



# 2 Historical Context for Middle English Literature

*Brian Gastle, Western Carolina University*

## Chapter Overview

Overview	23
When Did Middle English Literature Begin?	24
Historical and Political Change after 1066	24
Artistic and Linguistic Change after 1066	25
The Crusades and the Expansion of Church Power	26
The Power of the Church at Home: From Thomas Becket to the <i>Magna Carta</i>	27
Crisis in the Church Abroad: The Great Schism	28
Crisis in the Church at Home: Lollardy	29
Famine and Plague	31
Labour Unrest and the Peasants' Revolt	32
The Hundred Years' War	33
English Monarchy and the Deposition of Richard II	34
The Wars of the Roses and the Transition to the Early Modern Period	36
Middle English Timeline: 1066–1492	40

## Overview

Middle English (ME) literature stretches from roughly 1100 through the fifteenth century. The historical events that shaped English literature during this period were equally monumental. From the Battle of Hastings in England





### *The Medieval British Literature Handbook*

to the Battle of Agincourt in France, from the Crusades in the Holy Land to the Peasant's Revolt and the march on London, from the Black Death to the deposition of Richard II, the events of the later Middle Ages provided a rich backdrop that both affected and was affected by the literature of the period. While no common thread ties all of these events together, the period does reflect an interesting kind of parallelism, for both the beginning and the end ME literature are marked by significant events that would redefine English national identity. This chapter explores a number of these events, not to force direct parallels between the events and specific ME works, but rather to highlight the rich relationship between two. First, beginning with the Norman Conquest, it investigates the significant changes in language that occurred during the period and some of the continental events affecting England during the time, such as the Crusades. Second, it discusses some of the social, religious and political events in England that parallel events abroad (such as the Schism in the Church on the Continent and the heretical Lollard movement in England). Finally, it addresses three major political events and struggles that served to redefine the country and the literature at the end of the Middle Ages: the Hundred Years' War, the Deposition of Richard II and the War of the Roses. (See Chapter 1: Extending the Medieval.)

### **When Did Middle English Literature Begin?**

Medieval English literature in general is usually divided into two main categories: Old English literature (also known as Anglo-Saxon literature) and ME literature. Since language changes gradually over time, it is often difficult as well as inappropriate to assign specific dates for dividing such periods. Fortunately, however, for students and scholars the origins of ME literature can be traced to a single, specific, historical event: the Battle of Hastings, on 14 October 1066, during which William I definitively ended English self-rule and installed a French-speaking aristocracy and attendant bureaucracy, forever changing English language and literature.

### **Historical and Political Change after 1066**

From the late fourth through the sixth centuries, the Angles, Saxons, Frisians and Jutes had invaded England from northern Europe, conquering and displacing the indigenous Celts, but Vikings also subsequently harassed these invaders all the way into the eleventh century, when Danish kings replaced Saxon kings of England. In 1042, Edward the Confessor took the throne of England from the Danes and held it for two decades against both Danish incursions and opposition from other English nobility. (See Chapter 3: Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History of the Kings of Britain*.)





### *Historical Context for Middle English Literature*

Edward named William, Duke of Normandy, his successor, in part because the Normans aided Edward in his acquisition of the crown. When Edward died in January of 1066, Harold I (Harold Godwinson), a Saxon lord and opponent of Norman rule, claimed the crown. A second Harold, Harold Hardrada, a Norwegian warrior and descendant of the Danish kings of England (and no friend of the Normans), invaded northern England and captured land as far south as York. The Saxon forces, under Harold I, defeated the Norwegians on 26 September 1066 (marking the last major Scandinavian invasion of England until 1974 and ABBA's hit song 'Waterloo'). The very next day, 27 September 1066, William landed in Hastings, England, to defend his claim to the throne. The Battle of Hastings occurred on 14 October 1066, and the Normans defeated the Saxons after two days of fierce fighting. By the end of the year, William had swept through the country and subdued the English nobility, and he was crowned King of England in London on Christmas day, 1066. (See Chapter 3: The Bayeux Tapestry.)

### **Artistic and Linguistic Change after 1066**

William's conquest opened a new chapter in English literary history. Most notably, French became the official language of the state and of the aristocracy, and would remain so until the fourteenth century. For over 200 years after the Conquest, artistic literary production in England focused upon French forms, styles, genres and subjects. In fact, ME literature – from its genesis in the eleventh century, to its heyday in the fourteenth, and to its eventual transmutation into Early Modern (formerly called Renaissance) literature – could be characterized as an attempt to create and define English national identity. The play between French and English traditions is even further complicated by the fact that many medieval English texts were written in Latin, the international language of medieval Europe. England was truly a multilingual nation, and that multilingualism reflected the political turmoil of the times. (See Chapter 8: Multilingualism, International Contexts, and Postcolonial Concerns.)

In addition to these political changes, one of the most important effects of the Norman Conquest upon English literature was linguistic change. The English language changed dramatically after the Norman Conquest. It gradually lost its inflections (word suffixes that controlled meaning) and relied more on word order for meaning. French words became a more significant part of English vocabulary, and often the French form of a word became the more socially prestigious usage. For example, the following words originally meant the same thing, but have now come to carry much different connotations:





### *The Medieval British Literature Handbook*

- 'stench' (OE *stenc/stincan*) and 'aroma' (OF *aromat*): the French have an *aroma* and the English *stink*
- 'ask' (OE *ascian*) and 'demand' (OF *desmande*): the English, as subordinates, *ask* and the French, as superiors, *demand*.
- 'cow' (OE *cu*) and 'beef' (OF *boef*)

That last example typifies the political and social effects of this language shift. When the animal was prepared and placed on the table in front of the aristocracy, the French word was used. When the Anglo Saxon peasant was in the field working, that peasant had to beware of Anglo Saxon 'cu'-pies.

We especially see this French influx of vocabulary in legal, military, social, ecclesiastical and governmental terms. Because the Norman conquerors controlled political life, they brought to English the words *exchequer*, *administer*, *nobility*, *garter*, *brooch*, *siege*, *captain*, *jury*, *judgment* and many others. Later authors took full advantage of such French etymologies and cognates to develop their own characters and events. For example, when Chaucer wants to highlight the inappropriate gentility of his Prioress, not only does he say she can only speak French that she learned at school, but her portrait in the *General Prologue* is replete with French cognates (*divine*, *simple*, *morsel*, *plesaunt*, *charitable*, *tretys* etc.), many of which appear to have entered the language not long after the Norman Conquest. Such subtle diction exemplifies how historical events help shape ME literature, and the Prioress's portrait also demonstrates how those changes affected both political and religious discourse.

