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Class: L1

Module: Literary Text

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2nd semester

Lecture Two: The Middle English Period (1066-1500)

Tutorial Outcomes

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

- Outline the historical and cultural contexts of the Middle English period.
- Identify and analyze key literary works and their prevailing features.
- Discuss the significance of authors such as Geoffrey Chaucer and other Middle English writers.

Prerequisites

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

- What were the key historical events and cultural shifts that shaped Middle English literature?
- How did the Norman Conquest impact the English language and literature?
- What are the defining characteristics of Middle English literature, and how do they reflect the values and beliefs of the people of this era?

Terminology Used in This Tutorial

- **Chivalry:** A code of conduct associated with medieval knighthood, emphasizing honor, courtesy, and service.
- **Romance:** A narrative genre characterized by idealized settings, heroic characters, and themes of love and adventure.
- **Satire:** The use of humor, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule to expose and criticize people's stupidity or vices.

Introduction

English literature mirrors the social, religious, political, and scientific changes in English society. Each period, often named after monarchs or dominant literary figures, reflects the era's spirit. This lecture focuses on the Middle English Period (1066-1500), a transformative era marked by the Norman Conquest and the rise of English as a literary language.

The framework for understanding English literature includes:

- 450-1066: The Old English Period
- 1066-1500: The Middle English Period
- The Anglo-Norman Period (1066-1340)
- The Age of Chaucer (1340-1400)
- 1500-1660: The Renaissance Period

1. The Middle English Period (1066-1500)

The Middle English Period began with the Norman Conquest in 1066 and concluded at the end of the 15th century. This era is divided into two sub-periods: the Anglo-Norman Period (1066-1340) and the Age of Chaucer (1340-1400). The early part of the Middle Ages is sometimes referred to as the Dark Ages due to limited historical documentation.

2. Influencing Factors of the Literature of this Period

Several significant events and cultural shifts influenced the literature of the Middle English Period:

- 1) **Establishment of the English Parliament (1295):** This marked a step towards a more structured governance system.
- 2) **The Crusades (11th-13th centuries):** These religious wars between Christians and Muslims exposed Europeans to new cultures and ideas.
- 3) **Magna Carta (1215):** This charter limited the power of the monarch, asserting certain rights for the English people.
- 4) **English as the Language of Law (1362):** The declaration of English as the language of law and courts elevated its status over French in British institutions.

- 5) **Decline of the Norman Feudal System:** This followed the Black Death (1348-1349), which led to significant social and economic changes.
- 6) **John Wycliffe's Reformation:** Wycliffe initiated reforms within the English Church, challenging its authority.
- 7) **Establishment of the Printing Press (1476):** William Caxton's printing press facilitated the wider dissemination of literature and knowledge.
- 8) **The Renaissance:** The influx of Christian scholars into Europe, including Britain, led to a revival of classical knowledge, fostering interests in patriotism, adventure, and humanism.

3. Major Authors and Their Works

Several authors left an indelible mark on the Middle English Period:

- John Wycliffe (1324-1384): Known as the "father of English prose," he translated the Bible from Latin to English, significantly impacting the accessibility of religious texts.
- John Gower (1325-1408): Notable for writing *Confessio Amantis*, a long poem that explores themes of love and morality.
- Geoffrey Chaucer (1340-1400): Arguably the most important writer of the period, Chaucer penned *Troilus and Criseyde* and the renowned *Canterbury Tales*, which offers a vivid depiction of medieval society.
- William Langland (1332-1386): Authored *Piers Plowman*, a notable allegorical poem addressing social and religious issues.
- Sir Thomas Malory (1485): Wrote *Morte Darthur*, considered the first prose romance in English, retelling the Arthurian legends.

4. The Literary Characteristics

- The Middle English Period saw significant shifts in literary styles and themes:
- Poetry as the Main Genre: Poetry continued to be a dominant form of literary expression.
- Emergence of English Prose: Prose writing in English gained a stronger foothold.
- Standardization of English: The English language evolved, reaching a more standardized form.
- Development of Drama: Drama emerged in forms such as "Mystery Plays," "Morality Plays," and "Interludes."

- Influence of Italian Authors: Writers were influenced by Italian authors like Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio.
- Dominant Themes: Love, chivalry, and religion were central literary subjects.
- Rise of Romance: The spirit of romance became a defining characteristic, contrasting with the Old English period.
- Introduction of Pentameter: The use of pentameter (ten syllables per line) began to appear in poetry.
- Use of End-Rhyme: End-rhyme was introduced as a common poetic device.
- Shift in Poetic Style: Stressed alliteration declined, while humor, irony, and satire gained prominence.

Practice

Research and compare the social structures depicted in *Beowulf* (Old English) and *The Canterbury Tales* (Middle English). How did these literary works reflect the evolving societal norms and values of their respective periods.

References

1. Burrow, J. A. (1982). *Medieval writers and their work: Middle English literature and its background, 1100-1500*. Oxford University Press.
2. Gerould, G. H. (1916). *Saints' legends*. Houghton Mifflin.