

history of middle english literature

History of Middle English Literature

history of middle english literature offers a fascinating glimpse into a transformative period in English literary tradition. Emerging after the Norman Conquest of 1066 and lasting roughly until the late 15th century, Middle English literature represents a vibrant blend of linguistic evolution, cultural shifts, and artistic innovation. This era bridges the gap between Old English texts like *Beowulf* and the Renaissance works of Shakespeare, encapsulating a time when the English language itself was undergoing dramatic changes. Exploring this history not only enriches our understanding of medieval society but also highlights the roots of modern English storytelling.

The Context Behind the History of Middle English Literature

To truly appreciate the history of Middle English literature, it's essential to understand the socio-political and linguistic backdrop of medieval England. The Norman Conquest introduced Norman French as the language of the ruling elite, law, and culture, while Latin remained dominant in religious and scholarly contexts. English, once the language of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, was relegated mostly to the lower classes.

The Linguistic Shift: From Old English to Middle English

Between 1100 and 1500, English evolved significantly. This period saw the simplification of Old English grammar and the infusion of thousands of Norman French and Latin words into the English vocabulary. The result was a hybrid language—Middle English—that was more flexible and expressive, setting the stage for literary flourishing. The history of Middle English literature is inseparable from this linguistic transformation, as it influenced not only vocabulary but also narrative styles and themes.

Impact of the Norman Conquest on Literature

The Norman Conquest's impact on literature was profound. For nearly two centuries, French was the language of power, and English writers had to navigate this environment carefully. Initially, English literary production diminished, but gradually, a resurgence occurred as English-speaking writers began to reclaim their language. This renaissance was fueled by a growing sense of English identity and the changing political landscape, especially after the Hundred Years' War, which fostered national pride and a renewed interest in English storytelling.

Key Literary Works in the History of Middle English Literature

Middle English literature is marked by a rich tapestry of genres, ranging from religious allegories to chivalric romances and vernacular poetry. These works are invaluable for their insight into medieval life, values, and beliefs.

Geoffrey Chaucer and The Canterbury Tales

No discussion of the history of Middle English literature would be complete without Geoffrey Chaucer, often hailed as the Father of English literature. Chaucer's magnum opus, *The Canterbury Tales*, is a collection of stories told by pilgrims traveling to Canterbury Cathedral. Written in the late 14th century, it showcases the diversity of medieval society through vivid characters and a range of literary genres, including satire, romance, and morality tales. Chaucer's use of Middle English vernacular was revolutionary, as it made literature accessible to a broader audience beyond the clergy and aristocrats.

Other Notable Works and Authors

While Chaucer stands out, many other authors contributed to the vibrant history of Middle English literature:

- *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: A chivalric romance blending folklore and Christian symbolism, highlighting ideals of knighthood.
- *The Pearl Poet*: Known for religious and allegorical poems exploring themes of loss and redemption.
- *William Langland's Piers Plowman*: An allegorical narrative poem that critiques social corruption and religious hypocrisy.
- *Julian of Norwich*: Her mystical writings, particularly *Revelations of Divine Love*, offer profound spiritual reflections.

These works collectively reveal the era's preoccupations with faith, morality, and social order, reflecting a society in flux.

The Role of Manuscripts and the Rise of Vernacular Literature

During the Middle English period, literature was primarily transmitted through handwritten manuscripts. The painstaking process of copying texts meant that books were rare and expensive, often commissioned by wealthy patrons or religious institutions. Despite this, the rise of vernacular literature—works written in English rather than Latin or French—was a significant milestone.

The Influence of the Printing Press

The invention of the printing press by Johannes Gutenberg in the mid-15th century revolutionized literature's accessibility. William Caxton introduced the printing press to England in 1476, allowing Middle English texts to be reproduced more widely and consistently. This technological advancement played a crucial role in preserving Middle English literature and ushered in the Early Modern English period. The history of Middle English literature cannot be fully understood without recognizing how print technology helped spread the English language and its stories to a growing reading public.

Thematic and Stylistic Features of Middle English Literature

Middle English literature exhibits distinct thematic interests and stylistic traits that reflect its historical context.