### **The Crusades and the Expansion of Church Power**

Being a Christian in medieval western Europe meant being what is now termed Roman Catholic; the authority of Holy Church, the infallibility of the Pope, and the power bestowed upon clergy (as the only path to salvation) were well established. Catholic doctrine so permeates ME literature that it is nearly impossible to extricate such beliefs from that literature. During England's violent transformation in the eleventh century, the Church expanded its reach into the Holy Land through the Crusades. While French and German aristocracy fielded most of the Christian forces during the Crusades, England participated comparatively little; only Richard I – the Lionheart – went on crusade during his reign. Nonetheless, the cultural effects of the Crusades resonated for over two hundred years.

For ME literature, the Crusades provided rich matter both as an explicit subject and as background or metaphorical material. No ME literature embraced the Crusades as fully as continental literature, such as the Old





### *Historical Context for Middle English Literature*

French *Song of Roland*, but several ME Romances allude to the Crusades. However, the proliferation of continental romances, which idealized the courtly crusading warrior and crusader culture, influenced romance production in England. Arthurian literature, such as the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* and Malory's subsequent *Le Morte d'Arthur*, depict King Arthur as a Crusader to further establish his Christian legitimacy to the crown. While Boccaccio's great Italian work, the *Decameron*, sets several tales during the Crusades, the English poet John Gower would later draw upon the Crusades more circuitously in his Tale of Constance in the *Confessio Amantis*, as would Chaucer in his version of the Constance story, the *Man of Law's Tale*. Chaucer complicated his Knight's portrait in the *General Prologue* by referring to crusading battles in which the Knight had fought, but not all of which were successful for the Christians. The Crusades also led to a flourishing of travel and trade between the East and the West, which gave rise to the rich travel and pilgrimage literature of the later Middle Ages. (See Chapter 3: Arthurian Literature and the 'Matter of Britain': *Chanson de Roland* and the 'Matter of France'; and Fall of Troy and the 'Matter of Troy'.)

### **The Power of the Church at Home: From Thomas Becket to the *Magna Carta***

In spite of England's relative distance from the Crusades, the Church's power in England grew, thanks in part to two historical events – the murder of Thomas Becket and the adoption of the *Magna Carta* – that reverberated through the literature of the period. In the twelfth century, Henry II named Thomas Becket, his long-time friend and Chancellor, to the post of Archbishop of Canterbury, the most senior ecclesiastical position in England. In contrast to his earlier role as the King's chief ally, Beckett consolidated Church lands and protected them from secular control and taxation, battling Henry for years in the courts and waging a political war for the role of the Church in England. In 1170, four knights, possibly incited by the king, violated the sanctity of the church as a refuge from violence, entered Canterbury Cathedral and murdered Beckett on the stairs leading up to the choir. One contemporary account of the murder is quite gruesome, stating that the knights cut the top of Beckett's head off and 'scattered the brains with the blood across the floor' (Grim). Both the Church and the people of England were outraged at the murder, which led to greater sympathy for the Church throughout the land, and Beckett became one of the most significant saints of England, with a shrine established at the very place he was murdered. Chaucer later sets this shrine as the destination for the pilgrimage in his *Canterbury Tales*: 'The hooly blissful martir for to seke' (I.17). (See Chapter 3: Pilgrim and Travel Literature.)





## *The Medieval British Literature Handbook*

The conflict over secular authority and Church land and rule continued into the early twelfth century when, in 1215, the first version of the *Magna Carta* was issued. While the *Magna Carta* is best known for its influence on constitutional law and democracy, it also strengthened the Church's authority in England. The *Magna Carta* was issued several times from 1216 (King John) to 1297 (Edward I). It granted specific rights both to the Church in England and to English nobles, and it freed the Church almost completely from secular authority in England. This freedom allowed the Church to weather internal conflicts during this period, such as heretical movements and the Great Schism.

### **Crisis in the Church Abroad: The Great Schism**

From the eleventh century, a number of forces variously consolidated and fractured the power of the Church throughout Europe. For example, the Knights Templar, a military and religious order, had risen to power with the blessings of the Church in the early twelfth century, in part through crusading, but by the early fourteenth century, their power had so threatened the Church that they were persecuted as heretics. During that time, the Church enacted its own sweeping reforms during the fourth Lateran Council of 1215. A number of that council's edicts shaped the organization of the Church and its relationship to parishioners for centuries. Lateran IV adopted the word 'transubstantiation' for the literal transformation of Eucharistic wine and bread into the blood and flesh of Christ, began the process to establish Fraternal orders (Friars), outlined basic prayers and defined the Seven Sacraments – baptism, confirmation, Eucharist, confession, matrimony, holy orders and extreme unction – as aspects of the ideal Christian life. (See Chapter 3: Monastic Orders.) Even though Lateran IV attempted to set basic parameters of Christian faith, ME texts developed a range of responses to Catholic doctrine and practices, from explicative works such as the morality play *Everyman* and Chaucer's *Parson's Tale* on penitence and the seven deadly sins, to critiques of abuse such as *Piers Plowman*, to gendered investigations such as the *Book of Margery Kempe* and Julian of Norwich's *Showings*. Additionally, in the twelfth century, the rise of the universities in Paris and Oxford coincided with increased education of parishioners, greater interrogation of ecclesiastical rules and growing dissatisfaction with the system itself. (See Chapter 3: Schools and Literacy and Universities.) While much of the Church's turmoil occurred too far away to affect England directly, in the later Middle Ages ME literature drew upon both far reaching Church politics and local ecclesiastical problems, some of which paralleled England's tumultuous relationship with France.

