights who had come in pursuit of him arrived and told him that it was his time to die. John writes:

> Steadfast in speech as in spirit, he replied: "I am prepared to die for my God, to preserve justice and my church's liberty. But if you seek my head, I forbid you on behalf of God almighty and on pain of anathema to do any hurt to any other man, monk, clerk or layman, of high or low degree. ... I embrace death readily, so long as peace and liberty for the Church follow from the shedding of my blood." ...
> He spoke, and saw that the assassins had drawn their swords; and bowed his head like one in prayer. His last words were "To God and St. Mary and the saints who protect and defend this church, and to the blessed Denis, I commend myself and the church's cause." ... A son's affection forbids me to describe each blow the savage assassins struck, spurning all fear of God, forgetful of all fealty and any human feeling. They defiled the cathedral and the holy season with a bishop's blood and with slaughter.

It remains unclear whether or not Henry ordered Becket's murder. What is clear is that the outcry was so great that Henry was forced to perform public penance—and to accept that the church would, to some extent, remain outside the realm of royal authority. Becket's martyrdom created the Canterbury shrine that was the goal of Chaucer's pilgrims, among many others.
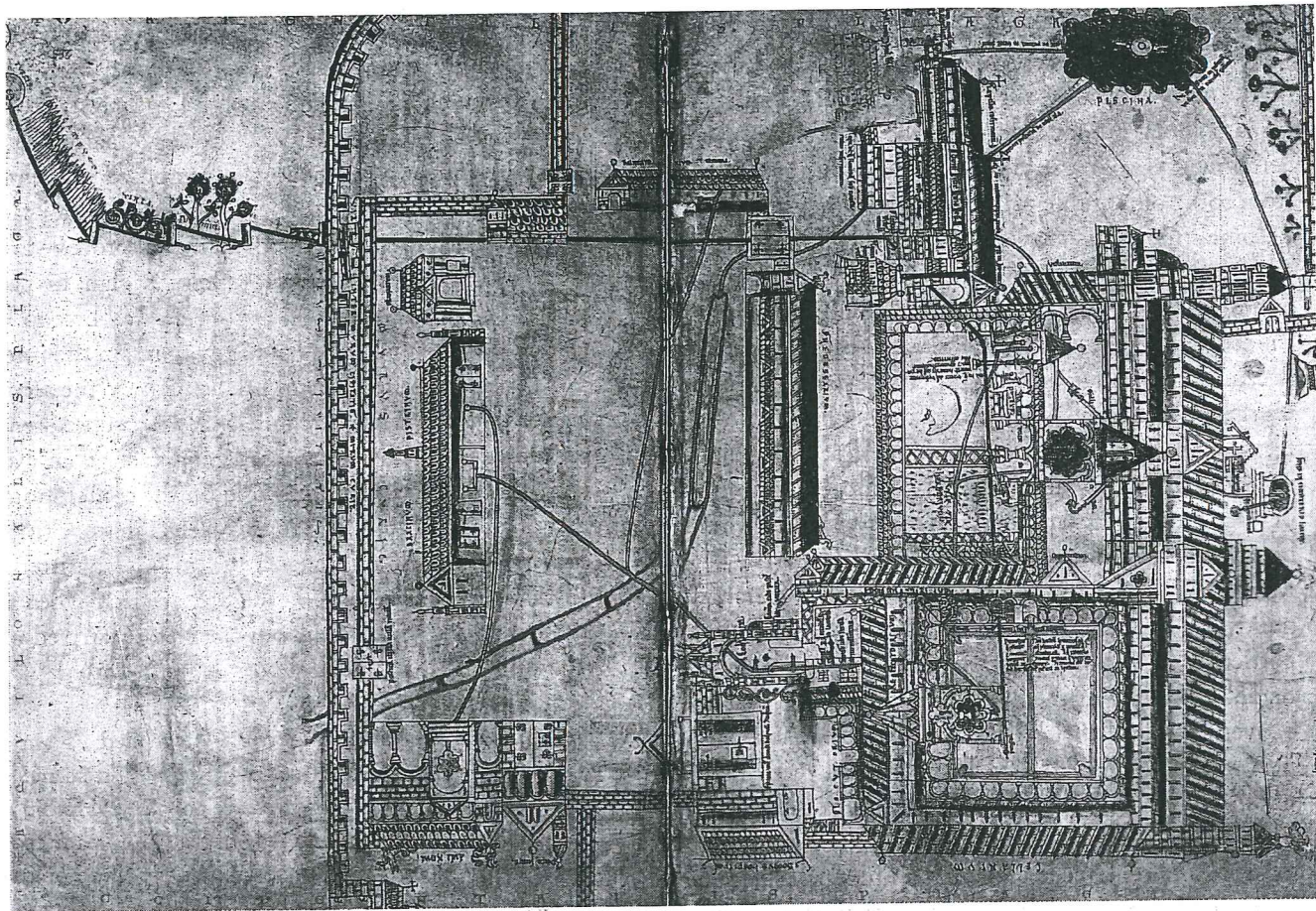
Plan for Canterbury Cathedral, c. 1160.

Canterbury Cathedral, the seat of the Archbishop of Canterbury, head of the English Church, is a kind of time capsule of Christianity in Britain since Anglo-Saxon times. The earliest church known to have stood on this site was that of St Augustine of Canterbury, who arrived as a missionary in 597 CE; traces of this building are believed to lie beneath the current structure. An Anglo-Saxon church was built over that of Augustine in the ninth or tenth century; it was destroyed by fire in 1067 and rebuilt by the Normans shortly afterward, and this construction still forms the basic fabric of the existing church, although it was modified and decorated further in the succeeding centuries. The plan shows the extensive monastic buildings as well as the cathedral itself. The lines shown connecting the buildings represent the plumbing system. At the top left the vineyard and orchard are indicated. The murder of St. Thomas Becket, then Archbishop, on the Cathedral's altar, made Canterbury a major pilgrimage shrine.

Durham Cathedral, begun in 1093, is regarded as one of the finest examples of Norman architecture in Europe; this style, a form of the Romanesque, is characterized by round arches (as here, along the sides of the nave) and vast but relatively spare interiors. Durham also displays some features (such as the pointed vaulting) that came to characterize the Gothic style of many later cathedrals.
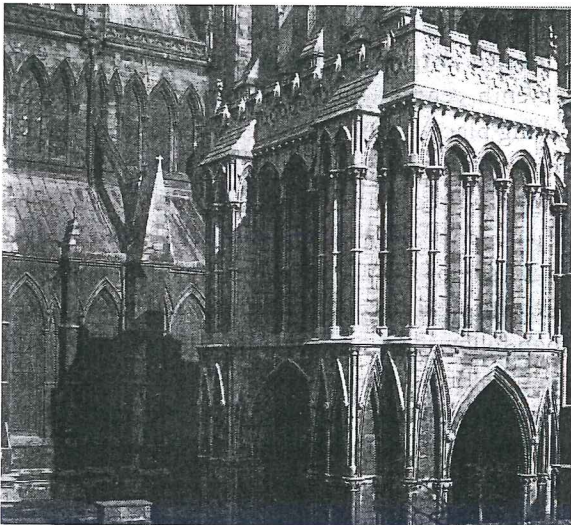
Lincoln Cathedral, Galilee Porch.