Common Themes

- **Religion and Morality**: Given the Church's dominance, many works explore spiritual salvation, sin, and divine justice.
- **Chivalry and Romance**: Tales of knights, courtly love, and heroic quests were popular, embodying medieval ideals.
- **Social Critique**: Poems like *Piers Plowman* and Chaucer's satirical tales highlight societal flaws and human folly.
- **Allegory and Symbolism**: Writers frequently used allegorical figures and symbolic narratives to convey moral lessons.

Stylistic Characteristics

Middle English literature is notable for its use of alliteration, rhyme, and varied verse forms. The language's flexibility allowed poets to experiment with meter and narrative voices. Additionally, the period saw a gradual shift from oral storytelling traditions to more complex written narratives, which enriched character development and plot structure.

Why the History of Middle English Literature Matters Today

Understanding the history of Middle English literature gives us more than just historical knowledge—it provides insights into the evolution of the English language and the cultural forces that shaped it. The themes explored in Middle English texts continue to resonate, revealing human concerns about morality, identity, and society that are still relevant. For students and lovers of literature, diving into this period offers a rewarding experience, connecting the past to the present through stories that

have endured centuries.

Moreover, the history of Middle English literature encourages us to appreciate linguistic diversity and change. The transition from Old English to Middle English and eventually to Modern English is a testament to the dynamic nature of language and storytelling. Whether you're a scholar, writer, or casual reader, exploring this era deepens your appreciation for English literary heritage and its ongoing influence.

In the end, the history of Middle English literature is not just about texts—it's about the voices of medieval England echoing through time, inviting us to listen, learn, and enjoy.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is Middle English literature?

Middle English literature refers to works written in the English language from approximately 1150 to 1500 AD, a period between Old English and Early Modern English.

What historical events influenced Middle English literature?

The Norman Conquest of 1066 greatly influenced Middle English literature by introducing Norman French vocabulary and culture, leading to a blending of languages and literary traditions.

Who is considered the most famous author of Middle English literature?

Geoffrey Chaucer is considered the most famous Middle English author, best known for his work 'The Canterbury Tales'.

What are some characteristic features of Middle English literature?

Middle English literature often features a mix of French, Latin, and Old English vocabulary, themes of chivalry and courtly love, religious allegory, and a growing use of vernacular language.

How did the Black Death impact Middle English literature?

The Black Death led to social and economic changes that influenced literature, including a focus on mortality, social critique, and a shift towards more personal and vernacular expression.

What role did the printing press play in the history of Middle English literature?

The introduction of the printing press in the late 15th century helped standardize Middle English and made literature more accessible, facilitating the transition to Early Modern English.

Can you name other notable Middle English literary works besides 'The Canterbury Tales'?

Other notable works include 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,' 'Piers Plowman' by William Langland, and various religious and allegorical texts.

How did Middle English literature reflect societal changes of its time?

Middle English literature reflected societal changes such as the rise of the middle class, shifting religious views, and the decline of feudalism through themes, characters, and language.

What languages influenced Middle English literature?

Middle English literature was influenced primarily by Old English, Norman French, and Latin, resulting in a rich and diverse vocabulary and literary style.

Additional Resources

History of Middle English Literature: An Analytical Exploration

history of middle english literature traces a transformative period in the evolution of English language and literary expression, bridging the gap between Old English traditions and the burgeoning modern English vernacular. Spanning approximately from the late 11th century to the late 15th century, this era encapsulates a dynamic linguistic and cultural shift influenced by socio-political upheavals, such as the Norman Conquest, and the gradual rise of a more accessible literary culture. Understanding the history of Middle English literature not only sheds light on the linguistic metamorphosis but also reveals the diverse thematic concerns and stylistic innovations that characterized this pivotal epoch.

The Historical Context of Middle English Literature

The history of Middle English literature cannot be disentangled from the broader historical currents of medieval England. The Norman Conquest of 1066 was a watershed moment that redefined the linguistic landscape. Norman French became the language of the ruling class and administration, while Latin dominated scholarly and ecclesiastical discourse. English, relegated largely to the common people, underwent significant lexical and syntactic changes due to French influence. This linguistic hybridization gave birth to Middle English, a language that served as a fertile ground for new literary forms and themes.

The gradual re-emergence of English as a literary medium in the 13th and 14th centuries was partly propelled by a growing sense of national identity and the decline of French as the dominant tongue. The rise of the merchant class and increased literacy among the laity also contributed to a more vibrant literary culture. This period saw the proliferation of manuscripts, the establishment of universities, and the early stirrings of print technology, all of which played roles in shaping Middle English literature.