The years 1378 to 1417 – a time known as the Great Schism or Avignon





### *Historical Context for Middle English Literature*

Papacy – marked a troubled period in Church history, one that medieval English writers acknowledged. From 1309–77, seven popes (all of whom were French) had held the papacy in Avignon rather than in Rome. The initial move to Avignon in 1309 was defended as a security measure to protect the Pope from armed militias in Rome. But the political ramifications of the move intensified as subsequent popes remained in the familiar, more modern and far more luxurious papal seat in Avignon. The political effects of the move were unavoidable, and the great Italian poet Francesco Petrarch referred to Avignon as the ‘Babylon of the West’. In 1378, Pope Gregory XI moved the papacy back to Rome, but upon his death opposing factions established two different popes, one in Rome (Urban VI) and one in Avignon (Clement VII); thus began the period generally referred to as the Great Schism. At times there would be two or even three popes until the Council of Constance ended the Schism in 1415. While the papacy had been under attack before, never had its own members created such division, forcing all of Europe take sides. Needless to say, during this period of fragmented and weakening Papal power, the English did not support the French pope, but they were interested in a resolution. John Gower attacked Clement both in his long Latin poem *Vox Clamantis* and in his ME poem *Confessio Amantis*, but in his short Latin poem ‘De Lucis Srutinio’ (‘An Examination of Light’) he urged reunification. Additionally, like many of his contemporaries, Gower saw the Schism as a catalyst for other, more local, problems, namely the heretical movement known in England as Lollardy. (See Chapter 4: The 1381 Revolt.)

#### **Crisis in the Church at Home: Lollardy**

Lollardy was a religious movement of the late fourteenth through the fifteenth century in England that the Church deemed heretical, but it possessed a wide following and often benefited from powerful supporters or protectors, such as John of Gaunt, uncle to Richard II and father of the subsequent Henry IV. Lollardy developed out of the teachings of the Oxford theologian John Wyclif (c.1320–84), and therefore its adherents are sometimes also called Wycliffites. However, Wyclif was not the leader of the movement, and Lollardy did not follow a single common text or doctrine. Rather, Lollards held various beliefs that they judged central to reforming the corruption they saw in the church. They believed that the Bible and preaching should be more accessible to the laity, so they enacted the first translation of the entire Bible into ME (centuries before the King James or Authorized Version) and preached not in Latin but in the vernacular. They believed that laymen, not just the ordained clergy, should have the power to perform sacraments. They opposed many of the doctrines of the Church, including transubstantiation. Their religious teachings also led to questioning of the social and political





*The Medieval British Literature Handbook*

status quo in England. For example, John Ball, a leader of the 1381 Peasants' Revolt who appears in many ME poems, was a Lollard preacher. Upon the death of John of Gaunt, and especially after John of Gaunt's son Henry IV took the throne, Lollards were persecuted relentlessly in England, and in 1427 Wyclif was burned as a heretic and his ashes cast into a river; it is unlikely that this had much effect on him, since he had been already dead for some 43 years. Yet even with such dedicated persecution, Lollards appear to have remained in England well into the Early Modern period, and many of the Protestant tenants of the Reformation echo Lollard doctrines. (See Chapter 3: Lollardy and John Wyclif.)

Just as Lollardy had both its proponents and persecutors among the sacred and secular authorities, so too did it have both among authors of the period. Literature criticizing abuses of the Church proliferated in late medieval England, and sometimes it is difficult to determine whether a work is specifically Lollard in sentiment or if it is merely participating in a long tradition of anti-clerical or anti fraternal literature. Such works might criticize friars (*anti-fraternal*) or merely general corruption among members of the church (*anti-clerical*). William Langland's long dream vision *Piers Plowman* is often read as a Lollard poem, given its focus upon the humble plowman, Piers, and its emphasis upon personal piety leading to salvation. Some medieval contemporaries associated the character of Piers himself with the revolt, as if he had been a real person participating in the event. Other authors, like John Gower, would criticize Wyclif and the Lollards as heretical and dangerous to the social order of England. In the Epilogue to the *Man of Law's Tale*, the Host accuses the Parson of being a Lollard (II.1173), and the Shipman then interrupts, saying that he will hear no preaching from someone who would 'springen cokkel in our clene corn' (II.1183). It is difficult to know whether medieval audiences saw the Parson justly criticized as a Lollard who sows dissent, or if they believed him to be pious and the Shipman as too coarse to benefit from such a sermon. Either way, Chaucer's critique of simony and abuses in the Church emerged as part of the growing vernacular secular literary traditions, but such criticisms and discussions of the Church also appeared in more explicitly religious literary texts. (See Chapter 3: Geoffrey Chaucer.) In the early fifteenth century *Book of Margery Kempe*, Margery is often considered a heretic because she travels the countryside speaking of her discussions with God and Jesus, but she carefully defends herself against these claims since being considered a Lollard might have led to her imprisonment or death. (See Chapter 4: Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*.)

*The Book of Margery Kempe* is also part of a larger literary tradition in the later Middle Ages known as mysticism. Medieval mystic writers, such as Margery Kempe, Julian of Norwich and Richard Rolle, were particularly





### *Historical Context for Middle English Literature*

interested in their individual spiritual relationship with God, the 'mystical' rapport between the temporal self and the divine almighty. While the authors of a number of mystical and devotional texts (such as *The Cloud of Unknowing*) are unknown, many were composed by women who were either lay people (like Margery Kempe) or members of religious communities (like Julian of Norwich). This textual form of feminine spirituality often upset secular and sacred authorities alike. Julian, for example, refers to God as both a Mother and as a Father figure, while Margery Kempe calls upon her visions to help resolve personal and political disputes she encounters during her travels. The profoundly personal spirituality of medieval mystics undermined traditional roles of the clergy, and just as the nature of spirituality and religion was transformed from within, so too was the secular feudal order thrown into chaos from disruptive external pressure. (See Chapter 3: Brigitta of Sweden, Catherine of Siena, Christina of Markyate, *Cloud of Unknowing*, Walter Hilton, Julian of Norwich, Margery Kempe, Nicholas Love, Marguerite Porete, and Richard Rolle and Chapter 3: Contemplative Literature.)

### **Famine and Plague**

England in the fourteenth century experienced a number of events that greatly diminished its population and strained its socio-economic resources. The first of several famines, probably caused by climate changes, struck in 1315 and lasted for at least two years, killing some 10–20% of England's population of 5–7 million. More debilitating and better known is the Black Death (Bubonic Plague) that swept across Europe and reached England in 1348. The Black Death was spread in part by the bite of fleas, which transmitted the disease across Europe on the backs of the ubiquitous black rat (*Rattus rattus*). Mortality rates are unclear; estimates range from one-third to two-thirds of the population of Europe, but the death rate was probably somewhat less in England because the colder Northern climate restricted its spread. As people died, survivors looked for ways to deal with the loss.

