

Middle English Period Authors (1066-1485)

The Middle English period spans from the Norman Conquest in 1066 to around 1485. This era saw significant linguistic and cultural changes as Anglo-Norman French influenced the English language. Literature during this period evolved from religious and courtly writings to more diverse forms, including romances, lyrics, and drama. The period culminates with the works of Geoffrey Chaucer, whose writing helped establish English as a literary language.

Geoffrey Chaucer (c. 1340-1400)

Life

Geoffrey Chaucer was born to a wine merchant family in London around 1340. He served in the royal court under King Edward III and King Richard II, holding various positions including diplomat, customs controller, and clerk of the king's works. His travels to France and Italy exposed him to continental literature, which greatly influenced his writing. Chaucer married Philippa Roet, who was connected to John of Gaunt's household, which helped secure his position at court. He died in 1400 and was the first poet to be buried in what is now known as Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey.

Works

- **The Canterbury Tales:** His masterpiece, a collection of stories told by pilgrims traveling to Canterbury Cathedral
- **Troilus and Criseyde:** A tragic love story set during the Trojan War
- **The Book of the Duchess:** An elegy for Blanche, Duchess of Lancaster

- **The House of Fame:** A dream vision poem
- **The Parliament of Fowls:** An allegorical poem about love
- **The Legend of Good Women:** A collection of stories about virtuous women

Contribution to English Literature

- Often called the "Father of English Poetry"
- Established English as a literary language when French and Latin dominated
- Pioneered the use of iambic pentameter, which became the standard meter in English poetry
- Developed realistic, psychologically complex characters
- Combined humor, irony, and social commentary in his works
- Demonstrated the expressive potential of Middle English
- Influenced countless subsequent writers, including Shakespeare

William Langland (c. 1332-1386)

Life

Little is known with certainty about William Langland's life. Scholars believe he was born around 1332 in the West Midlands. Based on autobiographical hints in his work, he appears to have received some education for an ecclesiastical career but never advanced beyond minor orders. He likely lived in London as a freelance writer and may have earned his living by singing masses and copying legal documents.

Works

- **Piers Plowman:** His major work, an allegorical narrative poem that exists in three versions (A, B, and C texts), showing Langland's continuous revision of his work over decades

Contribution to English Literature

- Created one of the most significant works of social criticism in medieval English literature
- Developed allegorical dream vision as a vehicle for social and religious commentary
- Preserved the alliterative verse tradition of Old English poetry
- Provided valuable insights into the religious and social concerns of 14th-century England
- Influenced later religious and political movements, including early Protestant reformers
- Documented the hardships of peasant life and criticized corruption in church and state

John Gower (c. 1330-1408)

Life

John Gower was born to a wealthy landholding family in Yorkshire or Kent around 1330. He was well-educated and became a successful lawyer and landowner in London. Gower was a friend of Geoffrey Chaucer, who dedicated "Troilus and Criseyde" to him. In his later years, Gower became blind and retired to the Priory of St. Mary Overie (now Southwark Cathedral), where he died in 1408.

Works

- **Confessio Amantis** (The Lover's Confession): His major English work, a collection of over 100 stories within a frame narrative
- **Vox Clamantis** (The Voice of One Crying): A Latin poem about the Peasants' Revolt of 1381
- **Mirour de l'Omme** (Mirror of Mankind): A French poem examining human vices and virtues
- **In Praise of Peace**: A poem addressed to King Henry IV

Contribution to English Literature

- Demonstrated remarkable versatility by writing major works in three languages (English, French, and Latin)
- Preserved and transmitted classical and continental stories to English audiences
- Developed the frame narrative technique in English literature
- Combined entertainment with moral instruction
- Provided important social commentary on 14th-century English society
- Served as a bridge between continental and English literary traditions

Julian of Norwich (1343-c. 1416)

Life

Julian of Norwich was born in 1343, likely in Norwich, England. Little is known about her early life, but at age 30, during a severe illness, she experienced a series of visions or "showings" of Christ's Passion. After recovering, she became an anchoress, living in a small cell attached to St. Julian's Church in Norwich (from

which she takes her name, as her birth name is unknown). There she devoted herself to prayer and spiritual counsel, becoming renowned for her wisdom.

Works

- **Revelations of Divine Love:** The first known book in English written by a woman, existing in two versions—a shorter earlier account and a longer, more reflective version written over several decades

Contribution to English Literature

- Pioneered women's writing in English
- Developed a unique theological voice emphasizing God's love rather than judgment
- Created some of the most striking metaphors and images in medieval literature
- Advanced mystical writing in the vernacular
- Influenced Christian theology with her concept that "all shall be well"
- Demonstrated sophisticated philosophical thinking in accessible language
- Provided a rare female perspective on medieval spirituality

Margery Kempe (c. 1373-after 1438)

Life

Margery Kempe was born around 1373 in King's Lynn, Norfolk, to a prosperous merchant family. She married John Kempe at age 20 and had 14 children. After the birth of her first child, she experienced a mental breakdown followed by a religious vision. This began her spiritual journey, which included pilgrimages to Jerusalem, Rome, and Santiago de Compostela. Her emotional religious expressions, including

loud crying in public, often caused controversy. She dictated her life story to scribes, as she was illiterate.

Works

- **The Book of Margery Kempe:** Often considered the first autobiography in English, detailing her spiritual experiences and travels

Contribution to English Literature

- Created the first known autobiography in English literature
- Provided a rare glimpse into the life of a medieval middle-class woman
- Documented religious pilgrimage and devotional practices of the late medieval period
- Challenged gender norms through her public religious expression and independent travel
- Preserved valuable information about daily life, travel, and social attitudes in 15th-century England
- Demonstrated the tensions between institutional religion and personal spiritual experience
- Influenced later autobiographical and confessional writing