Language and Linguistic Features

A crucial aspect in the history of Middle English literature is the linguistic environment itself. Middle English is characterized by a fluid orthography, reflecting the lack of standardized spelling and regional dialectal variation. Unlike Old English, which had a relatively fixed grammar, Middle English exhibited a simplification of inflections and a greater reliance on word order.

Some distinctive linguistic features include:

- Increased use of French and Latin loanwords, enriching the vocabulary.
- Reduction in case endings and verb conjugations compared to Old English.
- The emergence of a more flexible syntax, allowing for expressive literary experimentation.
- Pronunciation shifts that later contributed to the Great Vowel Shift.

These features made Middle English literature accessible to a broader audience and allowed writers to explore new poetic and prose forms.

Prominent Genres and Themes

The history of Middle English literature is marked by a diverse array of genres, reflecting the complex social fabric of medieval England. Religious texts, chivalric romances, allegories, and vernacular poetry all flourished during this time.

- **Religious Literature:** Given the dominance of the Church, religious and didactic works were prevalent. Texts such as sermons, saints' lives, and biblical paraphrases served both educational and spiritual purposes.
- **Romances and Epic Poems:** Middle English saw the adaptation of continental romances into English, often imbued with local flavor. These works typically featured themes of chivalry, courtly love, and heroic exploits.
- **Allegorical and Moralistic Works:** Allegory became a powerful narrative device. The famed "Piers Plowman" by William Langland used allegory to critique social injustices and religious hypocrisy.
- **Lyric and Popular Poetry:** Ballads and folk songs captured the everyday experiences and emotions of common people, blending oral tradition with literary form.

Key Figures in Middle English Literature

Central to the history of Middle English literature are its seminal authors, whose works have endured as cultural touchstones.

Geoffrey Chaucer (c. 1343-1400)

Often hailed as the “Father of English Literature,” Chaucer’s contributions epitomize the maturation of Middle English as a literary language. His magnum opus, **The Canterbury Tales**, offers a panoramic view of 14th-century English society through a series of framed narratives told by pilgrims en route to Canterbury. Chaucer’s innovative use of vernacular English, coupled with his keen social observation and mastery of various poetic forms, marked a significant departure from the primarily Latin and French literary traditions.

William Langland

Best known for **Piers Plowman**, Langland’s work is a complex allegorical poem that explores themes of spiritual redemption and social ethics. The poem’s fragmented, dream-vision structure and its engagement with contemporary religious debates highlight the evolving nature of Middle English literary expression.

Other Notable Writers

The period also includes figures such as:

- John Gower, whose morally driven poetry complemented Chaucer’s more humanistic approach.
- Julian of Norwich, one of the earliest known female English mystics whose **Revelations of Divine Love** offers profound theological insight.
- The anonymous author of **Sir Gawain and the Green Knight**, a masterpiece of Arthurian romance blending chivalric ideals with complex symbolism.

The Role of Manuscripts and the Transition to Print

The history of Middle English literature is inseparable from the material culture of writing and book production. Manuscripts were painstakingly copied by hand in monastic scriptoria and later by secular scribes. The labor-intensive process meant that literary works were often circulated in limited numbers, making each manuscript a unique artifact.

The advent of the printing press in England in the late 15th century, notably through William Caxton's efforts, revolutionized the dissemination of Middle English texts. Printing facilitated wider access to literature, standardized spelling to some extent, and preserved works that might otherwise have been lost. This technological shift laid the groundwork for the Early Modern English period and the flourishing of Renaissance literature.

Comparative Perspective: Middle English vs. Old English Literature

While Old English literature is renowned for works like **Beowulf**, characterized by alliterative verse and a focus on heroic and pagan themes, Middle English literature exhibits a more varied linguistic and thematic palette. The influence of Norman culture introduced courtly romance and continental literary motifs, while the vernacular nature of Middle English allowed writers to address a broader social spectrum.

This comparative evolution reflects a progression from a predominantly oral, elite culture to a more literate and socially diverse literary environment. Middle English literature's adaptability and inclusivity arguably set the stage for the rich literary innovations of the Renaissance.

Enduring Legacy and Influence

The history of Middle English literature is foundational to the development of English literary tradition. Its authors and texts not only reflect the linguistic shifts of their time but also engage with universal human concerns—faith, morality, love, social order—that continue to resonate.