A veritable cult of death emerged. Visual representations of the Dance of Death arose in frescoes and art. In Italy, Giovanni Boccaccio set his celebrated *Decameron* against the backdrop of the plague. In England, chroniclers like Henry Knighton describe its effects on the country, referring to the plague as a worldwide catastrophe. Surprisingly perhaps, the plague tends not to figure prominently in ME literature, but rather it serves as a dark backdrop to its themes and issues. For example, even though Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* is modelled on Boccaccio's *Decameron*, it does not rely upon the plague as a narrative force in the way the *Decameron* does. The Old Man in the *Pardoner's Tale* is 'forwrapped' (VI.718) like a corpse prepared for burial, and Chaucer sets his version of the story during the Plague, unlike his sources





*The Medieval British Literature Handbook*

and analogues, but the images do not contain the stark morbidity found in Boccaccio's descriptions of plague-ridden Florence. (See Chapter 3: Giovanni Boccaccio and *Wynnere and Wastoure*.)

### **Labour Unrest and the Peasants' Revolt**

One of the most immediate effects of the plague of 1348 was a substantial decrease in the labour force. As farmers and field hands died, fewer and fewer crops were harvested, which contributed to further mortality due to famine. As the size of the labour force declined, workers recognized one of the basic laws of economics: Labour shortages lead to higher wages. For the first time, English workers began demanding better pay for their work.

In the 1349 Ordinance of Labourers, King Edward III dictated that workers should work for their pre-plague wages. This edict did not go over well with the workers (although the landowners appreciated it) and it served as the first in a number of attempts at fixing prices, stabilizing wages, and controlling the workforce. The Statute of Labourers (1351) attempted to reinforce the Ordinance of Labourers by setting a 'maximum wage' – as opposed to modern minimum wage laws – and stiffer penalties for charging excessive wages or paying exorbitant prices for goods. These heavy-handed controls on peasant labour, in conjunction with a substantial tax in 1377, fueled a great uprising, known formerly as the Peasants' Revolt, or more currently, the 1381 Revolt, for recent research has demonstrated that far more than just commoners and peasants were involved.

A group of rioters from Kent and Essex marched on London in June 1381, led by Walther 'Wat' Tyler, Jack Straw, and the aforementioned Lollard priest John Ball who, according to biased chroniclers like Thomas Walsingham, used Langland's *Piers Plowman* as a rallying cry. The crowd attacked London, selectively burning the palace of John of Gaunt (uncle to Richard II and father to the future Henry IV), destroying official charters and administrative files, and executing the Archbishop of Canterbury and other notable members of the London elite. They demanded the abolition of serfdom and the dismissal the King Richard II's counsellors, whom they viewed as corrupting the King. (See Chapter 3: William Langland, *Piers Plowman*.) The crowd was not opposed to the monarchy; rather it decried oppression of the commons by what they viewed as a corrupt and abusive aristocracy under the King. The 14-year-old Richard II took advantage of their patriotism and, during a meeting with the rebels outside of London, promised to consider their demands. Meanwhile the Mayor of London struck down Wat Tyler. After Tyler's death, Richard managed to disperse the crowd; subsequently all the leaders and many of the participants were found, imprisoned, tortured, or executed. (See Chapter 4: The 1381 Revolt.) This attack against the social





### *Historical Context for Middle English Literature*

basis of English culture, threatening to undermine an already shaky feudal hierarchy, profoundly affected the literary imagination of the time, although not all authors seemed to side with the rebels. In Chaucer's *Nun's Priest's Tale*, for example, the cacophony of the barnyard is likened to the noise of 'Jakke Straw and his meinee' (VII.3394). In his *Vox Clamantis*, Gower, a fierce supporter of Richard II (until he became a fierce supporter of Henry IV), uses the events of 1381 to show the increased corruption and degradation of society, and in his *Vox*, Gower likens supporters of the revolt to supporters of the Antichrist. Chaucer and Gower both seem to decry such strife because it can lead to anarchy, and England could not afford such internal turmoil given the threats from abroad it was facing during that time.

### **The Hundred Years' War**

As if the ravages of famine and plague in the fourteenth century were not enough, the long wars with France further burdened England's populace. The Hundred Years' War began as a dispute over the English monarch's rights to territories on the continent, especially Gascony (in southwestern France). When Charles IV, King of France, died in 1328, the French crowned Philip, Charles' cousin, as king. However, King Edward III of England also claimed the right to the throne of France, at least according to the English interpretation of feudal law and primogeniture (the right of the first born son to inherit the crown), since Edward's mother was Charles's sister. England had also long held lands in the north of France that stemmed from ancestral ties associated with William the Conqueror's titles.

In 1337, Philip tried to take advantage of Edward's preoccupation with the Scots (who were fighting England for independence) by claiming Gascony, harassing the coast of England, and supporting the Scottish rebels; the first open hostilities of the Hundred Years' War between England and France had begun. England often managed to defeat the French through the early fifteenth century, notably at the famous battles of Crécy, Poitiers, and Agincourt, but the tide turned in 1429 at the battle of Orléans where, led by the famous French martyr and saint Joan of Arc, the French defeated the English. By the early 1450s the English had been driven out of all of the French territories except Calais, and the Hundred Years' war was all but over.

While few ME writings deal directly with the war, the changing backdrop of English society colored much of the writing from the period. Perhaps nowhere is this more evident than in Arthurian literature from the period. Arthuriana can be traced back far earlier than the ME period, yet it is during the later Middle Ages that a number of notable and influential Arthurian works appeared on the literary landscape, from Chrétien de Troyes in





### *The Medieval British Literature Handbook*

twelfth-century France, the *Gawain*-poet in fourteenth century and Malory in fifteenth-century England. Chrétien's romances represent the flowering of the French Arthurian tradition and focus on French knights such as Lancelot. British knights, such as Gawain, might be portrayed as honourable in the French romances but were often criticized, condemned, or derided for their inability to rise up to chivalric standards. The thirteenth-century French prose *Tristan*, for example, depicted Gawain as an evil murderer. (See Chapter 3: Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History of the Kings of Britain*, Arthurian Literature and the 'Matter of Britain', and The *Pearl*-Poet).

