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English Literature and the Reflections of the Society: Middle English

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**B. Praveena,**  
(Research Scholar),  
Acharya Nagarjuna University, Guntur  
Andhra Pradesh, India

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**Abstract:**

The paper is about the conditions prevailed and literature that was there in Middle English period. Latin was the only respectable language for serious literature and the only language for an international audience, and would remain so for several centuries to come. French was the language of the upper classes, and this Anglo-French dialect was, in fact, the vehicle of some of the best writing done in French anywhere during the period. Compared with what we have from the old English period, the quantity of surviving ME literature is large, especially after 1250. Obviously the later something was written, the better its changes for preservation, and the advent of printing at the end of the ME period saved much that would otherwise have been lost. To modern tastes, the quantity of ME literature is not parallel by a correspondingly high quality. Part of the explanation is different tastes: most modern readers simply do not care for the religious and didactic works that that comprise the overwhelming bulk of ME literature. Secular prose in middle English includes legal works such as codes of laws, charters, wills, writs, and deed-little of literary interest but much that is valuable as a source of linguistic and historical information. Most medieval chronicles were either written in Latin or French, or were in verse, or both. However, the *Anglo-saxon chronicle* was continued in English prose for nearly a century after the conquest. Late in the Me period, John Capgrave wrote his *chronicle of England* in prose. Romances also were normally in verse, but a few were in prose. Of no literary interest whatsoever is Dan Michel's *Ayenbite of Inwit*, a bad translation into bad English prose of a French book on vices and virtues. However, the work is of linguistic interest as a relatively rare example of the Kentish dialect.

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English was only one of three major literary languages in England during the ME period – and it ran a poor third at that. Latin was the only respectable language for serious literature and the only language for an international audience, and would remain so for several centuries to come. All vernaculars, not just English, were universally regarded as inferior to Latin. Another incentive for writing in Latin was the awareness that English had changed and was continuing to change; if authors wanted their works to be accessible to posterity, they felt obliged to write in Latin. French was the language of the upper classes, and this Anglo-French dialect was, in fact, the vehicle of some of the best writing done in French anywhere during the period. But polylingualism was not restricted to Latin, French, and English. The Celts in Ireland, Scotland, Wales, and Cornwall continued to speak and write in Irish, Scots Gaelic, Welsh, and Cornish.

For most of the ME period, those authors who did write in English used their own dialects, and recognizable through only vaguely defined “schools” of literature arose in various regions. The West Midlands were earlier associated with the so-called Katharine Group of religious prose and later with alliterative poetry such as *Piers Plowman* and the work of the *Pearl* poet. Richard Rolle’s mystical works are in a Yorkshire dialect, and Barbour’s *Bruce* in a Northern dialect. Towards the end of the period, however, when it became clear that the London dialect would be a standard, authors began to use it even when it was not their native dialect in order to reach a national audience. Chaucer’s family was from London, so he could be expected to write London English, but John Gower (from Kent) and John Lydgate (from Suffolk) also wrote in the London dialect.

Compared with what we have from the Old English period, the quantity of surviving ME literature is large, especially after 1250. Obviously the later something was written, the better its chances for preservation, and the advent of printing at the end of the ME period saved much that would otherwise have been lost. Nevertheless, for a small population with a low literacy rate, the ME output is still surprisingly high. To be sure, much of this writing in English consists of translations, primarily from French and Latin, but sometimes from other European vernaculars. For example, the very late ME morality play *Everyman* is now generally agreed to be a translation of a Dutch original.

To modern tastes, the quantity of ME literature is not parallel by a correspondingly high quality. Part of the explanation is different tastes: most modern readers simply do not care for the religious and didactic works that comprise the overwhelming bulk of ME literature. In addition, much if not most of ME writing was done for oral presentation—relatively few people

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could read, and even those who could were just as accustomed to being read to as to reading to themselves. A listening audience has different expectations and different requirements from those of individual, silent readers. For example, in oral presentation, a fair amount of repetition is not only acceptable but essential because the audience can't go back reread something it missed the first time around. Still another reason for the spotty quality of so much ME literatures the fact that the English writers were still experimenting with new forms and genres borrowed from French and had not yet adapted them to suit English.

As is true of OE literature, the great bulk of ME literature is anonymous. There was no cult of creativity or originality and little or no material incentive for authors to claim works as their own. Copyright had yet to be invented-and would have been virtually meaningless if it had existed because, without printing, books were hand-copied one at a time and no one could ever make a fortune or even a decent profit by reproducing the works of others.

Another characteristic of ME literature alien to modern readers is the heavy proportion of verse to prose. Aside from legal documents, almost any kind of subject matter or genre could be and often was versified: historical works, biblical translations, religious instruction, fictional tales, even recipes and hoe-to mate-rials. Furthermore, with a few outstanding exceptions, the prose that was produced was a poor quality. One reason for the preponderance of verse is easier to memorize than prose, an important consideration for a society in which a book was a major investment and literacy was low. Second, through old English had a strong tradition of good prose writing, that was almost totally destroyed by the conquest. When literature once again began to be produced in English, it was at first primarily in verse; in any culture, good prose develops later than verse.