The survival and study of Middle English literature provide critical insight into medieval society and the origins of modern English. Today, scholars and enthusiasts alike recognize its importance in tracing the genealogy of English literary forms and the democratization of literature.

In exploring the history of Middle English literature, one uncovers a tapestry of linguistic evolution, cultural negotiation, and artistic innovation that has profoundly shaped the trajectory of English letters.

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history of middle english literature: Middle English Literature Christopher Cannon, 2013-04-18 This book provides a boldly original account of Middle English literature from the

Norman Conquest to the beginning of the sixteenth century. It argues that these centuries are, in fundamental ways, the momentous period in our literary history, for they are the long moment in which the category of literature itself emerged as English writing began to insist, for the first time, that it floated free of any social reality or function. This book also charts the complex mechanisms by which English writing acquired this power in a series of linked close readings of both canonical and more obscure texts. It encloses those readings in five compelling accounts of much broader cultural areas, describing, in particular, the productive relationship of Middle English writing to medieval technology, insurgency, statecraft and cultural place, concluding with an in depth account of the particular arguments, emphases and techniques English writers used to claim a wholly new jurisdiction for their work. Both this history and its readings are everywhere informed by the most exciting developments in recent Middle English scholarship as well as literary and cultural theory. It serves as an introduction to all these areas as well as a contribution, in its own right, to each of them.

history of middle english literature: *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature* David Wallace, 2002-04-25 This was the first full-scale history of medieval English literature for nearly a century. Thirty-three distinguished contributors offer a collaborative account of literature composed or transmitted in England, Wales, Ireland and Scotland between the Norman conquest and the death of Henry VIII in 1547. The volume has five sections: 'After the Norman Conquest'; 'Writing in the British Isles'; 'Institutional Productions'; 'After the Black Death' and 'Before the Reformation'. It provides information on a vast range of literary texts and the conditions of their production and reception, which will serve both specialists and general readers, and also contains a chronology, full bibliography and a detailed index. This book offers an extensive and vibrant account of the medieval literatures so drastically reconfigured in Tudor England. It will thus prove essential reading for scholars of the Renaissance as well as medievalists, and for historians as well as literary specialists.

history of middle english literature: *The Making of Middle English, 1765-1910* David Matthews, 1999 Before the 1760s -- with the major exception of Chaucer -- nearly all of Middle English literature lay undiscovered and ignored. Because established scholars regarded later medieval literature as primitive and barbaric, the study of this rich literary heritage was relegated to antiquarians and dilettantes. In *The Making of Middle English, 1765-1910*, David Matthews chronicles the gradual rediscovery of this literature and the formation of Middle English as a scholarly pursuit. Matthews details how the careers, class positions, and ambitions of only a few men gave shape and direction to the discipline. Mostly from the lower middle class, they worked in the church or in law and hoped to exploit medieval literature for financial success and social advancement. Where Middle English was concerned, Matthews notes, these scholars were self-taught, and their amateurism came at the price of inaccurately edited and often deliberately improved texts intended for a general public that sought appealing, rather than authentic, reading material. This study emphasizes the material history of the discipline, examining individual books and analyzing introductions, notes, glossaries, promotional materials, lists of subscribers, and owners' annotations to assess the changing methodological approaches of the scholars and the shifts in readership. Matthews explores the influence of aristocratic patronage and the societies formed to further the editing and publication of texts. And he examines the ideological uses of Middle English and the often contentious debates between these scholars and organizations about the definition of Englishness itself. A thorough work of scholarship, *The Making of Middle English* presents for the first time a detailed account of the formative phase of Middle English studies and provides new perspectives on the emergence of medieval studies, canon formation, the politics of editing, and the history of the book.

history of middle english literature: *Middle English Literature* Roger Dalrymple, 2008-04-15 Middle English is a student guide to the most influential critical writing on Middle English literature. A student guide to the most influential critical writing on Middle English literature. Brings together extracts from some of the major authorities in the field. Introduces

readers to different critical approaches to key Middle English texts. Treats a wide range of Middle English texts, including *The Owl and the Nightingale*, *The Canterbury Tales* and *Morte d'Arthur*. Organized around key critical concerns, such as authorship, genre, and textual form. Each critical concern can be used as the basis for one week's work in a semester-long course. Enables readers to forge new connections between different approaches.