Begun in 1072 and substantially rebuilt in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, Lincoln Cathedral shows some of the classic features of both Romanesque and Gothic architecture. The Gothic Galilee Porch dates from c. 1230.
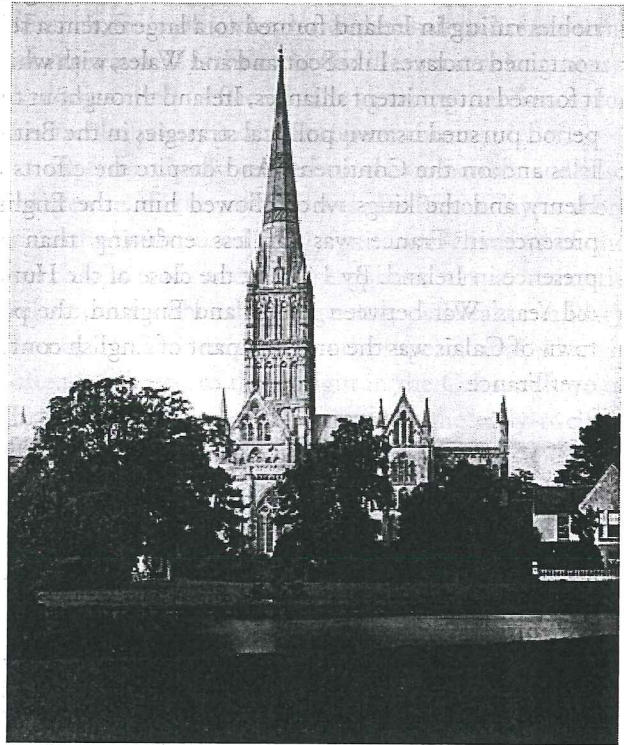
Salisbury cathedral (thirteenth century). With a spire of 404 feet, this was until the 1960s the tallest building in England. It is a classic example of the high Gothic style, with its pointed arches, flying buttresses to support a higher vault, and greater intricacy of design, including decorative features such as exterior sculpture and stained glass windows.

If Henry's extensions of the power of the English throne throughout the realm were unprecedented—though not, as the example of Becket suggests, entirely unopposed—so too was his extension of that power beyond the British Isles. Like previous Anglo-Norman monarchs, Henry controlled much of what is now northern France as well as England. With his marriage to Eleanor of Aquitaine in 1152 he had acquired control of much of southern France; he also exerted control over most of Scotland and Wales and in 1171 he invaded and took control of Ireland, where he quickly imposed the same feudal structures and judicial system on the

Irish people as he had on the English. Despite England's political control over Ireland—which itself was of varying strength over the next centuries —there was relatively little cultural assimilation, and the English nobles ruling in Ireland formed to a large extent a self-contained enclave. Like Scotland and Wales, with which it formed intermittent alliances, Ireland throughout this period pursued its own political strategies in the British Isles and on the Continent. And despite the efforts of Henry and the kings who followed him, the English presence in France was far less enduring than its presence in Ireland. By 1453, at the close of the Hundred Years' War between France and England, the port town of Calais was the only remnant of English control over France.

Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine sailing across the English Channel. Detail of illustration from Matthew Paris, *Historia Major* (c. 1240). The king and queen made the crossing many times as they traveled between their French and English kingdoms.

The period around the Norman Conquest also coincided with important developments in learned culture. England had produced outstanding scholars at various points in the early Middle Ages—among them Bede, the Latin poet Aldhelm, Ælfric, Byrhtferth, and most famously Alcuin of York, a monk of York who became master of Charlemagne's palace school—and in the eleventh century was home to the illustrious Anselm of Bec (1033–1109), one of the founders of scholastic thought, whose career demonstrates the international culture of the church and the schools, both of which used Latin an international language. Born in Italy, Anselm became abbot of a monastery in Normandy, and was eventually appointed Archbishop of Canterbury —the leading church position in England. His development of the ontological argument for the existence of God in his *Why God Became Man* (excerpted in this volume) is a good example of scholastic ways of thinking, proceeding on the basis of deductive logic to new theological conclusions. While there were outstanding individual thinkers at this time, however, the universities were still in their infancy; in most of Europe, schools had existed for the most part only in association with cathedrals or monasteries and their chief purpose was to provide training for clerics. In the wake of monastic and ecclesiastical reform in the tenth and eleventh centuries, these schools began to expand their curricula to provide a more highly educated clergy at all levels. Already by the end of the eleventh century there was some form of instruction taking place at Oxford, and by the end of the twelfth century it was a substantial enough center of learning to have attracted its first foreign student, and to benefit when Henry II forbade English scholars to study at the university of Paris. The university of Bologna was also already in existence at this time, and these three were soon followed by others across Europe.

The British Isles in the twelfth century also saw the rise of new modes of historical writing, including works such as William of Malmesbury's *Gesta Regum Anglorum* or "Deeds of the English Kings," Henry of Huntingdon's *Chronicle,* and Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* or "History of the Kings of Britain." These writers' approach to history emphasized, as their titles suggest, the deeds of kings and the rise and fall of

nations; in this they departed from predecessors more interested in depicting the Christian framework of history. The period also illustrates the political uses of literature. While Henry II—unlike, for example, King Alfred—is not particularly remembered for his own literary activities, numerous works in Anglo-Norman are associated with him as a patron or dedicatee, and his desire to solidify and extend his claims on both French and English lands was one of the things that made him an important figure for literary history. Henry and his descendants are known as the Angevin (or Plantagenet) kings, a reference to Henry's father, Geoffrey "Planta-genet" of Anjou, and this designation accurately repre-sents their ongoing political and cultural interest in France. Henry's reign saw the production and wide dissemination of numerous literary and historical works that proved foundational for British literature, especially the development of the Arthurian legend.

Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History*, completed around 1139, offers an account of the history of the realm going back to its mythical Trojan founder, Brutus (from whom the name Britain supposedly derived), and provided the foundation for the Arthurian stories of the later Middle Ages. Henry II, the descendant of Normans who, like the mythical British under Arthur, had battled the Saxons for control of Britain, was only the first in a long line of kings to find this legend, with its potential to offer an authoritative and legitimizing history, an appealing subject; Arthur's imperial ambi-tions, as told in this version of the tale, also offered a supposed historical precedent for English claims to rule on the continent.[1] Geoffrey's *History* was popular throughout Europe, however, and in the British Isles alone was translated into Middle Welsh, Anglo-Norman, and Middle English. The Anglo-Norman version *Brut*, by the poet Wace, was dedicated to Henry's queen, Eleanor of Aquitaine, a further sug-gestion of the story's royal allure. Later in the century, French authors—most notably Chrétien de Troyes (c. 1150–90)—inserted into the legendary history of Arthur episodes that focused on the individual achievements of knights and on romantic (sometimes adulterous) love, creating a considerably greater role for female characters. Their works took their name from the language in which they were written, *roman* as opposed to Latin (French, from which we derive the modern literary term *romance* as well as the name for the *romance* languages), a choice that reflected the growing audience for vernacular poetry in the European courts.

A form closely related to the romance, and also written in the vernacular, was the Breton lay, a short narrative with, usually, a significant element of the marvelous and a central emphasis on a romantic relationship rather than large-scale political or military events. The lays' emphasis on the supernatural, which is often attributed to their origin in the Celtic culture of Brittany, is reminiscent at times of the early-twelfth-century prose tales of the *Mabinogi* from medieval Wales—which also, however, show notable chivalric and courtly features. By far the most famous medieval lays are those by an Anglo-Norman author who calls herself simply "Marie" and who apparently wrote in England in Henry's time; her twelve short tales—two of which are set in the world of Arthurian legend—offer a particularly careful attention to women's role in the conflicts of loyalty that often characterize romance narratives, and are one of the relatively few medieval works by a named female author, though the Marie who wrote the lays is usually identified with the "Marie de France" who composed a collection of fables and an account of a knight's visionary journey to purgatory. Romance and the lays took some time to make their way into English; Layamon translated Wace's *Brut* into English around the turn of the thirteenth century, but most Middle English romances date from the late-thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, probably reflecting the linguistic tendencies of their primary audience, the French-speaking nobility, before the fourteenth century.

