# The Literary Ground

1.3 Anglo-Saxon Literature

An oral art

The language used in the Anglo-Saxon period is now called **Old English**. This was a mixture of the languages spoken by the Germanic tribes that invaded Britain in the 5th century and was very different from modern English.

Like much of the world's earliest literature, the **literature of the Anglo-Saxons** was first communicated **orally**. Having been passed from one person to another by way of mouth, a poem or tale could change a lot before it was finally put down in written form.

Poetry in its earliest manifestations was simply a way of preserving the history and culture of the tribe for the benefit of future generations. In Anglo-Saxon culture, the poet, or **scop**, had this special role. He knew all the stories and legends of the clan, and was the keeper of a rich poetic vocabulary and metrical rules, which he combined in different ways to compose a **lay**, a poetic composition, which he accompanied on a stringed instrument.

In terms of the improvisational nature of his art, the scop can be compared with the modern day **rapper**, who is also expected to compose his/her verses or 'rhymes' spontaneously while at the same time keep within strict metrical rules. The difference is that while the poets of old sang of the achievements of the great leaders and heroes of their clan, many modern rappers tend to boast only of their own accomplishments.
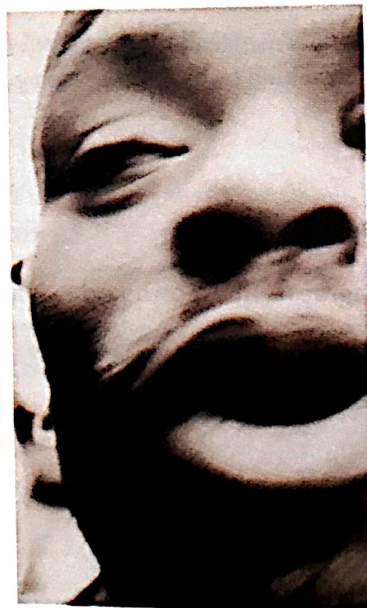
Rap culture marks a contemporary return to oral culture and tribal loyalties.
Pictured here are three members of New York's Wu-Tang Clan, whose group mythology is partially based on Hong Kong martial arts cinema. Photography by Daniel Hastings.

Lyric and epic poems

Much of the oral literature of the Anglo-Saxons has been lost to us, either because it was never written down or because the manuscripts have not survived.

However, several lyric compositions have survived, preserved in *The Exeter Book*, a volume dating from the 10th century. They are characterised by a melancholic tone, as in *The Seafarer*, in which the first-person narrator tells of his experiences of exile and solitude.

It is from epic poetry, however, that the most famous Anglo-Saxon poem, *Beowulf*, originated. Composed in Old English probably at the end of the 7th century, it is anonymous and at over 3,000 lines it is the longest work of the early period.
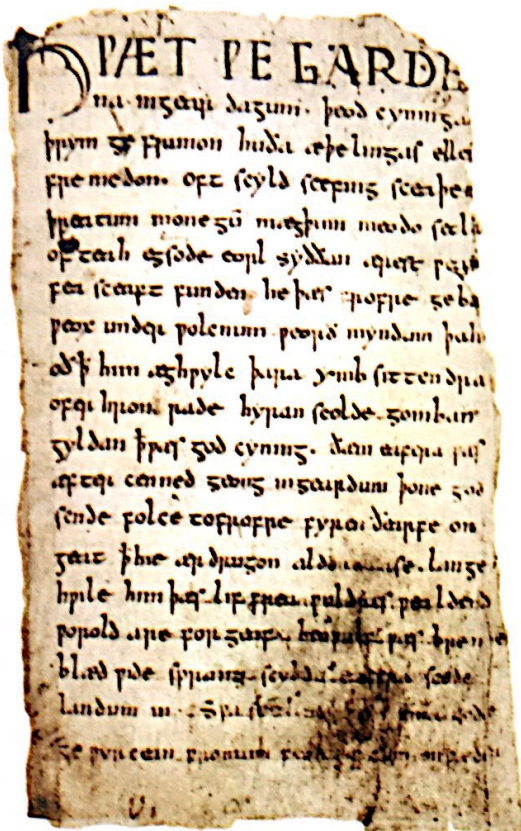
The poem, set in Scandinavia, tells the story of a hero called Beowulf, who becomes famous by helping Hrothgar, King of the Danes. Beowulf kills first a half-human monster called Grendel, who had been terrifying Hrothgar's people, and then Grendel's mother, who has promised to take revenge for her son's death. After these two acts of heroism, Beowulf eventually returns to his own country to become king. Late in life he decides to fight a dangerous dragon and is killed. In *Beowulf* we find an interesting **mix** of **religious** and **cultural references** that tell us something about the culture which produced it. The poem contains both pagan and Christian elements. It mainly derives from old Germanic sagas, but there are signs of Christian influence in the way some of the themes are developed. Another important aspect of the poem is the way it mixes myth and legend with reported historical fact.