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history of middle english literature: *Feminist Readings in Middle English Literature* Dr Ruth Evans, Ruth Evans, Leslie Johnson, 2005-08-04 This volume, designed with the student reader in mind, is an indispensable blend of key essays in the field with specially commissioned new material by feminist scholars from the UK and the US. It includes a diversity of texts and feminist approaches, a substantial and very illuminating introduction by the editors, and an annotated list of Further Reading, offering preliminary guidance to the reader approaching the topic of gender and medieval literature for the first time. Works and writers covered include: * Chaucer * Margery Kempe * Christine de Pisan * The Katherine group of Saints' Lives * Langland's *Piers Plowman* * Medieval cycle drama Students of both medieval and feminist literature will find this an essential work for study and reference.

history of middle english literature: Female Devotion and Textile Imagery in Medieval English Literature Anna McKay, 2024 Uncovers the female voices, lived experiences, and spiritual insights encoded by the imagery of textiles in the Middle Ages. For millennia, women have spoken and read through cloth. The literature and art of the Middle Ages are replete with images of women working cloth, wielding spindles, distaffs, and needles, or sitting at their looms. Yet they have been little explored. Drawing upon the burgeoning field of medieval textile studies, as well as contemporary theories of gender, materiality, and eco-criticism, this study illustrates how textiles provide a hermeneutical alternative to the patriarchally-dominated written word. It puts forward the argument that women's devotion during this period was a fabricated phenomenon, a mode of spirituality and religious exegesis expressed, devised, and practised through cloth. Centred on four icons of female devotion (Eve, Mary, St Veronica, and - of course - Christ), the book explores a broad range of narratives from across the rich tapestry of medieval English literature, from the fields of *Piers Plowman* to the late medieval *Morte D'Arthur*; the devotions of Margery Kempe to the visionary experiences of Julian of Norwich; Gervase of Tilbury's fabulous *Otia Imperialia* to the anchoritic guidance literature of the Middle Ages; and the innumerable (and oft-forgotten) lives of Christ, prayers, legends, and miracle tales in between.

history of middle english literature: *The Routledge Companion to Medieval English Literature* Raluca Radulescu, Sif Rikhardsdottir, 2022-12-30 The Routledge Companion to Medieval English Literature offers a new, inclusive, and comprehensive context to the study of medieval literature written in the English language from the Norman Conquest to the end of the Middle Ages. Utilising a Trans-European context, this volume includes essays from leading academics in the field across linguistic and geographic divides. Extending beyond the traditional scholarly discussions of insularity in relation to Middle English literature and 'isolationism', this volume: Oversees a variety of genres and topics, including cultural identity, insular borders, linguistic interactions, literary gateways, Middle English texts and traditions, and modern interpretations such as race, gender studies, ecocriticism, and postcolonialism. Draws on the combined extensive experience of teaching and research in medieval English and comparative literature within and outside of anglophone

higher education and looks to the future of this fast-paced area of literary culture. Contains an indispensable section on theoretical approaches to the study of literary texts. This Companion provides the reader with practical insights into the methods and approaches that can be applied to medieval literature and serves as an important reference work for upper-level students and researchers working on English literature.

history of middle english literature: *Translations of Authority in Medieval English Literature* Alastair Minnis, 2009-03-19 Minnis presents the fruits of a long-term engagement with the ways in which crucial ideological issues were deployed in vernacular texts. He addresses the crisis for vernacular translation precipitated by the Lollard heresy, Langland's views on indulgences, Chaucer's tales of suspicious saints and risible relics, and more.

history of middle english literature: *Medieval English Literature* W. P. Ker, 2023-09-17 In 'Medieval English Literature' by W. P. Ker, readers are treated to a comprehensive and insightful exploration of the literary works produced during the medieval period in England. Ker delves into the various genres and themes prevalent in this era, providing in-depth analysis and interpretation of works such as 'Beowulf' and 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight'. His scholarly approach and meticulous attention to detail make this book an essential resource for students and enthusiasts of medieval literature. Ker's elegant prose and erudite discussions place the texts in their historical and cultural context, shedding light on their enduring significance. W. P. Ker, a renowned scholar of medieval literature, brings his expertise and passion for the subject to 'Medieval English Literature'. His background in philology and literary criticism informs his work, offering readers a nuanced understanding of the texts examined in the book. Ker's dedication to the study of medieval literature is evident in his meticulous research and profound insights. I highly recommend 'Medieval English Literature' to anyone interested in exploring the richness and complexity of medieval English literary traditions. Ker's engaging writing style and profound analysis make this book a valuable companion for both students and scholars of medieval literature.