As had happened centuries earlier in the wake of Alfred's rule, royal authority was scaled back under Henry's successors, who included two of his sons: first Richard I (the Lionheart), who ruled from 1189 to 1199, and then John, who ruled until 1216. In order to raise money in his struggle against Phillip II of France for territory on the continent, John imposed extra-ordinary taxes on English barons and other nobles; the

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[1] Although the Normans may have liked to associate themselves with the British side in the Arthurian legends, Welsh poets of the time, whose culture was the more direct descendant of the early British, cast the Normans in the role of the despised English.

barons rebelled and forced the king to sign a document setting out the rights and obligations both of the nobles and of the king himself, and making explicit that the king was not to contravene these customary arrangements without consulting the barons. The document also reaffirmed the freedom of the English church, particularly the freedom from royal interference in the election of bishops or other officeholders. Under this "great charter" or Magna Carta, the power of the king was for the first time limited by the terms of a written document.

THE THIRTEENTH CENTURY

1215 was a momentous year in medieval Europe. In addition to the signing of Magna Carta—whose ultimately far-reaching effects were at the time felt only in England—this year witnessed the Fourth Lateran Council, a major gathering of church leaders under the guidance of the energetic Pope Innocent III. Lateran IV represented an extraordinarily far-reaching attempt to unify Christian practice and raise standards of Christian observance. The Canons of the Council covered almost all aspects of Christian life, and their effects on both religious practice and religious instruction resounded through the rest of the Middle Ages. Christians from now on were required to confess their sins formally and receive Communion at least once a year, and the sacrament of the altar was officially declared to involve transubstantiation, meaning that the body and blood of Christ were actually present in, rather than merely represented by, the bread and wine consecrated at the Mass (a doctrine that became a matter of serious dispute, however, in later medieval England). A new network of regulation was put into place to govern marriages, with secret marriages prohibited and marriage itself declared a sacrament.

Associated with the increased emphasis on the importance of priests administering sacraments to the faithful were increased efforts to ensure that members of the clergy were educated and competent; one of the canons involved the maintenance of cathedral schools free to clerics. Bishops were required to preach in their dioceses or ensure that there were others who could do so in their stead, and clergy were forcefully reminded of the requirement of clerical celibacy. Individual Christians, for their part, were expected to be able to recite a small number of prayers, but there was no thought of encouraging widespread education of a sort that would enable the populace to read the word of God on their own. On the contrary, it was considered important to keep the Bible at a remove from the common people so that it could be safely interpreted to them through church intermediaries. The controversy that later developed over this issue would extend over several centuries and become a crucial concern for the Lollard or Wycliffite sect in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century England, as well as central distinguishing point between the Roman Catholic Church and the various Protestant faiths in the Reformation.

As this suggests, the reforms of the Fourth Lateran Council aimed to strengthen the Christian community, but with this came a new emphasis on differentiating, excluding, and penalizing unorthodox believers and non-Christians. The canons include extensive commentary on the need to control and excommunicate heretics; they require Jews and "Saracens" (Muslims) to wear distinctive clothing lest they be mistaken for Christians; they prohibit Jews from holding public office and make provisions to encourage crusading against Muslim control of the Holy Land. The English joined wholeheartedly in the Crusades and the restrictions placed on Jews. There had been massacres of Jews, particularly at York, already in the late twelfth century; expulsions from various cities by the local lords became widespread as early as the 1230s; and in 1290 Edward I expelled all Jews from England. It is not surprising, in view of this, that anti-Jewish miracle stories became popular across Europe during this period; Chaucer's *Prioress's Tale* is a later example of this genre. Heresy remained a concern throughout Europe, although in this period the persecutions were more severe in France and other parts of the continent than in England.

The Fourth Lateran Council was in part a response to increased lay devotion and interest in religion, which offered a challenge to the sometimes inadequate pastoral care provided by the clergy. In the early thirteenth century, for example, the records of the Bishop of Winchester show numerous priests being forced to declare that they will learn the Creed, the Ten

Commandments, the Seven Deadly Sins, and various other basic Christian doctrines within the space of a year, or pay a fine of forty shillings, a far from unusual instance that suggests that their preparation was not all that could have been wished. We may note, however, that some of the greatest works of Middle English religious literature survive in a closely related group of texts from around this same time: the *Ancrene Riwle* (Rule for Anchoresses) and the saints' lives and other spiritual-guidance texts that accompany it in the manuscripts testify to the presence of learned and committed religious men and women in early thirteenth-century England.

The new religious movements that arose in the course of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries— movements often instigated by the laity—were in some cases accepted by the church, though others were declared heretical; the growth in such movements was so great that the Council decreed that no new religious orders could be instituted after 1215, a decree that was largely observed. Among the new groups, the most significant, particularly for literary history, were the fraternal orders or friars (terms that derive from the Latin and French words for "brother"): the Augustinian hermits, Carmelites, and, especially, Dominicans and Franciscans. Like the monks of the early church, the members of these new movements embraced poverty and learning. Unlike previous monks of any era, however, they devoted themselves to carrying religion directly to the people, rather than living an enclosed life; their aim was to pursue the "vita apostolica," the way of life of the Apostles. Founded in the first part of the thirteenth century, they spread with great rapidity, and had a substantial presence in the British Isles by around 1250.

The friars' considerable success and speedy growth derived in no small part from their practice of preaching and establishing foundations in urban centers. The tremendous growth in the European economy from the eleventh century onward had fostered the development of ever-larger towns and cities that made possible an increasing specialization of labor that is reflected in the rise of craft guilds and, in another sense, in the friars themselves. The religious and civic cultures that each represented were deeply entwined. Guilds, which by this time were at the center of civic life, had patron saints

and made religious fellowship a central part of their collective identities; their later sponsorship of the great cycle plays of the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries was a natural outgrowth of this melding. And although St Francis, the founder of the Franciscans, had entirely rejected his merchant background upon his conversion, the preachers of his order and the others found the towns, with their concentrated populations and alleged moral turpitude, an ideal place for their work.

Builders at work. Detail of illustration to Matthew Paris, *Historia Major* (c. 1240).

Matthew Paris, a monk at the famous Benedictine Abbey of St. Alban's, near London, took over the chronicle kept by his abbey in 1235 and continued it until his death in 1259. He is one of the liveliest sources for all kinds of information on the mid-thirteenth century, and was among those who commented (with some disapproval) on the spread of the friars and, among other things, their extensive building projects as their orders grew ever larger.

In the British Isles as elsewhere, the friars proved popular and controversial in almost equal measure; a fierce critique of them by the Irish bishop Richard FitzRalph (c. 1299–1360) survives in over seventy manuscripts from every part of Europe, and their influence at the University of Paris in the mid-thirteenth century so infuriated the other clerics there that the pope had to intervene. Their preaching was widely admired, however, perhaps especially by lay audiences, and while they quickly became part of the church and university hierarchies, they also claimed a particular affinity for pastoral work. Their mission thus promoted the translation and dissemination of religious teaching among the laity, and their energy in this activity made their writings an important influence on the development of literature in the vernacular languages of Europe, including England. Their emergence and quick expansion both coincided with and furthered the rise of lay involvement in religious life, whether this took the form of pilgrimage, of spiritual reading or writing, of attendance at sermons and church services, or of devotion to saints' cults, particularly that of the Virgin Mary. Nor were the friars the only force for increased religious education; English churchmen were particularly active in their response to the canons of the Fourth Lateran Council, and many works of spiritual instruction for the clergy or the laity, in Latin, Anglo-Norman, or English, attempted to disseminate the basic tenets of the faith. The *Speculum Confessionis* usually attributed to the learned Robert Grosseteste (c. 1170–1253), bishop of Lincoln, is one example of the new works that responded to the requirement of yearly confession; another is the Anglo-Norman *Manuel des Pechiez* (c. 1270), the source for Robert Mannyng's *Handlyng Synne* (1303), which aimed to give laypeople the knowledge they needed to live in accordance with Christian teaching. Just as the influence of the French aristocracy after the Norman Conquest brought French language and literature into the realm of English literary history, so the broader emphasis on basic Christian instruction in the thirteenth century and beyond made Latin works and church teachings increasingly available to vernacular audiences.