The first page of the manuscript of *Beowulf*.
The British Museum, London.

Check what you know

1 Read about the main characteristics of early Anglo-Saxon literature and discuss the following:
   a The language used in this period.
   b How the literature of the Anglo-Saxons was first communicated.
   c The main function of poetry in this period.
   d Anglo-Saxon poets.
   e Lays.
   f Scops.

2 What is *The Exeter Book* and when does it date from?

3 Explain what the main features of *The Seafarer* are.

4 Describe *Beowulf* in terms of:
   a Language.
   b Date.
   c Author.
   d Plot.
   e Influences.
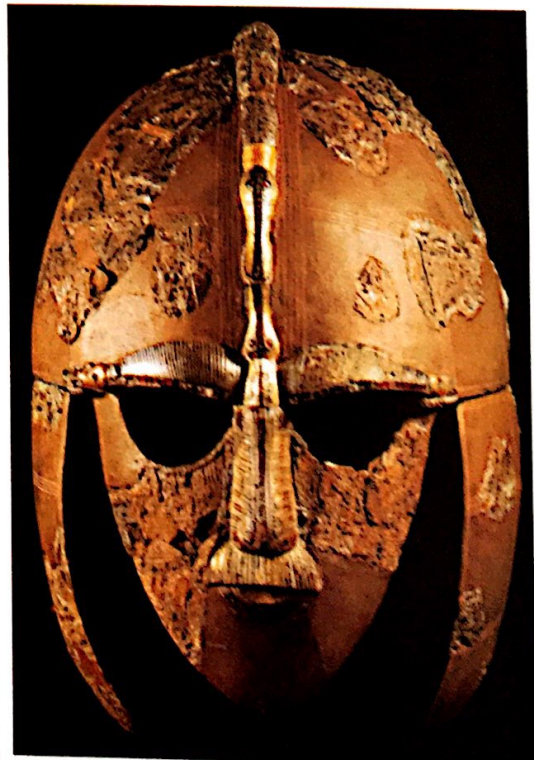
Anglo-Saxon iron helmet (7th century) from the Sutton Hoo ship-burial.
The British Museum, London.

1.4 Literature in the Late Middle Ages

An evolving language: The rise of Middle English

As we have seen, the language used in the Anglo-Saxon period is now known as **Old English** (c.700-1100). This was a mixture of the languages spoken by the Germanic tribes that invaded Britain.

Later on, the influence of the Norman invasions completely transformed both the structure and vocabulary of Anglo-Saxon English. For about two centuries after the Conquest, **Norman French** was the dominant language among the higher ranks of society, including the ruling classes and the aristocracy, while the peasants, who had no access to formal education, continued to use the native Anglo-Saxon language. In general, however, this period was a time of contamination and bilingualism.

With the growth of hostility between the French and the English from the 13th century onwards and the Hundred Years' War, French became the language of the enemy and English regained its importance, although by now it was a completely different language in terms of grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation.

Linguists usually see this period as the passage from Old English to what is called **Middle English** (1100-1450). In terms of grammar, one of the main changes to occur in Middle English was the disappearance of almost all of the Anglo-Saxon inflections. But the main influence of French over Middle English is to be found in vocabulary, in particular in the fields of law, fashion, food, architecture, art, medicine and literature. This change involved the loss of a large part of the Old English vocabulary and the addition of thousands of words from French and Latin. In some cases, however, both words survived.

At the end of this period Middle English becomes **Modern English** (1450-present day). It is interesting to notice how in Modern English two words with more or less the same meaning have often survived, one deriving from French and the other from Anglo-Saxon English. This is the case of coexisting words which came to indicate different meanings, such as, for example, the Anglo-Saxon words *pig* and *cow* and the French *pork* and *beef*, the former to describe the animal and the latter to describe the meat.

Medieval Prose

Arthurian romance

The legend of **King Arthur** dates from the 5th century, around the time of the first Anglo-Saxon invasions, when Arthur became symbolic of the Celtic Britons' resistance. It is still uncertain, however, whether Arthur was a real person – perhaps he was a great military leader or just a myth.

Scenes from the legend of King Arthur from *Roman de Tristan* (15th century).
Archivo Iconografico, Madrid.