history of middle english literature: *The Cambridge History of Early Medieval English Literature* Clare A. Lees, 2012-11-29 Informed by multicultural, multidisciplinary perspectives, The Cambridge History of Early Medieval English Literature offers a new exploration of the earliest writing in Britain and Ireland, from the end of the Roman Empire to the mid-twelfth century. Beginning with an account of writing itself, as well as of scripts and manuscript art, subsequent chapters examine the earliest texts from England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales, and the tremendous breadth of Anglo-Latin literature. Chapters on English learning and literature in the ninth century and the later formation of English poetry and prose also convey the profound cultural confidence of the period. Providing a discussion of essential texts, including Beowulf and the writings of Bede, this History captures the sheer inventiveness and vitality of early medieval literary culture through topics as diverse as the literature of English law, liturgical and devotional writing, the workings of science and the history of women's writing.

history of middle english literature: *English Literature in the Age of Chaucer* Dieter Mehl, 2014-06-11 Written in an engaging and accessible manner, English Literature in the Age of Chaucer serves as both a lucid introduction to Middle English literature for those coming fresh to the study of earlier English writing, and as a stimulating examination of the themes, traditions and the literary achievement of a number of particularly original and interesting authors. In addition to detailed and sensitive treatment of Chaucer's major works, the book includes chapters on his chief contemporaries, such as John Gower, William Langland and the Gawain-poet. It also examines the often underrated contribution to the English literary tradition of his successors John Lydgate and Thomas Hoccleve, as well as the interesting and original work of the Scottish poets, Robert Henryson, William Dunbar and Gavin Douglas, who also claim Chaucer as their model. Apart from the narrative poetry of Chaucer and his followers, the book also contains chapters on the Middle English lyric; Middle English prose, including Mandeville's travels; the most original and imaginative writings of the Middle English mystics, in particular Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe; and Thomas Malory's impressive prose compilation of Arthurian stories.

history of middle english literature: A Companion to Medieval English Literature and Culture, c.1350 - c.1500 Peter Brown, 2009-10-26 A Companion to Medieval English Literature and Culture, c.1350-c.1500 challenges readers to think beyond a narrowly defined canon and conventional disciplinary boundaries. A ground-breaking collection of newly-commissioned essays on medieval literature and culture. Encourages students to think beyond a narrowly defined canon and conventional disciplinary boundaries. Reflects the erosion of the traditional, rigid boundary between medieval and early modern literature. Stresses the importance of constructing contexts for reading literature. Explores the extent to which medieval literature is in dialogue with other cultural products, including the literature of other countries, manuscripts and religion. Includes close readings of frequently-studied texts, including texts by Chaucer, Langland, the Gawain poet, and Hoccleve. Confronts some of the controversies that exercise students of medieval literature, such as those connected with literary theory, love, and chivalry and war.

history of middle english literature: A Literary History of England Albert C. Baugh, Kemp Malone, 2003-09-02 The paperback edition, in four volumes, of this standard work will make it readily available to students. The scope of the work makes it valuable as a work of reference, connecting one period with another and placing each author clearly in the setting of his time. Reviewing the first edition, The Times Literary Supplement commented: 'in inclusiveness and in judgment it has few rivals of its kind'. This first volume covers The Middle Ages (to 1500) in two sections: The Old English Period (to 1100) by Kemp Malone (John Hopkins University), and The Middle English Period (1100-1500) by Albert C. Baugh (University of Pennsylvania).