When writing in English began again after the disruption of the conquest, English writers adopted French genres and forms wholesale. In most of the country and for most purposes, the native alternative verse was abounded for syllable counting, rhymed verse. The older tradition of heroic poetry gave way to new end of the ME period, drama appeared for the first time in English. Shorter poems that fit comfortably into our modern (rather hazy) notions of a lyric appear. In other words, many of the literary types of today are recognizably the descendants of ME forebears. Nonetheless, we still do not find such contemporary types as the novel, the short story, the biography, or the autobiography.

Secular prose in middle English includes legal works such as codes of laws, charters, wills, writs, and deed-little of literary interest but much that is valuable as a source of linguistic and historical

information. Also usually, but not always, written in prose were handbooks on such topics as astronomy, mathematics, political theory, medicine, husbandry, and etiquette. Personal letters of the period include some that rise to a level that might well be called literary. The letters of three families in particular, the stoners, the celys, and the pastons, survive in large quantities.

Most medieval chronicles were either written in Latin or French, or were in verse, or both. However, the *Anglo-Saxon chronicle* was continued in English prose for nearly a century after the conquest. Late in the Me period, John Capgrave wrote his *chronicle of England* in prose. Romances also were normally in verse, but a few were in prose. Thomas Malory's late fifteenth century romance *Morte Darthur* is the one of the best prose work of the entire period and one of the few prose works that can still be read today with genuine pleasure. Still another prose work in Thomas Usk's *Testament of Love*; despite its title, it is actually a political allegory.

Defying easy classification is *Travels of sir John Mandeville*, purportedly the record of Mandeville's journeys to the limits of the then-known world, but actually a fiction based on sheer invention and brazen plagiarism of earlier writings.

### Religious prose

Middle English religious prose is even harder to classify neatly than secular prose because there is so much of it and the types tend to overlap more. We will restrict ourselves to mentioning some of the most important titles and known authors. The early (c.1200) *Ancrene Riwle* (or, as some versions are called, *Ancrene Wisse*; is one of the few religious works likely to appeal to the contemporary reader. Written by a cleric at the request of three noblewomen, it is dedicated but compassionate, idealistic but realistic, down-to-earth but warm and often humorous. The quality of the writing is high, perhaps higher than that of any other English prose work prior to Malory.

Saints' lives (hagiography) must have been extremely popular with ME audience because so many of them have survived. Most of them bear about as much resemblance to reality as does the modern political campaign "biography". The same miracles and tortures are repeated for one saint after another. The so-called Katharine Group, written in heavily alternative prose for the West Midlands, includes the lives of three virgin saints, along with two other religious treatises. Another vast collection, *The Golden Legend*, contains numerous saints' lives in addition to much other ecclesiastical material. Still another very mixed collection is the *South English Legendary*, comprising saints' lives, other narratives, material appropriate for the church calendar, and other religious writings.

Collections of sermons and homilies from the period are too numerous even to list exhaustively. Among the better-known such collections are the *Lambeth Homilies*, the *Northern Homilies cycle*, the *Northern Passion*, and the late Jacob's *Well*. John Wycliffe (late fourteenth century) is best known today for the Biblical translations under his name (through he probably did little if any of the actual translating). However, he was also the author of a large number of surviving sermons that provide lively reading to this day. Many ME sermons and homilies include exempla, or short tales with a moral. Often the exemplum has been added more for its entertainment value than for its didactic relevance, and the application of the moral may be far-fetched. The *Gesta Romanorum* (late thirteenth century) is the most famous collection of such exempla.

The writing of the English mystics, or religious visionaries, forms a sub category of their own. The best-known of these mystics were Richard Rolle, Walter Hilton, and the author of *The cloud of unknowing*, all from the fourteenth century. Mystical writings by women include Dame Julian of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love* (late fourteenth century) and the rather hysterical but lively and colloquial *Book of Margery Kempe*.

Of no literary interest whatsoever is Dan Michel's *Ayenbite of Inwit*, a bad translation into bad English prose of a French book on vices and virtues. However, the work is of linguistic interest as a relatively rare example of the Kentish dialect.

### Conclusion:

Latin was the only respectable language for serious literature and the only language for an international audience, and would remain so for several centuries to come. French was the language of the upper classes, and this Anglo-French dialect was, in fact, the vehicle of some of the best writing done in French anywhere during the period. Compared with what we have from the old English period, the quantity of surviving ME literature is large, especially after 1250. Obviously the later something was written, the better its chances for preservation, and the advent of printing at the end of the ME period saved much that would otherwise have been lost. To modern tastes, the quantity of ME literature is not parallel by a correspondingly high quality. Part of the explanation is different tastes: most modern readers simply do not care for the religious and didactic works that comprise the overwhelming bulk of ME literature. Secular prose in middle English includes legal works such as codes of laws, charters, wills, writs, and deed-little of literary interest but much that is valuable as a source of linguistic and historical

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