Stories about Arthur are told in the courtly romances of the late medieval period. They refer to a timeless world where the courageous **Knights of the Round Table** battled for the love of virtuous women, and offer a full range of fantastic elements such as magicians, fairies, dragons and enchantments, all reflecting Celtic mythology. They deal with the ideals of chivalry and courtly love, a chaste quasi-religious idea of love in which women are exalted as ideal but untouchable objects. Arthurian romances were a European phenomenon, with writers from various countries such as the French poet Chrétien de Troyes, famous for his romance *Lancelot*. The most famous English version is Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, published in 1485, which represents the climax of the Arthurian tradition. Malory's version leaves out the more fantastic aspects of the legend and concentrates on the idea of chivalry – the knightly values of loyalty, bravery, honesty and glory – as a moral code of honour and as a principle of good government.

Medieval Drama

Miracle and mystery plays

In the Middle Ages **religious festivities** and the services which accompanied them were not only acts of worship for believers, but opportunities for **entertainment** as well.

During the great Christian festivals, such as Christmas and Easter, the most important events of the Old and New Testament were represented in forms of dialogues sung between a priest and the choir. These stories from the Bible were told in Latin and first given dramatic form in the Church.

In England, as in all over Europe, such performances gradually moved outside into the churchyard and then into other parts of the town. Latin was replaced by the vernacular as laypeople took over the roles previously performed by the clergy.

Medieval players weaving masks from a medieval manuscript.
Bodleian Library, Oxford.

In this way mystery or miracle plays came into being in the 13th century and developed over the next two hundred years. Although there is not a clear distinction between mystery and miracle plays, **mystery plays** usually dealt with events narrated in the Bible while **miracle plays** used stories from the lives of the saints. The name 'mystery' comes from the word *mestier*, which means 'trade': people from different trades (e.g. butchers, carpenters, etc.) performed different episodes of the plays.

The town guilds soon took charge of the performances. As the form developed and the plays became more elaborate, the various guilds of craftsmen were given charge of individual scenes on movable stages, called **pageants**. Although dealing with serious religious themes, the mystery or miracle plays were a popular form of drama and elements of humour were often added to the story.

21

The Art of **Poetry**

A **poem** – a composition written for performance by the human voice – is the oldest form of literature. The **sound** of words plays an extremely important role in poetry. The earliest poems were **oral**, not written, and many were actually sung rather than spoken and often accompanied by music and dancing. According to its oldest **classification**, poetry can be divided into three categories:

1. **EPIC**. By epic poetry we mean a long narrative poem on a great and serious subject. Early epics, such as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, were in the oral tradition. The most important Anglo-Saxon example is *Beowulf*.

2. **DRAMATIC**. By dramatic poetry we mean a poem written in the form of a monologue or a dialogue. It is written in the voice of a character assumed by the poet. A famous dramatic monologue is *Ulysses* by Alfred Tennyson.

3. **LYRIC**. Originally, a lyric was a song performed in ancient Greece to the accompaniment of a musical instrument called a 'lyre'. The term is now used for poems which are generally quite short and are written in the voice of a single speaker. The 'I' of a lyric poem should not be confused with the voice of the poet. Although it can be said that a lyric expresses personal feelings, the 'I' is frequently that of a fictional persona invented by the poet. Among the principal types of lyric are the ballad, the ode, the sonnet and the elegy.

FEATURES OF POETRY

Poetry has **three characteristics** that normally distinguish it from narrative prose: the attention given to sound, its structure on the page (i.e. its visual layout) and the way it uses language (the persistent use of what we call 'figures of speech').

Sound

Sounds are the raw material from which words, and thus poems, are composed, and the combination of sounds a poet uses contributes to the overall effect and meaning of the poem.

