**The Middle Ages**

Middle English:

* The year 1066 only marks the beginning of a new era in Britain, it does not identify the boundary between Old and Middle English.
* Middle English: beginning of the 12th century until the middle of the 15th.
* Manuscripts give an impression of considerable linguistic variety and rapid transition.
* The gradual decay of Anglo-Saxon traditions and literary practices gives this period character.
* The main influence on English was (strictly Norman) French.
* Bilingualism quickly flourished among those who crossed the social divide – English people learning French in order to gain advantages from the aristocracy, baronial staff learning English for the daily contact with local communities.

Middle English vocabulary:

* The Chronicle vocabulary is typical of what would have appeared in literary West Saxon, predominantly Germanic, with an admixture of Latin and Scandinavian.
* Several of its words have dropped from the language.
* Of the words still found today, several have altered meanings = ‘false friends’, that are always a problem in reading Middle English text because of their misleading similarity to the modern words.
* French influence became increasingly evident in English manuscripts of the 13th century – it has been estimated that some 10.000 French words came into English at that time.
* Some French loan words: cardinal, crime, chancellor, painting and peace.
* As new words arrived, there were many cases where they duplicated words that had already existed in English from Anglo-Saxon times.
* In such cases, there were two outcomes: either one word would supplant to the other (very common); or both would co-exist, but develop slightly different meanings.
* During the 14th and 15th centuries several thousand words came into the language directly from Latin.
* Some Latin loan words: history, library, lucrative and testify.
* Most of these words were professional or technical terms, such as religion and medicine, but also many words that were borrowed by a writer to produce a ‘high’ style = ‘aureate terms’
* Borrowing of French and Latin 🡪 a highly distinctive feature of Modern English vocabulary – sets of three items all expressing the same fundamental notion but differing slightly in meaning or style. The Old English word is usually the most popular one, the French one more literary, the Latin more learned.
* There was lots of borrowing from other languages 🡪 dramatic on the balance of words in the English lexicon.
* At the start of the Middle Ages, 90 percent of words were of native English origin. At the end, this had fallen to around 75 per cent.

Figurative Language:

* When a word is not used literally
* Metaphor: a comparison of two things which are not alike
* Simile: a comparison of two things using ‘like’ or ‘as’
* Synecdoche: a figure of speech where a part of something represents the whole
* Hyperbole: an exaggerated claim or statement

Beowulf (6th century?):

* Beowulf is the oldest European text written in a vernacular (i.c. common people’s) language.
* The only mediaeval copy is from the late tenth century, but the poem is probably a lot older than that: some time in the sixth century is the belief.
* The Anglo-Saxon world was very different from our own:
* Great Britain was divided into small states, each with its own king/lord.
* Few of these kings managed to remain in power for long: they tented to die young or were deposed by rivals.
* Society was dominated by lords and retainers (ondergeschikten), as depicted in Beowulf.
* For this elite, life’s central dramas were played out in the royal courts and on the battlefield.
* Retainers were kept in place and rewarded by silver and gold, in exchange for loyalty and assistance in battle. Kings were expected to pay ‘royally’ for their retainers’ support, the retainers were expected to be willing to die for their lords.
* At times of peace, poets provided entertainment. They recited (voordragen) well-known poems and accompanied themselves on the harp. This was quite a feat, Beowulf consists of more than three thousand lines of verse, written in a complex style.
* The poem’s lines are linked by alliteration (same starting letter). Rhythm is also very important.
* Poetry had to conform to complex rules: each line consisted of two halves and four stressed syllables (lettergrepen), and was associated with the adjacent lines by alliteration.
* Beowulf’s story:
* Beowulf is set in Scandinavia, at the time of the Migration of the Peoples (5th and 6th century) 🡪 the characters may be described as the forefathers of the Anglo-Saxon nation.
* Beowulf’s storyline centers on a hero of great strength, who’s famous for fighting monsters.
* The poem begins with family history of the Danish King Hrothgar.
* Beowulf travels from Geatland to Heorot, Hrothgar’s ancestral (voorouderlijk) home, to defeat the monster Grendel and his mother.
* Some years later, Beowulf is king and he tackles a dragon.
* During his last fight, he is injured by the dragon and dies of his wounds. The poem ends with Beowulf’s cremation on an enormous pyre (brandstapel)

Anglo-Saxon Riddles (early 10th century):

* An example of the interest that the Anglo-Saxons took in riddles is the Exeter book – a collection of Old English poetry with long poems and riddles. (Date from the second half of the 10th century)
* The first (Latin) riddles were introduced to England by Abbott Aldhelm (7th century)
* The oldest English riddle comes from the 8th century.
* Many educated Anglo-Saxons wrote riddles, often as questions in Latin poetry writing, or some were translations of older Latin riddles.
* The Anglo-Saxon riddle is based on the device of presenting one object or phenomenon as another.
* Use is often made of comparisons and metaphors, but the riddle usually remains vague to the modern reader.
* Old English riddles can be grouped into various types:
* By ‘level’: whether they are learned or not.
* By speaker: sometimes the speaker is an observer who describes the subject of the riddle, or sometimes the subject of the riddle.
* The riddles differ in length or style, but most conform to the rules of Old English poetry.

