

## **The Middle Ages: 1100- 1485**

**A Few Important Dates:** (for a fuller history, see NOTES for History of the English Language, Chapters 4 and 5, and read the introduction of our text, Garbaty's *Medieval English Literature*)

1066: Viking line dies without heir; Aethelred's son, Edward the Confessor, returns to rule England but dies with no heir. He is succeeded by Harold, son of advisor Godwin, with good will of people. Challenged by William, duke of Normandy (no real right to throne, takes Harold in Battle of Hastings; wipes out English nobility and replaces them with French; all educated, nobility, etc are now Anglo-French). French becomes the language of the upper-class in English for the next 200 years.

12<sup>th</sup> century: Eleanor of Aquitaine, bride of Louis and later Henry II of England, patroness of arts; grandfather a troubadour. Adds element of love, attitude towards women, her daughter commissions Chretien de Troyes to write first Arthurian romance and Andreas Capallanus to write treatise about courtly love. Chretien begins vogue of romance and is dubbed "Creator of Arthurian Romance"

The "Father of Arthurian romance," Geoffrey of Monmouth, writes *History of the Kings of Britain* in the 12<sup>th</sup> century under Norman influence (he also tells of Lear and Vortigern), but with sympathy for Celts because of his own Welsh background.

13<sup>th</sup> century: shifting emphasis of French and English . Englishmen (whether of Norman or Anglo descent) begin to use English. Many noble children must be taught French as if it were a second language.

1204: King John Lackland loses Normandy, but French influence continues

Late 14<sup>th</sup> century England: separation between England and France; Paris now center of Parisian culture

1244: Decree of the Two Masters, Louis IX and Henry III, finalizes separation between France and England

14<sup>th</sup> century: French is in decline. Anglo-French (as spoken in England and Normandy) is seen as inferior as Parisian dialect gains esteem. The 100 Years War enhances English patriotism, and The Black Death gives some empowerment to the lower classes and enables rise of bourgeois class. Writers must choose between

three languages for their compositions: French (still a language of culture), Latin, and English. Thus, John Gower writes three major works, one in each of these tongues.

15<sup>th</sup> century: Malory's *Morte D'arthur*: assembles all the stories about Arthur, probably while in jail, condemns courtly love, adds novel-like interest, and gave consistency to character.

1476: William Caxton introduces the printing press to England, one factor that leads to the rise of Standard English (East Midland dialect).

### **Literary Periods according to our text (Garbaty)**

**Beginnings to 1250:** the Period of Religious Record (exceptions include *The Owl and the Nightingale* (c. 1195), Layamon's *Brut* (c. 1205), and the *Ancrene Riwe* (c. 1200))

**1250-1350:** Period of Religious and Secular Literature (secular works include *Havelok* and *Horn*)

**1350-1400:** Period of Great Individual Writers (Chaucer, Gower, Wycliff, the Pearl Poet, Langland)

**1400-1500:** Period of Imitation or Transition (Malory, the Scottish Chaucerians, Lydgate)

### **Middle English Language:**

#### **Dialects**

Four main Middle English dialects are East Midland, Northern, Southern, and West Midland. Of these, East Midland developed into Standard English due to its central location, the presence of Oxford and Cambridge, the large population of the dialect area, and the importance of London as a commercial and political center.

This period is characterized by **leveling of inflections** as Old English inflections are lost or simplified. The language becomes increasingly less synthetic and more analytic. The period is also characterized by abundant borrowings, especially from French and Latin.