Rhythm

Every polysyllabic word in English is a combination of more pronounced syllables (which are called **stressed**) and less pronounced ones (which are called **unstressed**). For example, the word 'table', pronounced **TA**-ble, is a combination of a stressed followed by an unstressed syllable. The rhythm of English words comes from their stress pattern.
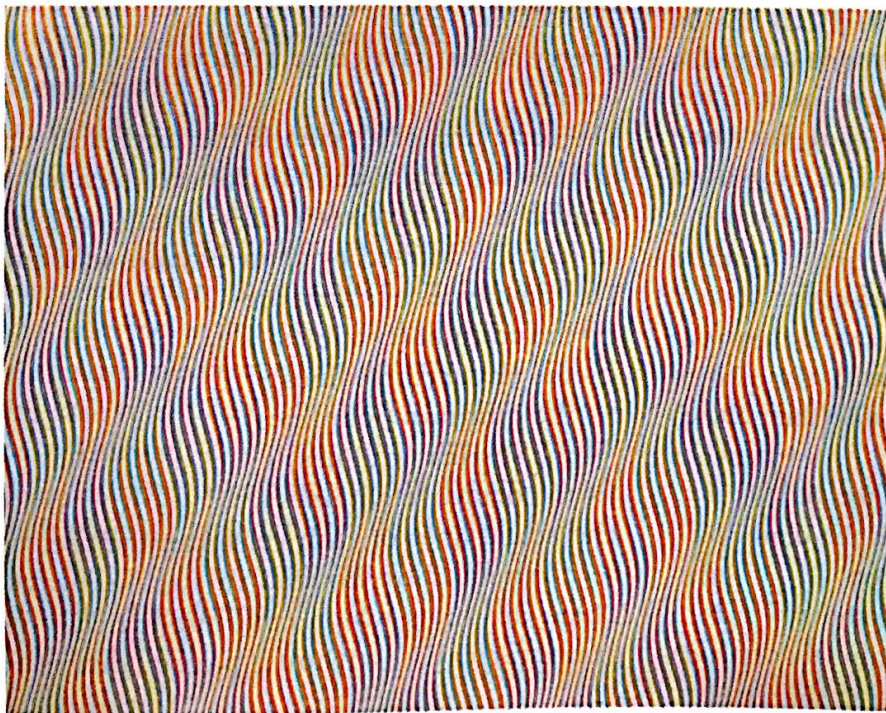
Clepsydra (1976) by Bridget Riley. Private collection.

Riley is a British exponent of Optical art, whose works aim to produce an intense sense of rhythm and movement through the repetition of patterns made of lines.

Metre

Each regular combination of syllables is called a **foot**. Each **line** of a poem has a given number of feet. This is the poem's **metre**. Let's look at the following line from a poem by Marlowe. Remember that the stress usually falls on the words which are most important to the line's meaning.

'Come **live** / with **me** / and **be** / my **love**'

Here we can see that there are four feet: we call this line a tetrameter, from the Greek 'tetra' = four. And since each of the feet is an iamb, its rhythm is iambic (unstressed/ stressed syllables). It is, in fact, an example of iambic tetrameter.

For centuries the most popular metre in English poetry was the **iambic pentameter**, from the Greek 'penta' = five, which is used in the sonnets of Shakespeare. When the iambic pentameter does not rhyme, it is called **blank verse**.

Rhyme

A rhyme involves regular repetition of consonants and vowel sounds. When the final syllables of two or more words have identical sound characteristics, usually at the end of a line, we say that they rhyme (e.g. night, bright). Rhymes are identified by the letters of the alphabet. The pattern they create is called the **rhyme scheme**. Many poems have fixed rhyme schemes. This means that the same sequence of rhyming lines is repeated throughout. For example:

'I was angry with my friend: *a*
I told my wrath, my wrath did end: *a*
I was angry with my foe: *b*
I told it not, my wrath did grow'   *b*
       (William Blake)

or
'When fainting nature called for aid,   *a*
And hovering death prepared the blow   *b*
His vigorous remedy displayed   *a*
The power of art without the show'   *b*
       (Samuel Johnson)

Assonance

By assonance we mean the repetition of a vowel sound with different surrounding consonants. For example:

'So we'll go no more a-roving'
       (Byron)

The [ou] sound is repeated four times in different words.

Alliteration

By alliteration we mean the recurrence of the same initial sound in words in close succession. For example:

'Crossing the dead dull fields with
       footsteps cold
The rain drips drearily...'
       (Philip Larkin)

Here there is a repetition of the sounds [d] and [dr].

Onomatopoeia

By onomatopoeia we mean the use of words whose sound imitates the sound that they describe. For example:

'The ploughman may have heard the splash'
       (W. H. Auden)

'Splash' denotes the sound of a body hitting water.

Structure

The second feature generally characteristic of poetry is its particular structure or visual layout.

The basic unit of a poem is the **line**. A group of lines forming a definite pattern is called a **stanza**. As we have seen, these groups of lines are usually defined by their **rhyme scheme**. The main types of stanza are:

- the **couplet** (two lines)
- the **tercet** (three lines)
- the **quatrain** (four lines)
- the **sestina** (six lines)
- the **octave** (eight lines)

The actual lines of each verse can themselves be connected or divided in various ways. There are lines which continue logically or grammatically without pause into the

following line: this technique is called run-on-line or **enjambement**.

> 'When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
> Upon those boughs which shake against the
> cold'
>
> (Shakespeare)

Language

Poetry often makes use of linguistic devices called **figures of speech**. These can also be found in a day-to-day conversation, in expressions such as 'I slept like a log' (simile) or 'golden hair' or 'he is a snake' (metaphor). The most common figures of speech are: simile, metaphor, symbol and personification.