The growing lay participation in religion is reflected in the growth of certain characteristic literary genres.

The *exemplum,* or illustrative short story, most famously characteristic of medieval sermons, often provided a narrative argument for avoiding particular sins or emulating certain virtues; the closely related form of the *miraculum,* or miracle story, aimed to impress the reader or hearer with a sense of wonder. In the later Middle Ages *exempla* and other short narrative forms were often especially associated with the preaching of the friars, because they were thought to be appealing to laypeople, who might need help with the fine points of doctrine and would find narrative more accessible. These tales were sometimes criticized for being more entertaining than instructive, and indeed are not always very different from the genres of fable or fabliau—the latter being a "funny short story in verse," often dealing with sexual or economic deception and valuing cleverness over morality. Popular in French, fabliaux are essentially non-existent in (written) English until Chaucer, whose *Miller's, Reeve's,* and *Shipman's Tales,* among others, are based on this genre.

Saints' lives, another widely popular literary form, are also one of the oldest genres in English literature; the Old English *Martyrology* of the ninth century is a particularly thorough example, but some of the earliest texts in Middle English are the lives of three virgin martyrs Juliana, Katherine, and Margaret, all dating from the early thirteenth century. Intriguingly, lives of women martyrs of the early church were extremely popular in late-medieval England; Chaucer's *Second Nun's Tale,* which recounts the life of St. Cecilia, is another well-known (later) example. As with the Bible, even texts that do not center on the life or deeds of a saint may invoke the saints or briefly recount their miracles; they were part of the common knowledge of the time, and widely represented in art. Saints were regarded as protectors and intercessors, and the retelling of their lives was part of the effort to promote their cults and gain their assistance; their stories could provide points of contact with the sacred, particularly since they came from many walks of life.

The growing attention to pastoral care further stimulated the need for clerical education, and the worldly duties of the clergy—from the care of souls (including the writing of sermons) to administration of lands or finances—made studies in logic, rhetoric, and

other subjects beyond theology or canon law an important part of their training. At the same time, contact with Arab scholars made both Arabic learning and the writings of classical philosophers—Aristotle most influential among them—newly available in Western Europe. The need to assimilate these traditions and bring them into accord with Christian teaching fostered the development of the scholastic method, or scholasticism, which gathered the evidence of various authorities and worked to synthesize it, usually by means of a debate form, into a single coherent authority. The structure of university study was quite different from its modern descendant, though not unrecognizably so. A student would first study the seven liberal arts, around which higher education was organized throughout the later Middle Ages: grammar, rhetoric, and logic (or dialectic), collectively known as the trivium, and arithmetic, music, astronomy and geometry, called the quadrivium. Students who wished to continue could pursue further studies in theology, medicine, or law—roughly the equivalent of modern graduate schools.

Despite the intellectual flowering of the eleventh to thirteenth centuries, education remained in essence a luxury good for most of the population. Not only laborers, but many of the nobility and even some of the clergy never learned to read, although the widespread practice of reading or reciting aloud—both secular and religious works—and of course of hearing sermons meant that they were not cut off from literate culture. Our own inevitable focus on the written sources that survive should not blind us to the ways in which those who could not themselves read or write still had considerable access to the great narratives and images of their culture.

The English Monarchy

The religious and cultural energy of the thirteenth century in England was not particularly reflected in its monarchs; the period's important political developments tended to arise, as we have seen in the case of John and Magna Carta, from limitations on the king's power rather than, as with William the Conqueror or Henry II, his exercise of that power. The reign of John's son

Henry III (1216–72) was long but not particularly successful; he came to the throne as a child and by the end of his reign his son held effective power. Under his rule the monarchy lost ground to both external and internal forces. The French dauphin Louis controlled the southern part of England upon Henry's accession, but was expelled in 1217; later in the century, however, Henry had to sell most of his French possessions to pay war debts, and the English barons continually challenged the king's authority, culminating in his effective deposition in 1264–65 by the forces led by the baron Simon de Montfort, who as regent convened a kind of proto-Parliament. Simon's death in 1265 at the hands of Henry's troops made him a martyr to many of the English, and both praise-poems and laments in his honor survive from the period. The most significant legacy of the barons' increased power was the consolidation of the principle of the king's limited rulership and the idea that the people of the realm (primarily the nobility) should take some part in its governance. The losses of French territory had contributed to a growing tendency for the ruling inhabitants of England to regard themselves as *English* (rather than Norman, Angevin, French, and so on); the broader participation in government in the course of the century may have solidified this tendency. By the early fourteenth century language could be seen as a unifying force in the nation: "both the learned and unlearned man who were born in England can understand English," asserts one commentator of the period.

Henry's son Edward I, a much more successful ruler than his father, managed to mend the relationship between monarchy and people, in part by strengthening administrative structures related to law (Chancery), finances (the Exchequer), and governance (the Council); in this he built on the legacy of Henry II and the achievements of the baronial challenge, and the meetings of his Council were the first to bear the name of Parliaments. He also conquered Wales, which never fully regained its independence, although resistance to English rule continued. Like other English monarchs, however, he was unable to gain much control over Ireland, and despite diplomatic and military attempts, he never managed to conquer Scotland, which remained officially independent of England until the eighteenth

century. A significant outcome of the ongoing English-Scots conflict was the growth of a sense of national identity among the Scots at least as marked as that among the English; we see this in the declaration of Arbroath (1320), sent to the pope by the nobles of Scotland as a group, in which they declared that they were speaking for "the community of the realm" and that "for so long as one hundred men remain alive, we shall never under any conditions submit to the domination of the English." Edward's attempts to subdue Scotland demonstrated once more the political usefulness of legendary history: in putting forward the English claim on Scottish territory, he made reference to the historical assertions of Layamon's *Brut*, the Middle English translation of the legends gathered in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*.

The strong, if sometimes brutal, kingship of Edward I contrasts sharply with the troubled rule of his son Edward II (1307–27), who was frequently at odds with his nobles and eventually was deposed by his French queen, Isabella, and her lover, Roger Mortimer, an English baron. Edward was succeeded by his son Edward III (1327–77), whose long reign provided a certain stability but involved considerable losses for England. Edward III forcefully reasserted his claims to French territory through his French mother, and began the long-lasting conflict that came to be known as the Hundred Years' War (1337–1453). This conflict displayed the ongoing contradictoriness of medieval English attitudes toward France: Edward's embrace of a French-derived chivalric culture and claim to the French throne tended to link the nobility of both countries, who exchanged hostages and diplomatic missions, while at the same time the battles provided a focus for anti-French sentiment as old as the Norman Conquest and for renewed claims for English as a valued national language. This was not, of course, a sudden development; already in the thirteenth century a writer could assert that "common men know no French, among a hundred scarcely one," and similar claims become increasingly common in the fourteenth century. Despite considerable early success in the war, meanwhile, England's French holdings dwindled almost to nothing by the time of Edward III's death, and his continuing demand for funds to pursue his military projects put considerable strain on the economy, already weakened by the northern European famine of 1315–18.