But Arthur is, after all, king of the Britons, and during the Hundred Years' Wars England reclaimed Arthurian myths to define its own political and religious character. The late fourteenth century *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, as well as the contemporary *Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*, focuses not upon a French knight but upon Gawain, whose literary lineage might be traced back to pre-conquest England (his name may be Welsh in origin) and who appears in early English works such as William of Malmesbury's *Gesta Regum Anglorum* (*The Deeds of the Kings of England*) and Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* (*The History of the Kings of England*). The reclamation of Arthuriana for England did not stop with appropriating just character or plot, however. Many of these later ME romances were written in alliterative verse – which repeats the sounds at the beginnings of the words, as in the opening line of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, 'Sithen the sege and the assaut was sesed at Troye' – rather than the end-rhymed verse of their French predecessors, which was based on similar inflectional endings long dropped from ME. Scholars debate the extent to which alliterative verse survived as a vernacular tradition from earlier Old English alliterative verse (an alliterative *tradition*), or whether it was resurrected in the fourteenth century as a way to establish a separate English literary tradition that simply hearkened back to earlier Old English forms (an alliterative *revival*), but whatever the case, much of the ME Arthurian literature does not follow the French tradition in either content or form. As for Gawain's character in particular, about 20 years after the end of the Hundred Years' Wars – at the height of the internal conflict that would become known as the Wars of the Roses – the great British knight Gawain would again be represented as problematically as the earlier French tradition, this time in Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*. (See Chapter 3: Arthurian Literature and the 'Matter of Britain'.)

### **English Monarchy and the Deposition of Richard II**

Ongoing conflicts with France, the ravages of the plague, and religious discontent were not the only factors wreaking havoc on late fourteenth-century





### *Historical Context for Middle English Literature*

English society. Post-Conquest England had repeatedly seen its share of upheaval in the monarchy, but the perceived failings of Richard II and his eventual deposition in 1399 by Henry IV influenced ME literature in ways more directly than virtually any prior monarchical event. Richard II was the son of Edward the Black Prince and grandson to the reigning Edward III when, in 1376, his father, next in line for the throne, died. When Edward III died the following year, Richard became King of England at the age of 10. During Richard's minority a number of advisors (most notably his uncle, John of Gaunt) in effect ruled the country in his name, but as Richard's actions during the 1381 Revolt suggest, he was already thinking of himself as the anointed monarch of the realm.

Richard II eventually removed a number of long-standing and high-ranking nobles and replaced them with a trusted inner circle of friends. He fostered a sense of aesthetic refinement at court that, for many of his fellow countrymen, smacked somewhat of French gentility. He pursued peace more than any of his Plantagenet forefathers, seeking resolution with the Irish (after successful campaigns there in 1395–6), signing a truce with France (after marrying princess Isabella of France), and refusing to pursue a campaign against the Scots. At home, he continued to levy more and more taxes on his subjects, thus alienating many of the powerful members of the merchant classes. In 1398 Richard banished his cousin, Henry Bolingbroke, son of John of Gaunt, for ten years. When John of Gaunt died, Richard seized all Bolingbroke's possessions, inciting Henry to return to England with force to reclaim his lands and goods. In 1399, while Richard was on a campaign in Ireland, Henry swept through Southern England, gathered powerful allies and entered London. Some leaders, especially the aristocracy who felt snubbed by Richard, and the merchants who felt over-taxed, welcomed his return with open arms and urged Henry to take the crown himself. Upon Richard's return, Bolingbroke forced him to abdicate the throne, and Henry was crowned as the first Lancastrian (a different branch of the House of Plantagenet, the royal house of English Kings, from which Richard II descended) King of England. Richard was subsequently imprisoned in the Tower of London, where he died (or some say, was murdered) in 1400. With the reign of Henry IV came renewed hostilities with France, increased conservatism at court, and rising persecution of social and religious liberties enjoyed during Richard's reign.

The literature of Richard II's reign (Ricardian Literature) was often interested in proper rule, a common theme throughout the Middle Ages. Ricardian political allegory and social commentary ran the gamut from the overt to the oblique. For instance, the Prologue to the B Text of *Piers Plowman* includes the famous scene where a bell is placed around a cat's neck (the 'belling of the cat'), which is commonly read as an allegory for John of Gaunt's role as





### *The Medieval British Literature Handbook*

advisor to and guardian of the young Richard II, and this image reappeared elsewhere, such as in the short political allegory, 'On the Times'. Poems such as *Richard the Redeless* and 'There is a busche that is forgrowe' further criticized Richard's protected counsellors. In the late 1380s, John Gower dedicated the first version of his *Confessio Amantis* to Richard II, but his subsequent revisions in the 1390s shifted that dedication to Henry IV.

This militant change of monarchs, rather than the approved succession defined by primogeniture, called into question the authority and validity of the monarchy itself, a concern that Henry IV addressed throughout his reign by making every attempt to legitimize his rule, usually by pursuing both war with France for ancestral lands and by supporting his new Archbishop, Arundel, in Arundel's crackdown on religious dissent at home. Lancastrian political literature is markedly more restrained in its criticism of the Crown than was Ricardian literature. Whereas a political poem such as *Richard the Redeless* referred to and criticized specific people and policies during Richard II's reign, Lancastrian political poems such as *Mum and the Sothsegger* were much more circumspect in their criticisms. Lancastrian poets like Thomas Hoccleve and John Lydgate enjoyed almost laureate status in part due to their overt Lancastrian sympathies. Henry IV and Henry V both supported Lydgate's poetry, as well as Lydgate's promotion of Chaucer, to further create an English literary and linguistic identity, and Lydgate's works reflect this patronage. For example, Lydgate's *Siege of Thebes* echoes language from the Treaty of Troyes, the agreement that named Henry V successor to the crown of France after the English victory at the Battle of Agincourt. Well into the Early Modern period, authors such as Shakespeare (in his history plays devoted to Richard II, Henry IV and Henry V) helped legitimize the Lancastrian dynasty, even as that dynasty was threatened from within by baronial conflicts. (See Chapter 3: John Lydgate.)

### **The Wars of the Roses and the Transition to the Early Modern Period**

After the closing battles of the Hundred Years' War in the 1450s, English nobles began amassing local armies to protect their lands from civil unrest throughout England. The Wars of the Roses, as later history would refer to it, represented a battle over the throne between the House of York and the House of Lancaster, both of whom traced their lineage to Edward III and therefore claimed right to the throne. The Wars of the Roses lasted from 1455 to 1487 and all but ended with the accession of Henry VII to the throne in 1485. With the rule of Henry VII and his son Henry VIII in 1491, there came about a consolidation of power in the monarchy and in the merchant classes. This consolidation of power eventually allowed England's imperial ventures subsequent to Columbus' 'discovery' of America in 1492. (See Chapter 1:





### *Historical Context for Middle English Literature*

Redefining the Period and Extending the Medieval, and Chapter 3: War of the Roses.)