Simile

A simile is a figure of speech that creates a comparison between two elements. The subject of the phrase is compared to something else, usually connected with 'like' or 'as', so as to expand its meaning or to modify the way we perceive it. For example:

> 'The eyes of strangers
> are cold as snowdrops'
>
> (Philip Larkin)

One function of simile can be to make something familiar seem strange or give it a peculiar resonance. Indeed, a simile is more striking if it is used to compare two things that would not normally be associated.

Metaphor

Derived from Greek, metaphor literally means 'carrying from one place to another place' and so, in literary use, has come to mean the transfer of a word from its literal meaning. A metaphor refers to an object through another one that the writer associates with it, yet the likeness is never open or declared (as it is in the case of simile where we often use 'like' or 'as'). Although the quality that the two things share is rarely obvious, we can generally say that there is at least one detectable feature that the two things have in common. Look at the following example:

> 'golden hair'

In reality hair cannot be made of gold but it can have approximately the same colour as gold. A metaphor can be in the form of a noun, an adjective, an adverb or even a verb, as in the case of these lines:

> 'Her face it bloomed'
>
> (John Clare)

> 'I can wade Grief –
> Whole Pools of it –
> I'm used to that –'
>
> (Emily Dickinson)

As with a simile, one function of a metaphor can be to make something familiar seem strange and to complicate the way we perceive something which might seem quite simple.

Symbol

Symbolism is similar to metaphor, but more ambiguous. If a metaphor refers to A through B, a symbol says that B suggests A, although A is never mentioned. Often the symbol is a concrete thing which represents an idea or feeling. For example, in common use the dove is a symbol for peace.

Personification

Personification gives abstract and inanimate things attributes that are generally considered human characteristics. It can be conveyed, for example, through the use of pronouns or possessive adjectives that usually refer to people (e.g. 'he', 'she', 'his', 'her') or through reference to actions or feelings that we would not normally associate with inanimate objects or natural phenomena. In Wordsworth's poem 'I wandered lonely as a cloud', for example, the speaker describes daffodils 'dancing in the breeze'. We know that flowers do not literally dance, but the verb conveys the daffodils' movements.

Geoffrey CHAUCER (1343?-1400)

Life and works

Geoffrey Chaucer was born in London between 1340 and 1345. His father was a wine merchant who had connections with the Court of Edward III. Geoffrey was educated well, though it remains unknown whether he went to university. From about the age of 26, Chaucer was frequently employed on important diplomatic missions both at home and abroad. The year 1372-3 marks the turning point of his literary life. He was sent to Italy where it is probable that he met **Petrarch** in Florence, and became familiar with the work of Boccaccio and Dante. In 1374 he worked as a customs official in the port of London, a job which he did not like much and later complained about in the satirical poem *The House of Fame*.

Geoffrey Chaucer (after 1400), detail, by an unknown artist. National Portrait Gallery, London.

From 1386 he represented the county of Kent in parliament and was appointed Clerk of the Works (person who oversees building work in progress) first at Westminster, then at Windsor and the Tower. It was during the last ten years of his life that Chaucer worked on his masterpiece, *The Canterbury Tales*, which was one of the first works to be printed by Caxton, in or around 1476-7. Chaucer died in 1400.

Chaucer's works are commonly divided into three periods.

The French period: Although Chaucer wrote almost exclusively in English, his early works, such as the fragment of *The Romaunt of the Rose* (after the French *Roman de la Rose* of the 12th century) and *The Book of the Duchess* are, in terms of style, highly influenced by their French models.

The Italian period: In his middle period, Chaucer expanded his stylistic range following the examples of Dante and Boccaccio. From this period date such works as *The Parliament of Fowls*, a fable with birds and other animals as characters, and *The House of Fame*, where the influence of Dante's *Divine Comedy* is at its most evident. Other works of this period include *Troilus and Criseyde* and *The Legend of Good Women*.

The English period: In the last period of his life, Chaucer was mainly occupied with the writing of *The Canterbury Tales*, which were written in Middle English and were probably begun in 1387. Chaucer originally planned to write 120 tales. At his death the project was less than a quarter complete with only 24 tales, but what remains is considered one of the greatest works ever written in English.

Focus on the text: *The Canterbury Tales*

The tales are structured as a series of stories told by a group of **thirty pilgrims** who are going to Canterbury on a pilgrimage to visit the shrine of Thomas Becket, who was murdered there. The whole cycle is prefaced by a *General Prologue*, in which the narrator gives us a brief description of each of the pilgrims, and each tale is preceded by a prologue in which the pilgrim tells us something about him/herself. It is the host, Harry Bailly, who proposes the **tale-telling competition** as a way of passing the time on the journey. Every pilgrim will have to tell two stories on the way to Canterbury and two stories on the way back, and there will be a prize for the best story. The allusion is to Boccaccio's *Decameron*, in which a group of young aristocrats gather to tell stories. But here the situation is somewhat different. The pilgrims have all met by chance and come from all levels of society. They are often rude and frequently interrupt each other.

