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Faculty of letters & Foreign Languages
Department of English Language and Literature

Class: L1

Module: Literary Text

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2nd semester

Lecture One: The Old English Period or the Anglo-Saxon Period (450-1066)

Tutorial Outcomes

By the end of this tutorial, students will be able to:

1. Outline the historical and cultural contexts of the Old English period.
2. Identify and analyze key literary works and their prevailing features.
3. Discuss the significance of works such as Beowulf and other Old English poems.

Prerequisites:

Before delving into the Old English period, please consider the following questions:

1. What are the key historical events and cultural influences that shaped Old English literature?
2. What are the unique characteristics of Old English poetry and prose, and how do they reflect the values and beliefs of the Anglo-Saxon people?

Terminology Used in This Tutorial:

Alliteration: The repetition of initial consonant sounds in closely connected words or syllables.

Epic: A long narrative poem celebrating heroic deeds.

Kenning: A metaphorical compound word used in Old English poetry (e.g., "whale-road" for the sea).

Introduction

English literature's history is intertwined with the history of the English people, evolving alongside the nation's social development and marked by religious, political, and scientific shifts. These changes have shaped distinct phases in English literature, each known as an Age or Period, often named after monarchs, prominent writers, or the prevailing spirit of the time. The period designations and durations may vary among historians, and some ages are further subdivided. This lecture adopts a framework adapted from M. H. Abrams (1996):

1. 450-1066: The Old English Period or The Anglo-Saxon Period

2. 1066-1500: The Middle English Period
 - a) The Anglo-Norman Period (1066-1340)
 - b) The Age of Chaucer (1340-1400)
3. 1500-1660: The Renaissance Period
4. Elizabethan Age (1558-1603)
5. Jacobean Age (1603-1625)

1) The Old English Literature (450-1066)

The Anglo-Saxon period, a formative era in English history, commenced in the 5th century with the migration of Germanic tribes—the Jutes, Angles, and Saxons—to the British Isles. These groups, originating from regions in what is now Germany and Denmark, gradually asserted dominance over the existing Celtic population, establishing their own kingdoms and cultural practices. This influx reshaped the linguistic, social, and political landscape of Britain, laying the foundations for what would eventually become England.

During this time, Anglo-Saxon society developed distinct characteristics, including a hierarchical social structure with kings, nobles, and commoners. The Anglo-Saxons were skilled farmers, craftsmen, and warriors, and their culture was deeply rooted in Germanic traditions, including a pagan belief system that later transitioned to Christianity. Key political entities, such as the kingdoms of Northumbria, Mercia, Wessex, and Kent, emerged and often engaged in conflicts for supremacy, contributing to a dynamic and evolving geopolitical environment.

The Anglo-Saxon period drew to a close in 1066 with the Norman Conquest, a pivotal event that dramatically altered the course of English history. William the Conqueror's victory at the Battle of Hastings marked the end of Anglo-Saxon rule and ushered in a new era under Norman governance. This transition resulted in profound changes in language, law, and social structure, fundamentally transforming England and setting the stage for its medieval future.

2) Influencing Factors of the Literature of this Period

- a) The Christianization of pagan tribes
- b) The establishment of monasteries in the 7th century, fostering written literature.
- c) Alfred the Great's encouragement of education and supervision of The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (871-901)
- d) The presence of Anglo-Saxon culture and folklore.

3) Major Literary Works of the Period

Beowulf is the earliest known English epic. Other significant works include "The Wanderer," "The Seafarer," "The Husband's Message," and "The Wife's Lament," recorded in the Exeter Book. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle represents the earliest English prose.

4) Prevailing Literary Features of the Age

The literary works of this period, particularly Beowulf, exhibit the following thematic and structural features:

1. Most works are anonymous
2. Paganism is dominant, though Christianity is also present
3. A strong belief in Fate is reflected
4. Evil is symbolized by monsters, while good is promoted through heroes
5. Romantic love is absent
6. Attitude towards women is respectful
7. Sea adventures and heroic activities are honored
8. Metaphors are favored over similes
9. Alliteration is a key poetic device, with stressed alliterative syllables
10. Kennings (compound words) are widely used (e.g., "whale-road" for the sea)
11. Verse lines lack a consistent number of syllables, varying from six to fourteen
12. End-rhyme is not typically used

Practice

Create a detailed timeline of the Anglo-Saxon period, including key events, rulers, and cultural developments.

Use a chronological format, marking significant events such as the arrival of the Jutes, Angles, and Saxons, the conversion to Christianity, the rise and fall of different kingdoms (e.g., Northumbria, Mercia, Wessex), and the Norman Conquest. Include brief descriptions of each event's significance.

Reference

- Campbell, J., John, E., & Wormald, P. (1991). *The Anglo-Saxons*. Penguin Books.
- Stenton, F. M. (1943). *Anglo-Saxon England*. Oxford University Press.