Even more significant than the famine was the great plague of 1348–49, the "Black Death," which had a lasting impact on the demography, the economy, and ultimately the culture of Britain and Europe more generally. It is believed that roughly one-third of western Europe's population died in the plague, though not evenly across all areas; the population of London is estimated to have fallen by almost half, from perhaps 70,000 to about 40,000. In the wake of the plague, there was—not surprisingly—a severe labor shortage; this enabled a certain amount of social mobility as people were able to take higher-paying work, and the countryside suffered further depopulation as laborers left for the towns. Some employers competed for scarce labor by improving wages or conditions of labor, but the Statute of Laborers of 1351 officially restricted both wages and labor mobility, a cause of long-standing friction between the working population of England and its large landholders. Some of that tension found violent expression early in the reign of Edward's successor, his grandson Richard II (r. 1377–99) who inherited the throne at the age of only ten; his father, the Black Prince, had died in 1376. Severe taxation and limits on wages imposed in the wake of the Black Death caused considerable distress among the general populace, and helped to spark the Rising of 1381 (at which time the kingdom was still under the regency of John of Gaunt, Richard's uncle), in which groups from all over the country challenged the legislative and fiscal policies of the nobility, although they declared their allegiance to King Richard. While this uprising was easily quelled, it was a tremendous shock to the political and cultural establishment and foreshadowed the struggles for legitimacy that continued throughout the early fifteenth century; it also left behind an unusually rich record of non-nobles' views on the political economy of their day. Beyond the general unrest, Richard's autocratic style and struggles with his nobles for control of the country made the last quarter of the fourteenth century a politically fragile time in England. The king's preference for his own favorites over other, more powerful lords led these "Lords Appellant," as they called themselves, to challenge his authority and, eventually, to succeed in

severely circumscribing his power as well as executing several of his closest advisors in 1388. A major source of the conflict between these lords and the King was Richard's desire to make peace with France; the King did eventually succeed in instituting a truce in 1396 through his marriage to the French princess Isabella (his beloved first wife, Anne of Bohemia, had died in 1394). In his later years he regained much of his control, in part through the help of his uncle John of Gaunt, but became increasingly despotic and took harsh revenge on the lords who had threatened his power. The contest culminated in the usurpation of the throne in 1399 by the Lancastrian Henry Bolingbroke (Henry IV), who had earlier been banished from the kingdom; Henry took advantage of Richard's absence in Ireland, where he was continuing the fruitless attempts to bring it under English control. Richard was later murdered in prison, echoing the fate of his deposed great-grandfather, Edward II.

CULTURAL EXPRESSION IN THE FOURTEENTH CENTURY

Richard's rulership may not have been a great success, but he is known, like Henry II, for his deep interest in artistic and cultural production and for the extraordinary literary output that took place under his reign —which was, unlike Henry's, as likely to be in English as in French. The writers of the period, some of the best-known figures of medieval English literature, include John Gower, Geoffrey Chaucer, the *Gawain*-poet, and William Langland; they are sometimes referred to as the "Ricardian poets" because of their activity under Richard II. While this contemporaneity signals the literary activity of the time, however, their writings by no means reflect a unified literary culture; while there are certainly overlaps and, in the case of Chaucer and Gower, even mutual references between some of their works, the main thing they have in common apart from historical era is that they all wrote in English. As this introduction has tried to suggest, this in itself is a striking fact; only at the end of the fourteenth century do we begin to see the major works of later-medieval English literature participating, often deliberately, in the project of making English a literary language worthy to take its place alongside Latin and the illustrious continental vernaculars, particularly French and Italian, and raising it to a position of renewed prominence and respect in its native country after a perceived period of neglect. At the same time, these authors were anything but removed from non-English influences. Gower composed works in Latin and French as well as English; Chaucer translated French and Italian works, and borrowings from continental and Latin traditions shape all his poetry; Langland's *Piers Plowman* contains numerous lines in Latin and is strongly influenced by monastic Latin literary forms, while its use of personification allegory echoes a popular pan-European mode also seen in the hugely influential French *Romance of the Rose*; in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the legendary history of Arthur is blended with borrowings from Celtic sources and Christian chivalric culture.

This brings us to an important point about medieval writers—one that applies to all the works in this volume, but that is usefully demonstrated by the Ricardian poets: they did not regard originality in the modern sense as an essential component of a literary work's value. While a medieval poet or preacher or chronicler certainly aimed to tell his story or convey his message in the best possible way, he or she would willingly draw on, borrow from, translate, compile, and rework previous authors or storytellers. (The same could, of course, be said of Shakespeare.) Indeed, a link to authoritative sources—which could be written or oral—is often a crucial component of a medieval composition's own claims to authority. The increasing availability of Latin works, through preaching or written translation into the vernacular, or French ones, through performance or translation into English, along with Welsh, Breton, and Irish story material and works in other continental vernaculars, thus provided a rich trove from which Middle English authors constructed their writings.

The tendency of the "big four" Ricardian poets to draw all the attention in the fourteenth century can overshadow their debts to, and continuity with, the century that preceded them. *Sir Gawain* is part of a substantial tradition of Middle English romance—Arthurian and other—that includes *Sir Orfeo*, *Sir Launfal*, and the *Alliterative* and *Stanzaic Morte Arthure*, among many others. These vary in form but show the tendency of romance, too, to draw on a wide range of

traditions for its subject matter. The lay *Sir Orfeo*, for example, reworks the story of Orpheus and Eurydice into a form with both Celtic and chivalric aspects: the classical underworld of Hades becomes a fairy land ruled by a powerful lord. The *Alliterative* and the *Stanzaic Morte Arthure*, meanwhile, each recount the fall of Arthur's kingdom, but with very different emphases—the Alliterative *Morte* sees imperial ambition and family treachery as essential elements, while the *Stanzaic* focuses on the adulterous love of Lancelot and Guinevere and the clash of blood brotherhood with the fraternal ties of the Round Table. Chaucer mocks traditional romance forms in his parodic *Tale of Sir Thopas* from the *Canterbury Tales*, and was all too aware of the challenges posed to idealized chivalry by the military realities of the fourteenth century. But as a member of the royal court, he could appreciate the virtues of what has rightly been called "the principal secular literature of entertainment" of the later Middle Ages, and the appeal to an idealized past or a magic-laden landscape, the conflicts of loyalties or contests for love that characterize many romances help to structure works as otherwise diverse as the *Franklin's, Wife of Bath's, Knight's* and *Merchant's Tales*.

Religious belief and practice are another crucial context for much late-fourteenth-century writing. Early in the century, the poet and canon Robert Mannyng (fl. 1288–1338) translated a handbook on basic Christian teachings from Anglo-Norman to English, titling it *Handlyng Synne* (1303) and illustrating it lavishly with *exempla*; the work indicates the growing audience for such spiritual "self-help" works in the English vernacular, and it has been suggested as a possible influence on many later works, including Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, and Langland's *Piers Plowman*. Whether or not Mannyng's work formed part of their background, they were all able to draw on extensive knowledge of biblical material and Christian history, as well as on the wealth of exemplary narratives that characterized many works designed for religious instruction in the vernacular.

The late fourteenth century also sees the first records of the biblical drama of late medieval England. Though little is certain regarding the origins of such drama, we do know that in the late fourteenth century substantial groups of plays presenting biblical subject matter began to be performed in several English towns, often in conjunction with festival days of late spring or summer such as Whitsun ("White Sunday," or Pentecost, the seventh Sunday after Easter) and the Feast of Corpus Christi (a celebration of the Eucharist, held eleven days later); such plays continued to be performed until their suppression in the late sixteenth century. We know too that the presentation of the plays (which have variously been termed "miracle plays," "mystery plays," and "cycle plays"—designations that are all problematic in one way or another as blanket terms) varied. The texts that survive from the northern towns of York and Chester consist of more-or-less unified sequences of short plays—often called "pageants," like the wagons in which they were performed—that present the full sweep of biblical history. The sequence of plays from Coventry is in some respects similar, but includes only New Testament material. Two much more disparate manuscript collections of plays exist, known as "the N-Town plays" and "the Towneley plays." No firm evidence suggests that either group of plays was ever performed as a sequence—or, indeed, that there was ever any intention to perform the collected plays as a sequence. The N-Town collection contains what was once a separate play on the childhood of Mary as well as a two-part Passion Play. The Towneley collection is of particular interest for a small group of remarkable plays traditionally ascribed to the "Wakefield Master." (Three of these plays contain textual allusions to the area of Wakefield.)