The route of the pilgrims from London to Canterbury.

The route the pilgrimage takes is also significant. The pilgrims begin at The Tabard Inn in London, a place which is linked with pleasure and conviviality of the period, and travel towards Canterbury Cathedral, a symbol of the holy, celestial city.

The pilgrims come from **different social classes**, such as the military (e.g. the Knight), the clergy (e.g. the Friar, the Nun, the Prioress, the Monk, the Parson), the middle classes (e.g. the Merchant and the Doctor) and the trades (e.g. the Carpenter and the Miller). However, it is worth noticing that neither the aristocracy nor the poorest ranks of society are included in Chaucer's gallery of human beings.

Chaucer's pilgrims

The **characters** of *The Canterbury Tales* are presented in such a way which renders them at the same time **'types'** drawn from popular and literary tradition – the virtuous knight, the domineering wife, the libertine friar, the elegant prioress, the poor parson, the astute miller – and **individuals** in their own right. Chaucer's characters have a human and individual quality which makes them extremely vital. In this they are different from characters in medieval ballads, who can generally be considered static. Many of the pilgrims are portrayed physically, through detailed description of their clothes and tools which show their character and social standing. Moreover, the pilgrims are often described **morally**, including their qualities and their weaknesses. But Chaucer is highly modern in the way he suspends judgement of his characters, allowing them free voice so that the reader can decide for himself which are the more or less praiseworthy.

The tales themselves cover a **wide range of themes**. Among the themes are love, marriage (as is evident in the portrait of the Wife of Bath), corruption, hypocrisy and chivalry. Many of the tales are ordered in such a way as to give another point of view to the ideas proposed in the previous tale. In this sense the tales permit open dialogue between people from different levels of society in which no one has the last word.

The following extracts are translated into modern English, as Middle English, in which Chaucer wrote, is difficult for a modern reader to understand.

The Pilgrims Outside the Walls of the City of Canterbury (c.1455-62) by John Lydgate. The British Library, London.

'The Knight'

(from the General Prologue)

In his General Prologue, Chaucer/the narrator supplies the reader with a description of the pilgrims. Here is his description of the Knight.

Before you read

1 The following extract introduces the Knight. From what you know about the Middle Ages what kind of figure do you expect him to be? Choose from the following adjectives:

brave	noble	cowardly	courteous	wise
crude	rich	well-travelled	tough	cautious

Now read the extract and underline the words and phrases describing him.

A knight there was, and he a worthy man,
Who, from the moment that he first began
To ride about the world, loved chivalry,
Truth, honour, freedom and all courtesy.
5 Full worthy was he in his liege-lord's war,
And therein had he ridden (none more far)
As well in Christendom as heathenesse,
And honoured everywhere for worthiness.
At Alexandria, he, when it was won;
10 Full oft the table's roster he'd begun
Above all nations' knights in Prussia.
In Latvia raided he, and Russia,
No christened man so oft of his degree.
In far Granada at the siege was he
15 Of Algeciras, and in Belmarie.
At Ayas was he and at Satalye
When they were won; and on the Middle Sea
At many a noble meeting chanced to be.
Of mortal battles he had fought fifteen,
20 And he'd fought for our faith at Tramissene
Three times in lists, and each time slain his foe.
This self-same worthy knight had been also
At one time with the lord of Palatye
Against another heathen in Turkey:
25 And always won he sovereign fame for prize.
Though so illustrious, he was very wise
And bore himself as meekly as a maid.
He never yet had any vileness said,
In all his life, to whatsoever wight.
30 He was a truly perfect, gentle knight.

Miniature depicting a knight from a medieval manuscript.

C'era dunque un Cavaliere, un valentuomo che fin da quando aveva iniziato ad andare a cavallo aveva amato la cavalleria, la lealtà, l'onore, la liberalità e la cortesia. Valorosissimo in guerra per il suo signore, s'era spinto nei più lontani paesi cristiani e pagani, facendosi ovunque onore con la sua prodezza. Era stato alla resa d'Alessandria, più volte aveva avuto il posto d'onore in Prussia fra i rappresentanti di tutte le nazioni ed aveva guerreggiato in Lettonia e in Russia più di qualsiasi altro cristiano del suo grado. Era stato anche a Granada all'assedio d'Algesir e s'era spinto fino in Belmaria. Fu alla conquista di Layas e Satalia, e in molte nobili armate sul Mar Grande. Per ben quindici volte aveva partecipato a combattimenti mortali, e a Tramissene tre volte era sceso in lizza per la nostra fede, sempre uccidendo l'avversario. Questo prode cavaliere un tempo era anche stato col signore di Palatia a combattere contro un altro pagano turco, ricevendo sempre sovrani onori. Benché fosse valoroso, era prudente e, negli atteggiamenti, mite come una fanciulla. Non avrebbe mai detto in vita sua una parola scortese a nessuno. Era un nobile cavaliere veramente perfetto.