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history of middle english literature: A Companion to Old and Middle English Literature Laura Lambdin, Robert Thomas Lambdin, 2002-06-30 Old and Middle English literature can be obscure and challenging. So, too, can the vast body of criticism it has elicited. Yet the masters of medieval literature often drew on similar texts, since imitation was admired. For this reason, recent scholarship has often focused on the importance of genre. The genre in which a work was written can illuminate the author's intentions and the text's meaning. Read in light of a genre's parameters, a given work can be considered in relation to other works within the same category. This reference is a comprehensive overview of Old and Middle English literature. Chapters focus on particular genres, such as Allegorical Verse, Balladry, Beast Fable, Chronicle, Debate Poetry, Epic and Heroic, Lyric, Middle English Parody/Burlesque, Religious and Allegorical Verse, and Romance. Expert contributors define the primary characteristics of each genre and discuss relevant literary works. Chapters provide extensive reviews of scholarship and close with detailed bibliographies. A more thorough bibliography of major scholarly studies closes the book.

history of middle english literature: A Concise Companion to Middle English Literature Marilyn Corrie, 2013-12-24 This concise companion examines contexts that are essential to understanding and interpreting writing in English produced in the period between approximately 1100 and 1500. The essays in the book explore ways in which Middle English literature is 'different' from the literature of other periods. The book includes discussion of such issues as the religious and historical background to Middle English literature, the circumstances and milieux in which it was produced, its linguistic features, and the manuscripts in which it has been preserved. Amongst the great range of writers and writings discussed, the book considers the works of the most widely read Middle English author, Chaucer, against the background of the period that he both typifies and subverts. An accessible resource that examines contexts essential to understanding and interpreting writing of the Middle English period Chapters explore the distinctiveness of Middle English

literature Brings together discussion and analysis by an international team of Middle English specialists, incorporating fresh material and new insights Includes analysis of Chaucer's writings, and considers them in relation to the work of his Middle English predecessors, contemporaries and successors Incorporates discussion of issues steering the perception of Middle English literature in the present day

history of middle english literature: Later Middle English Literature, Materiality, and Culture Brian Gastle, Erick Kelemen, 2018-04-12 The essays in this volume consider the ways in which material and intellectual culture both shaped and were shaped by the literature of late medieval England. The first section, "Textual Material," reflects on cultural and social issues generally referred to as the History of Ideas, and how those ideas manifest in later medieval English texts. Essays address, for example, affect in *The Book of Margery Kempe*, rhetoric in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, anarchy in late medieval political texts, and temporality in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*. The essays in the second section, "Material Texts," examine physical objects – from pilgrim badges, to manuscripts, to money, to early printed editions – and the cultural behaviors associated with them, interpreting these objects and exploring their connections to the important literary and political texts of the age such as *Piers Plowman*, Lydgate's *Troy Book*, and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. All of the essays in this collection emerge from the relationships and connections between the issues that characterize Jim Dean's work: the cultural, material, and aesthetic aspects of later medieval English literature. So too do they reflect a movement in medieval literary studies presaged by Dean's career of scholarship and teaching, that critical approaches to literary texts are best undertaken with an understanding of the complex cultural and historical milieu that defines both the production of those texts and the production of our own work on those texts.

history of middle english literature: The Making of Felony Procedure in Middle English Literature Elise Wang, 2024-07-12 *The Making of Felony Procedure in Middle English Literature* explores the literary inheritance of criminal procedure in thirteenth to fifteenth century English law, focusing on felony, the gravest common law offense. Most scholarship in medieval law and literature has focused on statute and theory, drawing from the instantiating texts of English law: acts of Parliament, judicial treatises, the *Magna Carta*. But those whose job it was to write about the law rarely wrote about felony. Its definition was left to its practice--from investigation to conviction--and that procedure fell to local communities who were generally untrained in the law. Left with many practical and ethical questions and few legal answers, they turned to cultural ones, archived in sermons they had heard, plays they had seen, and poetry they knew. This book reads the documents of criminal procedure--coroners' reports, plea rolls, and gaol delivery records--alongside literary scenes of investigation, interrogation, and witnessing to tell a new intellectual history of criminal procedure's beginnings. The chapters of *The Making of Felony Procedure* guide the reader through the steps of a felony prosecution, from act to conviction, examining the questions local communities faced at each step. What evidence should be prioritized in a death investigation? Should the accused consider narrative satisfaction when building his plea? What are the dangers of a witnessing system that depends so heavily on a few oathworthy men? What can a jury do if the accused's guilt seems partial or complex? And what if the defendant--for whatever reason--refuses to participate in this new, still--delicate system of justice? The book argues that answers they found, and the sources that informed them, created the system that became modern criminal procedure. The epilogue offers some thoughts about the resilience and incoherence of the concept of felony, from the start of the jury trial to the present day.

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