Individual biblical plays, particularly in the northern sequences, were generally produced by particular craft guilds, representing a large outlay of time and money; in addition to providing religious instruction and entertainment, the plays reflected and emphasized the guilds' central importance to civic life at this time, as well as the growth of lay power in the governance of many towns. But production of biblical drama was not restricted to annual guild-sponsored performances in towns; some plays were produced by local parishes and some plays performed in the halls of great houses, often by troupes of traveling players.

The scope of late medieval English drama is similarly diverse. The body of surviving religious drama deriving from some other areas, such as East Anglia, includes not

only biblical plays but also a large number of plays depicting the lives of saints or the performance of miracles. Passion plays and Christmas plays were also frequently performed in the late medieval period, as were interludes (typically, short comic sketches, intended for performance at court); mummings (dumb shows with masked performers); folk plays (featuring music and dance as well as dialogue, typically depicting the death and revival of a legendary hero); and Robin Hood plays.

A fifteenth- and sixteenth-century form that has attracted particular interest is the genre conventionally referred to as the "morality play." Plays in this genre (such as *Mankind* and *The Castle of Perseverance*) depict in allegorical form the struggles of a universal human figure; vices and virtues are personified as characters and participate fully in the action of the play. Morality plays were clearly intended to encourage devout individuals to consider their own moral position and to maintain a keen awareness of the state of their souls. But morality plays could also offer a broad range of entertainment —as the humor and energy of *Mankind* amply demonstrate.

The continuing growth of lay participation in spiritual matters that we see reflected in a work like *Handlyng Synne* or in the biblical dramas became, in other contexts, one of the most contentious issues in fourteenth and fifteenth century England. The critiques of the clergy, and particularly of monks and friars, that had accompanied eccesiastical reform movements from the tenth century onward were strongly endorsed in the works of the Oxford theologian John Wyclif (c. 1324-84). In the course of a long and influential writing career, he attacked the church for its enormous wealth and criticized clerics for their moral failings, questioned the doctrine of transubstantiation, and moved toward a view that all laypeople should have direct access to the Bible and could communicate directly with God, needing no priestly intermediation (although he was in many cases sympathetic to parish priests). His views, some of which were declared heretical by the Archbishop of Canterbury's council in 1382, were nonetheless widely shared, including by some of the nobility at Richard II's court. Wyclif provided much of the intellectual foundation for the English sect known as Wycliffites or Lollards, and had an enormous influence on the religious, literary, and political culture of late-medieval England. Many of the issues that aroused his wrath are addressed also in Langland's *Piers Plowman*, a text highly critical of clerical and ecclesiastical shortcomings, although unlike the writings of Wyclif and his followers it was not generally regarded as heretical.

Yet another aspect of fourteenth-century spirituality is evident in the *Showings* of the anchoress Julian of Norwich, one of the most important visionary texts of the Middle Ages. Julian's theologically complex and deeply learned account of her experience forms part of both a long tradition of women's visionary literature in medieval Europe (going back at least to the twelfth-century German abbess Hildegard of Bingen) and of a flowering of vernacular religious writing in late fourteenth-century England that also includes authors like Richard Rolle and Walter Hilton. And to set Julian's image of the created world as a hazelnut in the palm of God's hand alongside *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*'s richly detailed hunting scenes or the mysterious John Mandeville's accounts of satyrs, the phoenix, and the exotic kingdoms of the east is to be reminded of the enormous diversity of the literature of late-medieval England. As we noted at the beginning of this introduction, moreover, medieval manuscripts would in many cases have kept this diversity immediately present to readers, recording texts of very different genre alongside one another: saints' lives with confessional manuals, fabliaux with satirical poetry, romances with recipes. Such compilations are reflected in miniature, as it were, by "compilation poems" like the *Canterbury Tales*, which place stories from varied genres and traditions within a unifying frame, or *Piers Plowman*, which blends social critique, personification allegory, and anticlerical satire into a visionary autobiography.

FIFTEENTH-CENTURY TRANSITIONS

Writers in fifteenth-century England were deeply aware of the rich and authoritative literary tradition that immediately preceded them, drawing on and praising the works of their predecessors even as they devised a distinctive tradition of their own. In political and religious terms as well, the fifteenth century reaped the

whirlwind of the late fourteenth, beginning with a crisis of royal authority as the "usurper" Henry IV tried to solidify his claims to the throne and to contain a major nationalist rebellion in Wales led by Owain Glyndwr (Owen Glendower). Religious legitimacy was also at issue, as ongoing Wycliffite (or Lollard) challenges to current church practices caused aggressive responses on the part of the ecclesiastical and secular hierarchies—most notably the royal decree *De heretico comburendo* of 1401, ordering that recalcitrant heretics were to be burnt at the stake (the first institution of such punishment in England), and the famous *Constitutions* (1407–09) of Thomas Arundel, Archbishop of Canterbury, which declared that the making or owning of Bibles in English was forbidden and set strict limits on acceptable religious composition in the vernacular. William Thorpe's testimony during his trial for heresy before Archbishop Arundel, an excerpt from which appears on the website to this volume, demonstrates the depth of commitment and the high level of religious understanding that the Lollards brought to this struggle, which both sides regarded as a matter of eternal life and death as well as immediate political importance. The religious and political threats came together in the short-lived rebellion led by Sir John Oldcastle in 1413, in which he and other Londoners tried to depose the new King Henry V; the fact that Oldcastle had at this time already been convicted of heresy (as a Lollard) solidified the link many secular and church lords made between religious and worldly sedition. While Henry V's military success in France—most famously at the battle of Agincourt in 1415—and his strength as a ruler eased some of the strain, anxiety about the monarchy's legitimacy and about composition in the vernacular are evident in much of the literary production of the century.

One of the modes in which these anxieties were expressed, however, was an outpouring of carefully orthodox religious literature in English, often in forms such as saints' lives, visionary narratives, or meditations on the life of the Virgin or on Christ's Passion. The great religious foundations of Henry V, Sheen Charterhouse and Syon Abbey, were important centers for both the dissemination of fourteenth-century writings and the creation of new works (many of which were translations from Latin or French); when Henry VI came to the throne after his father's early death, his own devout tendencies reinforced the link between the Lancastrian court and monastic spirituality. Religious devotion was far from limited to the elite, however; probably the most famous English text of the first half of the fifteenth century is the *Book of Margery Kempe*, composed by a laywoman living in the world as an account of her spiritual experiences, visions, pilgrimages, and trials for heresy. Margery's frequent conversations with divine and saintly personages show her to be simultaneously extraordinary in and typical of her time; fifteenth-century devotion, particularly in the vernacular, often emphasized emotional connection to and a sense of familiarity with the figures of salvation history.

The intense spirituality of figures such as Margery Kempe contrasts sharply in tone with many of the historical events of the later part of the century. The civil war between the Lancastrian and Yorkist factions—known to us as the Wars of the Roses from the two groups' emblems—pitted descendants of Edward III against one another as claimants to the throne. Begun under the weak kingship of Henry VI, who was deposed by the Yorkist faction in 1460, returned briefly to the throne in 1470, and was executed in 1471, the struggle went on until 1485 when Henry Tudor, a Lancastrian descendant (on his mother's side) of Edward III, defeated Richard III of the house of York and united the warring houses by marrying Elizabeth, daughter of the Yorkist king Edward IV (1461–70, 1471–83). Henry's direct descent, on his father's side, from the twelfth-century Welsh prince Rhys made his rulership the apparent fulfillment of longstanding Welsh prophecies that a Briton would rule England once more.

The chaos and disillusionment that attended the period of civil war echo through the *Morte Darthur* of Thomas Malory, who drew on Middle English and French works to create his massive cycle of Arthurian romances. This text, a kind of summation of the Arthurian obsessions of later-medieval England, became one of the first printed books in England when William Caxton published it in 1485. In his preface, Caxton—who gave Malory's work the title by which we know it—described the *Morte Darthur* as recounting "noble chivalry, courtesy, humanity, friendliness, hardiness,

love, friendship, cowardice, murder, hate, virtue and sin," a catalogue whose ending echoes the often dark tone of Malory's work. The *Morte Darthur* seems to reflect and perhaps comment upon the decline of the chivalric world that Malory, a knight who apparently fought on both sides in the Wars of the Roses, would have known well, and its account of the competing loyalties that eventually destroy Arthur and his kingdom would surely have resonated with contemporary events.