Translated by Ermanno Barisone

Orientation

1 What values is the Knight associated with at the beginning of the extract?

2 What are the different places the Knight has been to?

3 Why did he go there?

4 The last few lines of the text give further information. Which of the following is true? Support your choices with lines from the text.

	Line
a The Knight is extremely vain.	
b He is extraordinarily unpretentious considering his position.	
c He is very wise.	
d He is very kind and polite.	
e He is very pious.	
f He is quite vulgar.	

Exploration

1 Read the extract again. What is its rhyme scheme?

2 In drawing his portrait, the narrator is very specific about all the military campaigns the Knight had taken part in. What effect does this detailed list have? Choose from the following (more than one answer can be correct) and justify your choice.
   a It makes the text more poetic.
   b It makes the description more 'real'.
   c It provides a historical context.
   d It emphasises the qualities of the Knight expressed in the text.

3 What kind of portrait of the Knight does Chaucer give us? Choose from the following and justify your answer.

> detailed   realistic   romanticised   poetic
> abstract   stereotypical   literary   sober
> authentic   psychological

4 The text below contains some supplementary information about knights during Chaucer's times. Fill the gaps with the following words:

> courtesy   landowner   codes   soldier
> war   humble   armour

Considering the context of Chaucer's times, the term 'knight' can be interpreted in three different ways: as a social classification, in a military sense and in relation to the aristocratic

a .... denoted by 'chivalry'.
In social terms, a knight was an average
b .... without a hereditary title who often participated in local government.
In military terms, the knight was a cavalry
c .... He supplied his own horse and d .... , and sometimes a small group of foot-soldiers as well. The armed knight on horseback was the principal weapon of e ....
But apart from military courage, the knight was supposed to cultivate other disinterested virtues. In personal relations, the knight was to be f .... but resolute. He cultivated g .... and the art of making fine speeches and he balanced his ferocity as a soldier with his refinement as a lover.

Creative writing

Now write your own description of a knight.

- First of all concentrate on his physical appearance. What does the knight look like? What does he normally wear? How old is he? In your description you can use some of the following words:

> armour   visor   shield   chain mail
> sword   heraldic emblem

- Now try to connect his physical appearance to his personality. Is there a special feature which tells us something about his character? For example his eyes might be cruel and his gaze cold and ruthless.

- Remember to think about his virtues but also about his defects. While Chaucer's description presents the Knight only in a positive light, try to be more critical towards him. For example a knight may be extremely courageous but he need not be a good person.

LINKS

THEMATIC: Hero and Anti Hero
Multimedia Lab: From Pilgrimage
   to Tourism
Tennyson, 'Ulysses'
From Brit Lit to It Lit: Pavese's Ulysses

'The Wife of Bath'

Still from the General Prologue, *here is Chaucer's description of the Wife of Bath.*

Before you read

1   Which of the following do you think will be included in the description of the Wife of Bath? Choose three, then read and check your ideas.

> her clothes   the pilgrimages she has made   her house
> her skills in the kitchen   her husbands   her education

There was a housewife come from Bath, or near,
Who – sad to say – was deaf in either ear.
At making cloth she had so great a bent
She bettered those of Ypres and even of Ghent.
5   In all the parish there was no goodwife
Should offering make before her, on my life;
And if one did, indeed, so wroth was she
It put her out of all her charity.
Her kerchiefs were of finest weave and ground;
10   I dare swear that they weighed a full ten pound
Which, of a Sunday, she wore on her head.
Her hose were of the choicest scarlet red,
Close gartered, and her shoes were soft and new.
Bold was her face, and fair, and red of hue.
15   She'd been respectable throughout her life,
With five churched husbands bringing joy and strife,
Not counting other company in youth;
But thereof there's no need to speak, in truth.
Three times she'd journeyed to Jerusalem;
20   And many a foreign stream she'd had to stem;
At Rome she'd been, and she'd been in Boulogne,
In Spain at Santiago, and at Cologne.
She could tell much of wandering by the way:
Gap-toothed was she, it is no lie to say.
25   Upon an ambler easily she sat,
Well wimpled, aye, and over all a hat
As broad as is a buckler or a targe;
A rug was tucked around her buttocks large,
And on her feet a pair of sharpened spurs.
30   In company well could she laugh her slurs.
The remedies of love she knew, perchance,
For of that art she'd learned the old, old dance.

