

# LECTURES ON EARLY ENGLISH LITERATURE



ROBERT A. ALBANO

LECTURES  
ON  
EARLY  
ENGLISH  
LITERATURE



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**by**

**Robert A. Albano**

**MERCURYE PRESS**

**HUALIEN**

# **LECTURES ON EARLY ENGLISH LITERATURE**

Robert A. Albano

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# **PART I**

## **THE MIDDLE AGES**

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# LECTURE 1

## AN INTRODUCTION TO THE HISTORY AND LITERATURE OF THE MIDDLE AGES

The first question you should ask yourself when you hear the expression **Middle Ages** is “the middle of what?” For many, many years scholars and historians have designated the two great periods of literature, culture, and the arts in Western Civilization as the Classical Age and the Renaissance. The Classical Age marks the period, first in Greece and later in the Roman Empire, when culture flourished. The Renaissance marks the achievement of culture first in Italy and then throughout Western Europe. The time periods for these two great eras are as follows:

<b>Classical Age</b>	500BC to 500AD
<b>Renaissance</b>	1350 to 1660

Well, what about the period in-between? Scholars have unimaginatively and perhaps condescendingly called this period the Middle Ages. It comes in the middle of the Classical Age and Renaissance. One of the reasons for the negative treatment of this time period is that for many years so little was known about it. A second stumbling block, especially in England and France, is that the national languages of the earlier time period were often too **archaic** to be understood easily by later generations.

Today, however, far more is known about the **Middle Ages**, or **Medieval** period (*medieval* means

## The Middle Ages

middle ages); and there is much literature and art from this time period that also deserves to be called great.

In England the Renaissance began much later than the rest of Europe. An easy date to remember that we can use to designate the beginning of the English Renaissance will be 1500. However, we should keep in mind that this date, like those listed above, is an approximation and does not necessarily indicate a precise beginning or ending of any time period.

The Middle Ages in England, then, lasted for about 1000 years, from 500 to 1500 AD. We can further subdivide the English Middle Ages into two periods:

<b>Old English</b>	500 AD to 1100 AD
<b>Middle English</b>	1100 AD to 1500 AD

These divisions are based on changes in language that have occurred in English since 500 AD. In fact, language experts usually divide the English language as falling into three stages: Old English, Middle English, and Modern English. In regards to language change, **Modern English** begins around 1500 because, for the most part, the grammar and vocabulary and pronunciation of English became fixed in a form similar to what we still use today.

### THE OLD ENGLISH PERIOD

Old English, on the other hand, was far different from Modern English and is actually more Germanic in grammar and vocabulary. If we know a little bit about the history of England, we can see why this is so.

From 50 BC to about 450 AD, England was dominated by Rome. There were some native tribes

living in England, such as the Britons, the Picts, and the Scots. These natives spoke in a **Celtic** language, not in English. The Romans introduced the Latin language and Christianity in England, but these Roman features did not survive when the Romans left around 450. At that time Rome was having great difficulties protecting itself against invaders, and they had to recall all of their soldiers to defend the Roman Empire (which, as we all know, would fall).

This left the possession of England back in the hands of the native Celtic tribes, but much fighting occurred among these tribes. Further, one of the Celtic leaders (according to one historical source) made the mistake of asking for help from their neighbors in **Germanic** (Germany) lands. The Germanic tribes came originally to help the Celtic leader, but soon realized that the island of England seemed like an ideal place to settle. With Rome out of the way, England was practically free for the taking.

The names of the Germanic tribes who came to England were the **Angles**, the **Saxons**, the Frisians, the Jutes, and others. The first two were the most predominant. The Germanic warriors eventually overpowered the smaller Celtic forces and settled permanently in England. Today, many English regions are still named after the two largest Germanic tribes: East Anglia, Wessex (West Saxon), Sussex (South Saxon), and Essex (East Saxon).

Eventually, the language of these invaders soon began to replace the Celtic languages as the predominant language of the land; and as this Germanic language grew and developed somewhat differently from what was happening in the German lands, the birth of the English language takes place. This spoken language is

usually named **Anglo-Saxon** after the two Germanic tribes that dominated the region. However, given our historical perspective, we call their language **Old English**.

The language of the original inhabitants, the Celts, still survives today. As the Angles and Saxons took over southern and eastern England, some of the Celts headed west to what is modern Wales today and others headed north to Scotland. The **Welsh** language is one example of the original **Celtic** dialects.

### **THE CHRISTIAN INFLUENCE**

The history (and literature) of England is dominated by a **Christian influence**. But this was not always the case. The Romans had brought Christianity to England with them before 450. However, when the Romans left England, so too did the religion. It was not until the year **597** that the missionary **St. Augustine** came from Rome to convert the pagan tribes of England to Christianity. So successful was the mission of St. Augustine (who should not be confused with the popular 4<sup>th</sup> century philosopher of the same name) that by 700, within a period of approximately 100 years, the majority of people in England had converted to the Catholic faith.

One of the earliest surviving works of literature from England in this early period is the ***Historia Ecclesiastica*** (a religious history of England) written in Latin by a churchman named **Bede**. This religious document from the year **731** is important not only because it reveals the growth and development of Christianity in England but also because it provides the best history of early England for that time period.

### WAR AND CONFLICT

This history of England is also dominated by **conflict**. First there was the conflict between the Romans and the Celtic tribes. Then there were the internal conflicts among the various Celtic tribes after the Romans left. Later there was the conflict between the Celts and the Anglo-Saxons. And once the Celts were pushed aside, there were the internal conflicts among the various Germanic tribes. England was a land of many kingdoms, and the Germanic desire for land continued to be a reason for conflict for many years. During the 9<sup>th</sup> century, the conflicts increased even more: invaders from the Scandinavian countries came to England and realized how easy it would be to take land from a people lacking any sense of unity. These invaders, known as the **Norse** or **Vikings** or **Danes**, came close to conquering all of England. If they had succeeded, there would have been no England and no English language today.

Fortunately, one of the Saxon kings, King Alfred of Wessex, later to be known as **Alfred the Great** (871-899), united England at the end of the 9th century and was able to put up a stiff resistance against the Viking invaders. Eventually, a treaty of peace was established; but the Anglo-Saxons lost about half of England to the Norse invaders. This northern region of England was known as the **Danelaw**. The new settlers spoke the **Norse language**, not Anglo-Saxon. But the Norse settlers soon were on friendly terms with their Anglo-Saxon neighbors, and business and language exchanges soon became commonplace between them. The English language changed as a result of such exchanges, and



even today many Norse words still form a noticeable (but not large) part of the Modern English vocabulary.

Alfred the Great should also be recognized for being a man of learning and letters, and he was, most likely, responsible for establishing one of the most important works of literature in the Old English language: the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. Although many of its entries are sketchy and incomplete, the *Chronicle* is important to modern readers because it reveals many details about the development of the English language as well as documenting many historical facts about England.

One of the best surviving literary works from England during the 10<sup>th</sup> century is the “**Battle of Maldon.**” This short heroic poem is significant not only because of its literary merits: it is also significant historically because it recounts events of the Viking invasion.

### **THE LOST LITERATURE OF ENGLAND**

The amount of poetry and even prose literature that has survived from the Old English period is scant. Less than 5% (maybe only 1 or 2%) of all the poetry from that time period survives. There are several reasons for this:

- 1) The **Oral Tradition**: During the Middle Ages, most of the people could not read or write. Instead, they had to rely on professional story-tellers (also known as bards or scop) who would memorize long epic poems and recite them to their audiences. These story-tellers would usually

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