The printing of Malory's work by Caxton was only one small piece of the latter's enormous output. Between about 1475 and his death in 1491, he published almost a hundred different works, many of them his own translations; the most famous of the latter is his *Golden Legend*, an English version of a monumentally influential thirteenth-century Latin compendium of saints' lives. He is probably best known, however, for his awareness of and influence on the canon of British literature; works by Chaucer, Lydgate and Gower were among his most important productions, with Malory joining them not long after. His attention to the ever-growing market for vernacular literature and his admiration of the great authors of the past made his professional life one of the great shaping forces on the development of the British tradition, as well as, of course, the instrument of England's entry into the world of printed books. Caxton's (numerous) early readers included members of the Paston family, a wealthy Norfolk clan. Their extensive surviving letters, which range in date from 1422 to 1529, deal not with legendary heroism or magical encounters, but with the minutiae of everyday
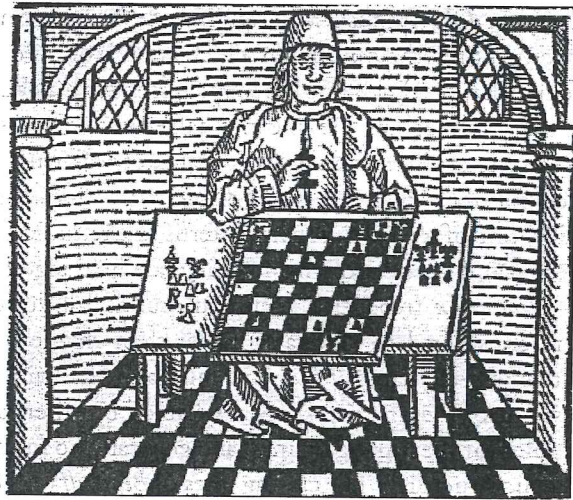

Table of contents and woodcut illustration from *The Game and Play of Chesse*, printed by William Caxton (2nd edition 1481).

life: bills, quarrels with neighbors, marriages, deaths, political gossip. Like the Tudor dynasty, the civic dramas, and the early print culture of England, they carry us forward into the sixteenth century, and offer a glimpse of the kinds of everyday events and concerns that formed the original contexts for all the works presented here.

Advertisement issued by William Caxton (c. 1477).

LANGUAGE AND PROSODY

Old English is sufficiently distant from modern English that it must be studied and learned as a different language; for this reason works in Old English in this anthology are presented in modern English translation (though a few passages in Old English are provided). All

poetry in Old English had roughly the same formal structure, only the outlines of which are reproduced in the translations. Each line has four stresses, with a pause (or *caesura*) breaking the line into halves of two stresses each. The verse is *accentual* rather than metrical, with no fixed number of unstressed syllables in a line; lines follow one of several different patterns of alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables. Lines are held together by *alliteration* (repetition of initial sounds; all vowels were considered to alliterate) rather than rhyme; the third stressed syllable of each line must alliterate with at least one of the first two stressed syllables, but there are no rules for the linking of lines, and generally no formal stanzaic structures. The closing lines of *Beowulf* (3178–82) illustrate these principles; stressed syllables are in bold type, and alliterating syllables are underlined (the letters þ and ð are pronounced like the *th* in *thin* and *then*; æ is pronounced like *a* in *hat*; diphthongs are one sound, but final *-e* is pronounced, so that the half-line *Geat-a leod-e* has four syllables):

Swa be**gnor**nodon   <u>**Geat**</u>a **leo**de
so lamented   the Geatish people

<u>**hla**</u>fordes <u>**hry**</u>re,   **heor**ð-**gen**eatas,
the lord's downfall, hearth-companions,

cwædon þæt he <u>**wæ**</u>re   <u>**wy**</u>ruld-**cyn**inga
said that he was   of world-kings

manna <u>**mil**</u>dust   ond <u>**mon**</u>-ð**wæ**rust,
of men the mildest   and most gentle,

leodum <u>**lið**</u>ost ond <u>**lof**</u>-**georn**ost.
to people the kindest, and most eager for fame.

The linguistic beginnings of the transition to Middle English predate the Norman invasion of 1066, but the changes in the language are seldom manifest in writing before the twelfth century. Among the latest surviving works deemed by scholars to have been written in Old English are a section of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* added in Peterborough around 1154, and some late twelfth-century copies of eleventh-century homilies and gospel translations.

The linguistic changes that characterize the transition from Old to Middle English are as much a reflection of the changing cultural situation of English as they are of changing grammar or phonology. By 1100 the leaders of the church, the government, and the aristocracy (that is, practically anyone who could read or write) either spoke French as a native language or had learned French. The English language survived, however; Norman knights who settled in England married English women, had their children raised by English nurses, and worked with the English-speaking peasants and overseers on their farms. The total number of French speakers in England at any time was relatively small and bilingualism was probably common on all but the highest and lowest levels of society. For almost two centuries, however, this small number of French speakers included all officials, nobles, and high-ranking churchmen in the country. English was by no means the prestige language it had been among the Anglo-Saxons. There was little support for English literature among the literate classes, and no formal system of education or book-production to encourage writing in English; for more than a century after the Conquest, English had no place in the political, intellectual, or economic life of the country.

We may think of this situation as parallel, at least in linguistic terms, to the colonial settlements of India, Africa, and the Caribbean, in which a dominant language-culture influences the subject language-culture and *vice versa*; in such environments, to speak one language or another can be a highly charged and socially conscious act. In the early Middle English period one finds English poetry like *The Owl and the Nightingale* written in the French style (with rhymed meter rather than alliterative stressed lines), expressing French literary values, and borrowing French words and forms. French remained the language of the nobility (and thus of Parliament and the royal courts of law) until the late fourteenth century, and the English language borrowed widely from French as it expanded to deal with a more diverse and complex society, and with the growing literary ambitions of English authors. Both languages, meanwhile, continued to interact in complex ways with the language of unquestioned intellectual prestige, Latin.

The borrowings of French words into the English vocabulary are many, and generally seem to have been culturally motivated; thus, English borrows words for government (*peace, justice, court, judge, sentence* —though *gallows* is an English word) and culture (*noble, dame, gentle, honor, courtesy, polite, manners*). One effect of all this borrowing is that English has a great flexibility in its synonyms; we can express things in several different ways using words from different origins: we can *ask* or *question* someone, and get an *answer* or a *response*, which may make us *glad* or *pleased*, or it may make us *mad* or *angry*, and lead to a *fight* or *dispute* (or even an *altercation*). Often the English and French words for the same thing have come to differ in meaning: it has long been observed, for example, that animals used for meat are called by their English names when they are in the field—*cow, calf, pig, sheep, deer*—and by their French names on the table—*beef, veal, pork, mutton, venison*. This linguistic development reflects the social situation of post-Conquest England, in which the lower-class English raised the animals and the upper-class French ate them; it may also have something to do with the superiority of French over English cooking, which was recognized even a thousand years ago.

Alongside this generous borrowing of vocabulary and literary forms, one of the most important changes in Middle English was the wearing-away of the complex inflectional system of Old English, which had already begun to disappear by the end of the tenth century in some dialects, and the concomitant fixing of word-order into something more like its modern form. Another was the representation of many different regional dialects in written Middle English; Old English had regional varieties, but by far the majority of surviving manuscripts are written in some approximation of the standard West Saxon of the late tenth century. In the absence of a strong educational system teaching a standard for English spelling, regional dialects were much more fully represented in written Middle English. The differences between Old and Middle English can be seen in the following two passages, each translating the opening verses of Psalm 23; the former is from the Old English "Paris Psalter" of the ninth century, the latter from the Wycliffite translation of the Bible in the later

fourteenth century (the same verses from the modern Douay-Rheims Bible, also translated from the Latin Vulgate, appear after the two passages):

> Drihten me ræt, ne byð me nanes godes wan, and he me geset on swyðe good feohland. And fedde me be wætera staðum, and min mod gehwyrfde of unrotnesse on gefean. He me gelædde ofer þa wegas rihtwisnesse, for his naman.