The Wife of Bath from the Ellesmere manuscript of *The Canterbury Tales* (15th century). Huntington Library, San Marino, California.
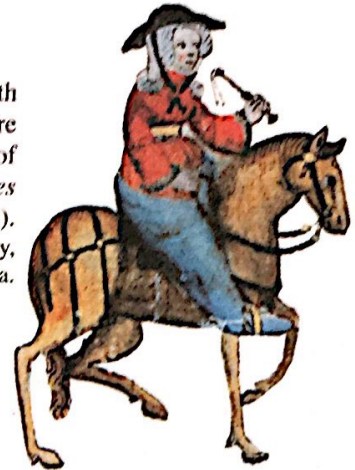
E c'era una brava Comare dei dintorni di Bath, ma, peccato, era un po' sorda. A tessere il panno era così pratica, da battere quelli di Ypres e di Gand. In tutta la parrocchia non c'era donna che avesse il coraggio di passarle avanti a far l'offerta: se mai qualcuna s'arrischiava, a lei veniva una tal bile, che usciva fuori da ogni grazia. I suoi fazzoletti erano di tessuto finissimo: giurerei che pesavano dieci libbre quelli che si metteva in capo la domenica. Le sue calze erano d'un bel rosso scarlatto, ben attillate; le scarpe morbidissime e nuove. Aveva un volto impertinente, bello, di colorito acceso. Era una donna ricca di meriti, che in vita sua aveva condotto ben cinque mariti sulla porta di chiesa, senza contare altre amicizie di gioventù… ma non è il caso di parlarne proprio ora. Tre volte era andata a Gerusalemme, e di fiumi stranieri ne aveva attraversati molti: era stata a Roma, a Boulogne, a San Giacomo in Galizia e a Colonia. Aveva insomma parecchia pratica di viaggi: i suoi denti infatti erano radi. Sul cavallo sedeva comodamente, ben avvolta da un soggólo, con un cappello in testa largo come un brocchiere o uno scudo; una gualdrappa intorno ai larghi fianchi, e ai piedi un paio di speroni aguzzi. In compagnia sapeva ridere e chiacchierare; e doveva intendersene di rimedi d'amore, poiché di quell'arte conosceva certo l'antica danza.

Translated by Ermanno Barisone

Orientation

1 Fill in the following table about the Wife of Bath.

Place where she is from ....
Profession ....
Physical description ....
Clothes ....
Marital history ....

2 Make a list of features of the Wife of Bath

Pious	Profane
offerings to church	
	five husbands

3 What do you think the phrase 'not counting other company in youth' alludes to? Why do you think he doesn't explore this subject?

4 Has she had many opportunities to travel? Where to? What for?

Exploration

1 What is the rhyme scheme of this extract?

2 What type of language does the narrator use? Choose from the following and give reasons for your choice:

> formal   colloquial   contemptuous
> affectionate   lyrical   ironic
> judgmental   playful   elaborate
> respectful   realistic   idealistic

3 Look for examples of simile and enjambement.

4 Chaucer often uses humour and irony to describe his characters. Can you find some examples in the text you have read?

5 Here is a comment that the American critic Harold Bloom has written about the Wife of Bath, adapted from his book *The Western Canon*. Fill in the gaps with the following words.

> husbands   scarlet   antecedent
> Prologue   pilgrim
> deaf   bold   vitality   Canterbury

When we first meet the 'good Wife', in the General a .... to *The* b .... *Tales*, we are necessarily impressed. [...] She is a bit c .... , for reasons we will discover later; her stockings are d .... , her expression is e .... , fair and matches her stockings. Famously gap-toothed and so presumably lustful, she has survived five f .... , not to mention other company, and is a notorious g ...., nationally and internationally. [...] What is impressive about the Wife is her endless h .... : sexual, verbal, polemical. Her exuberance has no literary i .... and could not be matched until Shakespeare created some of his characters.

FILMOGRAPHY

The Canterbury Tales (1971, Italy/France). Directed by Pier Paolo Pasolini.
The Canterbury Tales (2000, UK). Directed by Jonathan Myerson.

LINKS

THEMATIC: Female Subjectivity
C. Brontë, Jane Eyre
C. Rossetti, 'In an Artist's Studio'
Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*
Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*
Carter, 'Wolf-Alice'

Check what you know

1 When, approximately, was Chaucer born?

2 Explain why the years 1372-3 were particularly significant for him.

3 How are Chaucer's literary works normally classified? Fill in the following chart with at least one work for each period.

Period	Works
French period	

4 How are *The Canterbury Tales* structured?