Apart from the political and social upheaval caused by the war, the end of the fifteenth century saw a major shift in the English language. William Caxton's introduction of the printing press to England in 1476 brought with it, among other things, greater regularization of the language, since the press was able to disseminate large numbers of like texts. It also ushered in an era wherein more people of all classes would have access to literary production in the vernacular. (See Chapter 3: William Caxton.) Even prior to Caxton, vernacular texts spread throughout the countryside, due in part to increased manuscript production. At the same time, vernacular drama carted across the countryside, or was performed by the brethren of guilds, in towns and cities like Chester and York. The proliferation of medieval drama in the fifteenth century helped secure the vernacular as a literary commonplace, just as Caxton imprinted the vernacular on a new book culture. Throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, English underwent subtle but ongoing shifts in pronunciation, so much so that the language of fourteenth- and early fifteenth-century literature is dramatically different with respect to pronunciation from literature of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a phenomenon known as 'the Great Vowel Shift'. The British Isles contained (and will probably always contain) a rich variety of regional dialects, but Chaucer's London dialect eventually became the English standard from the Early Modern Period onwards.

### **Conclusion**

The same features that mark its beginnings mark the end of the ME literature's historical era: a war that helped define English national identity and the ongoing transition of a language. Even so, the literature of the later Middle Ages is not exclusively about war, or politics, or religion, or strife. On the contrary, as you shall see throughout this volume, ME literature is rich and varied, and it is interested in the same things in which many of us today are interested, like humour, loss, desire, anger, frustration, adventure, fear, and, of course, the many forms of love. But those historical events particular to the Middle Ages, the historical context which this chapter only briefly touches upon, shaped the way medieval authors wrote about those issues and help make ME literature both recognizable in its passions and yet fascinating in its eccentricity.





*The Medieval British Literature Handbook*

## Study Questions

1. Briefly summarize the important characteristics of the following historical events and social movements, including their dates:
  - The Conquest / Invasion of England
  - The Martyrdom of Thomas Becket
  - The *Magna Carta*
  - Lateran IV
  - The Ordinance of Labourers and The Statute of Labourers
  - The Great Schism / Avignon Papacy
  - Lollardy
  - The Plague
  - The Peasant's Revolt
  - The Deposition of Richard II
2. For a work of ME literature that you are reading or have read, list the adjectives used to describe a specific characters. Using an etymological dictionary, identify whether those words derive from French or English/Germanic origins or from some other language.
3. Given the events of 1066, why do you think there is relatively little literature that remains in ME from the twelfth to thirteenth century?
4. Today, Christianity is divided into a number of denominations (Catholic, Episcopalian, Lutheran, Baptist and many others). How do you think the late medieval period differed from the contemporary period by having a unified and centralized Church?
5. King Arthur is one of the most recognizable figures from the Middle Ages. What effect would it have to associate him with the Crusades?
6. Compare two different accounts of the Crusades and discuss their relative approach to 'the enemy' and to the Crusades themselves, for example, in:
  - An Arab account: Al-Makrisi's Account of the Crusade of St. Louis in the *Medieval Sourcebook* (<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/makrisi.html>).
  - A Christian Account: Guy, A Knight: Letter from the Sixth Crusade in 1249 in the *Medieval Sourcebook* (<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/1249sixthcde-let.html>).
7. Make a list of the changes that Lollards wanted to make to the Church. For each one, discuss the ramifications of that change and how it would affect the power and role of the Church in England. See, for example, the following online sources that discuss Lollard beliefs and propositions, including:
  - The Harvard Chaucer Page (<http://www.courses.fas.harvard.edu/~chaucer/special/varia/lollards/lollards.html>).
  - The *Catholic Encyclopedia* entry on Lollardy: (<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/09333a.htm>).
  - The Lollard Society, an academic organization devoted to the study of Lollardy: (<http://lollardsociety.org>).





*Historical Context for Middle English Literature*

8. The next time you are in a classroom, or any room with a number of people (especially friends and family), note how many there are and imagine half of them being dead within the year (roughly the European mortality rate of the plague of 1348). How do you think that would affect your world? Imagine how you might deal with such loss and compare that to how you see death handled in ME literature versus contemporary accounts.
9. Compare and contrast the Deposition of Richard II with changes of power in contemporary societies in the First, Second and Third Worlds. What accounts for the similarities and differences?
10. *Web Quest:* Do a web search for the term 'crusade(s)' or 'plague(s)' and identify the different uses to which the terms are put. How many are used with a contemporary political or social slant? How many are used as a historical reference to the medieval period? What kinds of websites use the terms and in what ways? What are the strengths and weaknesses of using such historically inflected terms for contemporary situations?





*The Medieval British Literature Handbook*

## Middle English Timeline, 1066–1492

Date	Historical and Cultural Events	Ruler	Literary and Cultural Texts
<b>Eleventh Century</b>			
1066	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Edward the Confessor Dies</li> <li>Harold II (Harold Godwinsson) crowned</li> <li>Harold Hardrada of Norway invades England – defeated at Stamford Bridge by Harold II</li> <li>William Duke of Normandy invades</li> <li>Battle of Hastings – William defeats Harold II</li> <li>William I (the Conqueror) crowned first Norman King of England</li> </ul>	Edward the Confessor, Harold II (Godwinsson), William I	
1067	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Work begins on Tower of London</li> </ul>	William I	
1072	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>William I invades Scotland</li> </ul>	William I	
1086		William I	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Domesday Book</i> completed</li> </ul>
1087	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>William I dies</li> <li>William II crowned</li> </ul>	William II	
1095	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Pope Urban preaches the First Crusade</li> <li>Eight crusades take place between 1096 and 1270</li> </ul>	William II	
1099	Crusaders capture Jerusalem	William II	
<b>Twelfth Century</b>			
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Mabinogion</i> (Welsh Epic)</li> <li>Geoffrey of Monmouth (Welsh), <i>Prophecies of Merlin</i> (1135) and <i>Historia Regum Britanniae</i> (1137)</li> <li><i>The Owl and the Nightengale</i> (late twelfth century)</li> </ul>
1100	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>William II assassinated</li> <li>Henry I ascends to the throne</li> </ul>	Henry I	
1129	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Empress Matilda (daughter of Henry I and widow of Emperor Henry V) marries Geoffrey the Handsome (Count of Anjou; Plantagenet)</li> </ul>	Stephen	