> The Lord gouerneth me, and no thing schal faile to me; in the place of pasture there he hath set me. He nurschide me on the watir of refreischyng; he conuertide my soule. He ledde me forth on the pathis of rigtfulnesse; for his name.

> *The LORD ruleth me; and I shall want nothing. He hath set me in a place of pasture: he hath brought me up, on the water of refreshment. He hath converted my soul. He hath led me on the paths of justice, for his own name's sake.*

Even in these few lines the differences are notable: considerable developments in vocabulary (*Drihten > Lord, ræt > gouerneth, feohland > the place of pasture, mod > soule, gehwyrfde > conuertide, wegas > pathis*), changes in word order (*Drihten me ræt > The Lord gouerneth me, he me geset > he hath set me, min mod gehwyrfde > he conuertide my soule*) and the erosion of inflectional endings (*be wætera staðum > on the watir of refreischyng, for his naman > for his name*) all indicate the movement of English towards its present state. The Middle English passage is nearly identical to the early Modern English of the Douay-Rheims version. To understand something of the dialect diversity in written Middle English, however, one should compare the Wycliffe version to the same passage in two other Middle English texts, the *West Midlands Psalter* and the Yorkshire version of Richard Rolle, both written around the middle of the fourteenth century:

> (*West Midlands Psalter*) Our Lord gouerneþ me, and noþyng shal defailen to me; in þe stede of pasture he sett me þer. He norissed me vp water of fyllyng; he turned my soule fram þe fende. He lad me vp þe bistiges of rigtfulnes for his name.

(*Richard Rolle Psalter*) Lord gouerns me and naþyng
sall me want; in sted of pasture þare he me sett. On
þe watere of rehetynge forþ he me broght; my saule
he turnyd. He led me on þe stretis of rightwisnes;
for his name.

By the end of the thirteenth century English began to
appear once again as a language of official documents
and public occasions. In 1337 a lawyer addressed the
Parliament in English for the first time, as a chronicle
says, "so that he might be better understood by all"; in
1362 Parliament ordered all lawsuits to be conducted in
English. There is some indication that at the beginning
of the fourteenth century the nobility had to be taught
French—the language still held prestige, but it was by
no means the native tongue of those born on English
soil. Not surprisingly, it is in the same period, the
fourteenth century, that English literary output becomes
significant again, but the language that emerged was
strongly altered by two centuries of 'underground'
existence and the shaping pressure from the dominant
French language and literary culture. It is thought that
the use of alliterative verse in the Old English style may
have persisted through the twelfth and thirteenth
centuries, though evidence of this is scarce and
ambiguous. In the fourteenth century alliterative verse
reappears in written form throughout much of England,
and is used for subjects as varied as Arthurian legendary
history (the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*), Christian dream
vision (*Pearl*), and satiric commentary (Langland's *Piers
Plowman*), among others. Rhymed, metrical, non-
alliterative poetry like that of Chaucer and Gower was
largely inspired by French traditions.

The literary flowering of the second half of the
fourteenth century was by no means restricted to one
region. Chaucer wrote in the dialect of London and the
east Midlands which, more than any other, is the
ancestor of modern English; the author of *Sir Gawain
and the Green Knight*, on the other hand, wrote in a
dialect of the northwest midlands. As Chaucer himself
put it, there was great "diversitee in English and in
writing of our tonge." With the coming of the printing
press in the fifteenth century, however, the printed
language began to take on more and more common
characteristics, though it would be not until the late

eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that grammar,
spelling, and punctuation were standardized.

In reading Old and Middle English (in whatever
dialect) it is important to be aware of the major ways in
which the language differs from our own. For any
historical period of English the reconstruction of
pronunciation is only approximate, but a careful study
of sound changes, spelling, cognate languages and word
histories allows scholars to make highly educated guesses
about the way Old and Middle English sounded. Old
English used some letters not found in the Latin
alphabet, including [*thorn* (þ), *eth* (ð], and *yogh* (ȝ); the
first two survived into Middle English, where thorn
gradually came to be written much like the letter *y*
(giving rise to the common misreading of 'ye' for 'the'
in faux-antique signs like 'yᵉ olde shoppe'). Some Old
English consonant clusters were pronounced in unusual
ways; *sc* was pronounced like *sh* and *cg* like *dg*, so that
OE *scip* and *ecg* sounded much like their modern
descendants *ship* and *edge*. The consonants *c* and *g* were
pronounced differently depending on their position in
a word; the Old English words *gold* and *camb* were
pronounced much as in Modern English *gold* and *comb*,
but *geat* was pronounced with a *y* as if it were roughly
yat, and *ciric* was pronounced with *ch* sounds as in its
modern descendent *church*.

One way in which Old and Middle English are
dramatically different from Modern English is in
sounding all consonants, including those in combina-
tions such as *kn, gn, lk,* and *wr* that have become largely
or entirely silent in modern English. The word
"knight," for example, is pronounced something like "k-
ni*cht*" (with the *i* short). Final unstressed *e* in words is
always sounded in Old English, and sounded far more
frequently in Middle English than is the case in modern
English—though during the late medieval period the
sounding of the final *e* was beginning to die out, and
scholars continue to dispute how frequently the final *e*
should be sounded in Chaucerian English. Vowels are
pronounced roughly as in French or Spanish —the
modern English values are the result of a "Great Vowel
Shift" which began in the fifteenth century. The long *a*
in words such as "made," for example, was pronounced
like the *a* in "father"; the long *e* in words such as
"sweete" was sounded like the *a* in "mate"; the long *i* (or

y) in words such as "lif" and "myn" was pronounced in the same way we sound the *i* in "machine"; the long *o* in words such as "do" and "spoon" was sounded as we pronounce the *o* in "note"; and the long *u* (or *ou* or *ow*) in words such as "flowr" was sounded as we would pronounce the *oo* in "boot."

While Middle English is far less inflected than Old English, meaning that fewer grammatical differences are signaled in the form of words, matters are, as noted above, complicated by dialect. Third person singular formations of verbs, for example, tend to end in *-s* or *-ys* in northern dialects, and in *-th* or *-ith* (later *-eth*) in southern dialects. "She has" is thus a form deriving from northern Middle English dialects, and "she hath" from southern English forms (cf. Richard Rolle's "Lord gouerns me" where the Wycliffite version has "The Lord gouerneth me"). When the sheep thief Mak in *The Second Shepherds' Play* pretends to be from southern England he says "ich be" instead of "I am" as northerners then (and all English speakers nowadays) would say. Word order in Middle English is often substantially different from modern practice, with the verb often coming later in the sentence than is our custom in statements, but coming at the beginning at the sentence in questions, as is the practice in many Romance languages. Many Middle English words are of course unfamiliar to the modern reader, but there are also many "false friends"—words that look identical or very similar to modern English words but carry significantly different denotations. *Lewd,* which in Old English means "secular, not relating to the clergy," comes in Middle English to mean "unlearned," but without any suggestion of a sexual character. *Sely,* though the ancestor of the modern "silly," can mean "poor," "miserable," or "innocent" as well as "strange" or "foolish." Even at the level of a single word, one might say, we can see the peculiar and provocative mixture of strangeness and familiarity, the haunting family resemblances and the disconcerting dissonances, that make the study of medieval literary culture so compelling and rewarding. We hope that in this collection of works you will come to know its powerful appeal.