### Historical Context for Middle English Literature

Date	Historical and Cultural Events	Ruler	Literary and Cultural Texts
1141	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Matilda deposes Stephen</li> <li>• Matilda then driven out by an uprising and Stephen is restored to the throne</li> </ul>	Stephen Matilda Stephen	
1143		Stephen	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• William of Malmesbury (d. 1143), <i>Gesta Regum Anglorum</i> and <i>Historia Novella</i> narrates English history from 1066, includes references to Arthur as an historical person.</li> </ul>
1152	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Henry (later Henry II) marries Eleanor of Aquitaine (formerly married to King of France)</li> </ul>	Stephen	
1153	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Henry of Anjou (son of Matilda) invades England and forces Stephen to name him heir to the throne</li> </ul>	Stephen	
1154	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Henry II crowned</li> </ul>	Henry II	
1155	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Henry II appoints Thomas a Becket as Chancellor</li> </ul>	Henry II	
1160–80		Henry II	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wace, <i>Roman de Brut</i></li> <li>• Chretien de Troyes (at French court)</li> <li>• Marie de France (at English court), <i>Lias</i> and <i>Fables</i></li> </ul>
1162	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Henry II appoints Thomas Becket Archbishop of Canterbury</li> </ul>	Henry II	
1170	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Becket murdered</li> </ul>	Henry II	
1189	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Richard I (Coeur de Lion; the Lion Hearted; son of Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine) crowned</li> </ul>	Richard I	
1190	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Richard I leads the Second Crusade</li> </ul>	Richard I	
1191–4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Richard conquers Cyprus and Jaffa; makes peace with Saladin; captured by Duke Leopold of Austria; turned over to Emperor Henry VI; ransomed and returned to England</li> </ul>	Richard I	





## The Medieval British Literature Handbook

Date	Historical and Cultural Events	Ruler	Literary and Cultural Texts
1193	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• First English merchant guild established</li> </ul>	Richard I	
1199	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• John Lackland, youngest son of Henry II, crowned</li> </ul>	John	
<b>Thirteenth Century</b>			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Nibelungenlied</i> (German Epic)</li> <li>• Gottfried Von Strassburg, <i>Tristan and Isolde</i> (c. 1210)</li> <li>• <i>Roman de la Rose</i> – Guillaume de Lorris (c. 1235) and Jean de Meuns's continuation (c. 1275)</li> <li>• Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274), <i>Summa Theologica</i></li> </ul>
1200–25		John	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Layamon's <i>Brut</i></li> <li>• <i>Ancrene Riwe</i> (aka <i>Ancrene Wisse</i> – manual for anchoresses)</li> <li>• The 'Katherine Group'</li> </ul>
1207–13	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• John and Pope Innocent III altercations over Archbishop of Canterbury appointment</li> </ul>	John	
1209	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cambridge University founded</li> </ul>	John	
1213	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• John agrees to be subject to the Pope</li> </ul>	John	
1215	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Magna Carta</i> establishes feudal rights of barony, provides rights in England to the Church, protects property from the crown</li> <li>• Fourth Lateran Council</li> </ul>	John	
1216	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Henry III crowned (at age 9)</li> </ul>	Henry III	
1221	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dominicans establish order at Oxford</li> </ul>	Henry III	
1224	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Franciscans at Oxford and Cambridge</li> </ul>	Henry III	
c.1240	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 'Great Council' now referred to as 'Parliament'</li> </ul>	Henry III	





### Historical Context for Middle English Literature

Date	Historical and Cultural Events	Ruler	Literary and Cultural Texts
1250–99		Henry III	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>King Horn, Floris and Blancheflur, Havelok, Arthour and Merlin, Sir Tristrem</i> (metrical romances)</li> <li>• Roger Bacon, <i>Opus Majus</i></li> </ul>
1269	• Rebuilding of Westminster Abbey	Henry III	
1272	• Edward I ('Longshanks') crowned	Edward I	
1274	• Dominicans at Cambridge	Edward I	
1290	• Edward I expels all Jews from England	Edward I	
1295	• Representative Parliament – First Parliament to include broad representation	Edward I	
1296	• Edward I deposes John Balliol from throne of Scotland	Edward I	
1297	• William Wallace of Scotland defeats English army	Edward I	
1298	• Edward I defeats William Wallace and re-takes Scotland	Edward I	
<b>Fourteenth Century</b>			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dante's <i>Divine Comedy</i> (1307–21)</li> <li>• Petrarch</li> <li>• Giovanni Boccaccio: <i>Filostrato</i> (1335), <i>Filocolo</i> (1338), <i>Decameron</i> (1351)</li> <li>• <i>Gesta Romanorum</i> (c. 1350)</li> <li>• <i>Mandeville's Travels</i> (c. 1357)</li> </ul>
1300–50		Edward I	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Ywain and Gawain</i></li> <li>• <i>Bevis of Hampton and Guy of Warwick</i> (romances)</li> <li>• Robert Mannyng <i>Handlyng Synne</i></li> <li>• <i>Land of Cokaygne</i></li> </ul>
1305	• Capture and execution of William Wallace	Edward I	





## The Medieval British Literature Handbook

Date	Historical and Cultural Events	Ruler	Literary and Cultural Texts
1306	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Robert the Bruce leads Scottish rebellion and is crowned King of Scotland</li> </ul>	Edward I	
1307	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Edward I dies (en route to battle Robert the Bruce)</li> <li>Edward II crowned</li> </ul>	Edward II	
1314	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Robert the Bruce defeats Edward II at the Battle of Bannockburn achieving Scottish independence</li> </ul>	Edward II	
1315	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Great Famine in England</li> </ul>		
1327	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Edward II deposed, murdered</li> <li>Son Edward III crowned king</li> </ul>	Edward III	
1333	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Edward III defeats Scots</li> </ul>	Edward III	
1337–40	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>French invade Aquitaine</li> <li>Edward III declares himself King of France</li> <li>Hundred Years War begins (ends 1453)</li> </ul>	Edward III	
1346	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Battle of Crécy – Edward III invades France and defeats larger French force</li> </ul>	Edward III	
1348	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Order of the Garter established</li> <li>Black Death (bubonic plague) reaches England (30–50% of English population dies)</li> </ul>	Edward III	
1349	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ordinance of Labourers</li> </ul>	Edward III	
1350–99		Edward III	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Pearl</i> manuscript (c. 1400), includes four texts: <i>Pearl</i>, <i>Patience</i>, <i>Cleanness (Purity)</i>, <i>Sir Gawain and the Green Knight</i></li> <li><i>Alliterative Morte Arthur</i></li> <li><i>Winner and Waster</i> (Alliterative)</li> </ul>
1351	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Statute of Labourers</li> </ul>	Edward III	
1356	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Battle of Poitiers – Edward the Black Prince (eldest son of Edward III) captures King John II of France</li> </ul>	Edward III	





### Historical Context for Middle English Literature

Date	Historical and Cultural Events	Ruler	Literary and Cultural Texts
1360–70		Edward III	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chaucer, <i>Romance of the Rose</i> (trans.)</li> <li>• William Langland, <i>Piers Plowman</i> (A-text)</li> </ul>
1361	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Plague in England</li> </ul>	Edward III	
1362	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• English language required in court pleas</li> </ul>	Edward III	
1368	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Duchess Blanche – wife of John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster (son of Edward III) – dies</li> </ul>	Edward III	Chaucer, <i>Book of the Duchess</i> (after Blanche's death)
1370–80		Edward III	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• John Gower, <i>Cinkante Balades</i> and <i>Mirour de l'Omme</i></li> <li>• York Corpus Christi plays (first references)</li> </ul>
1373	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• John of Gaunt leads invasion of France</li> </ul>	Edward III	
1374	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• John of Gaunt returns to England and assumes control of government (during old age of Edward II and illness of the Black Prince)</li> </ul>	Edward III	
1376	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The 'Good Parliament'</li> <li>• Death of Edward the Black Prince</li> <li>• John Wyclif calls for reforms</li> </ul>	Edward III	
1377	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Edward III dies</li> <li>• Richard II (aged 11, son of the Black Prince and grandson of Edward II) crowned</li> <li>• John of Gaunt controls government during Richard's minority</li> <li>• 'Bad Parliament' reverses decisions of the 'Good Parliament' of 1376</li> </ul>	Richard II	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• William Langland, <i>Piers Plowman</i> (B-text)</li> </ul>
1378	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Great Schism (aka Western Schism or Papal Schism) begins – Papal courts and rival Popes in Rome and Avignon</li> </ul>	Richard II	





## The Medieval British Literature Handbook

Date	Historical and Cultural Events	Ruler	Literary and Cultural Texts
1380–90		Richard II	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wycliffite English Bibles</li> <li>• <i>Cloud of Unknowing</i></li> <li>• Chaucer, <i>House of Fame</i>, <i>Parliament of Fools</i>, <i>Troilus and Criseyde</i>, Boethius' <i>Consolation of Philosophy</i> (trans.); <i>Canterbury Tales</i> begun</li> <li>• John Gower, <i>Vox Clamantis</i>, <i>Confessio Amantis</i></li> </ul>
1381	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Peasant's Revolt</li> <li>• Wyclif denies transubstantiation</li> </ul>	Richard II	
1388	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 'Merciless Parliament' condemns advisors of Richard II</li> </ul>	Richard II	Julian of Norwich, <i>Showings</i>
1389	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Richard II (aged 22) assumes power</li> </ul>	Richard II	
1390–99		Richard II	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Parliament of Three Ages</i> and <i>St. Erkenwald</i></li> <li>• William Langland, <i>Piers Plowman</i> (C-text)</li> <li>• <i>Pierce the Ploughman's Crede</i></li> <li>• Chaucer, <i>Canterbury Tales</i> (in process) and <i>Treatise of the Astrolabe</i></li> <li>• Henry Knighton, <i>Chronicle</i></li> </ul>
1399	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Death of John of Gaunt</li> <li>• Gaunt's son, Henry of Bolingbroke, deposes Richard and is crowned Henry IV</li> <li>• Richard II murdered</li> </ul>	Henry IV	
<b>Fifteenth Century</b>			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Christine de Pisan (d. 1431)</li> <li>• Gutenberg Bible (1450)</li> </ul>





## Historical Context for Middle English Literature

Date	Historical and Cultural Events	Ruler	Literary and Cultural Texts
1400–50			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stanzaic <i>Morte Arthur</i></li> <li>• Hoccleve, <i>La Male Regle</i> (c. 1406) and <i>Regiment of Princes</i> (c. 1412)</li> <li>• <i>Dives and Pauper</i></li> <li>• Lydgate: <i>The Troy Book</i> (c. 1420), <i>Siege of Thebes</i> (c. 1422), <i>Pilgrimage of the Life of Man</i> (1428), <i>Fall of Princes</i> (c. 1438)</li> <li>• Early Paston Family Letters</li> <li>• <i>Book of Margery Kempe</i></li> </ul>
1400	• Owen Glendower of Wales rebels against England	Henry IV	Chaucer dies
1401	• Persecution of the Lollards	Henry IV	
1406	• Henry, Prince of Wales, defeats Welsh	Henry IV	
1413	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Henry IV dies</li> <li>• Henry, Prince of Wales, becomes Henry V</li> </ul>	Henry V	
1414	• Lollard Revolt – Sir John Oldcastle executed	Henry V	
1415	• Battle of Agincourt – Henry V invades and defeats France	Henry V	
1414–7	• Council of Constance ends Great Schism	Henry V	
1422	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Henry V of England and Charles VI of France die</li> <li>• Henry VI (9 months old) King of England (Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester is Regent)</li> </ul>	Henry VI	
1429	• Joan of Arc rescues Orleans English siege	Henry VI	
1430	• Joan of Arc captured	Henry VI	
1431	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Joan of Arc burned as a witch</li> <li>• Henry VI of England crowned King of France in Paris</li> </ul>	Henry VI	
1436	• Henry VI assumes power at age of majority	Henry VI	





## *The Medieval British Literature Handbook*

<i>Date</i>	<i>Historical and Cultural Events</i>	<i>Ruler</i>	<i>Literary and Cultural Texts</i>
1450–99			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cycle Plays: The <i>Towneley Cycle</i> and the <i>N-Town Plays</i></li> <li>• <i>Mankind</i></li> <li>• John Capgrave, <i>Chronicle of England</i></li> <li>• Sir Thomas Malory (d. 1471), <i>Le Morte d'Arthur</i></li> </ul>
1453	• Hundred Years War ends	Henry VI	
1454	• Richard, Duke of York, Regent during Henry VI insanity	Henry VI	• Gutenberg press
1455	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Henry VI (Lancaster) removes Richard (York)</li> <li>• War of the Roses (Civil War) begins between houses of York and Lancaster (1455–87)</li> </ul>	Henry VI	
1485		Henry VII	
1492	• Columbus contacts West Indies	Henry VII	