The Feudal System:

1. King
2. Nobles: gave money and knights to the king
3. Knights: gave protection and military to the king
4. Peasants: gave food and service to the king

King Horn:

* Probably the oldest surviving romance from the Middle Ages (written towards the end of the 13th century by an unknown author, in a simple style)
* The story begins with the death of Horn’s father and the banishment of Horn and his companions to a distant corner of the British Isles by the Saracens.
* There, Rhymenhild – daughter of the king – falls in love with Horn.
* Horn doesn’t want to marry her until he has proven himself, which he does by killing Saracens.
* Fikenhild (companion) is jealous and tells the king that Horn is planning to murder him 🡪 Horn flees to Ireland, where he kills more Saracens.
* As a reward, the Irish king offers him his daughter Reynild, but Horn is still faithful to Rhymenhild.
* Back home, he finds out that Rhymenhild is about to marry a king named Mory 🡪 Horn and his companions kill Mody’s entourage at the feast, then Horn reveals his identity to the king.
* Before marrying Rhymenhild, Horn gets off to get even with the Saracens responsible for the death of his father.
* When Horn comes back, Fikenhild has forced Rhymenhild to marry him, so Horn kills him and marries Rhymenhild.
* King Horn has all the characteristics of a romance: Horn makes the passage to manhood, there is a sharp line between good and evil, the Saracens form a threat to Horn’s ‘good’ world.

Ballads (13th and 14th century):

* A genre that developed in England in the Early Middle Ages. Its ‘golden era’ was a period of roughly 300 years, between 1200 and 1500.
* Ballads developed out of the ancient oral tradition that existed among uneducated people who could not read/write – they used ballads to communicate news, relate real or fiction, to express their opinion.
* Some were purely for amusement.
* As more people learnt to read and write, ballads became less popular, but they made a comeback in the Romantic Period and in the 20th century.
* The ballad is an uncomplicated genre that follows 12 rules (in the reader)
* No two performances of a ballad – even by the same singer – were ever the same, only the story remained the same.
* Tells a story, simple language, subjects are: betrayal, lost love, revenge and death, ABCB rime scheme.
* A ballad leaves out a lot of details and most of the time only tells the climax.

The Canterbury Tales (written between 1343-1400):

* Tells the story of a pilgrimage to the grave of Saint Thomas Becket – a bishop who was murdered in 1170 by the king’s followers.
* The prologue describes how a group of pilgrims meet in London and set out together to Canterbury. To pass time, they tell each other stories as they travel.
* The innkeeper – the person who came with the idea to tell stories – promises a free meal to the teller of the best story.
* Chaucer died before finishing the Canterbury Tales 🡪 we have 20 stories while there should have been about 120, in total 4 told by each pilgrim.

Romances:

* Late Middle Ages (from end of the 13th century): ‘romance’ genre very popular.
* For them ‘romance’ means an English-language story about adventures and romantic love. They were written in verse form, with between 1-3000 lines of verse.
* Each story has a central character: a young hero who develops in various ways as events take place.
* The knight’s chivalry, strength and courage are put to the test in the story, and he has to overcome obstacles to win the heart of his beloved.
* The hero is often aided by a close friend and opposed by an enemy: he must literally/ figuratively come of age in order to triumph over adversity.
* After many adventures, our knight achieves his goal and is rewarded.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight:

* Another celebrated romance, written in the late 14th century by an unknown author from Cheshire. Only one manuscript copy of it remains.
* The storyline is derived largely from French Arthurian tales, but it also contains older themes.
* By Mediaeval standards, the plot is well developed. It involves a logical progression from each event to the next.
* The begins on New Year’s Day, at a feast in King Arthur’s court.
* The festivities are interrupted by a giant stranger, whose skin and clothes are green, and who challenges Arthur’s knights to cut off his head with his own axe.
* Anyone who accepts the challenge will receive a blow in return from the same axe exactly a year and a day later.
* The only one willing to take up the challenge is Sir Gawain (nephew of the king), he decapitates the Green Knight, the giant picks up his own head and promises to meet him a year and a day later, then leaves.
* Ten months later (on All Saints’ Day 1 November), Gawain leaves to look for the Green Knight.
* He comes to a castle, where he is welcomed by the lord and his wife. They let him stay for a few days, the Green Chapel is close by.
* Gawain should remain behind to rest after his long journey, says the lord. He also has to give the lord all he has received during the day at the end of the day.
* For two days, the lord’s wife gives Gawain a kiss, every day one more, so Gawain has to give kisses to the lord.
* On the third day, Gawain receives three kisses and a green belt. Gawain gives the lord three kisses, but keeps the belt.
* The following day, Gawain makes his way to the Green Chapel.
* There, he found out the lord is actually the Green Knight, and his wife and he where both in a complot against Gawain.

Geoffrey Chaucer (1343-1400):

* At 16, he travelled to France to fight in the Hundred Years’ War.
* In about 1366 he married Philippa Roet and the couple were to have two sons, Lewis and Thomas.
* A year later, Chaucer entered the service of the English king Edward III.
* Chaucer did very well for himself economically, he worked in London as a tax inspector, and despite this he was able to write and to travel a lot.
* In 1385 Chaucer became a judge in the county of Kent and not long after his wife died.
* In 1389, King Richard II gave Chaucer the office of Clerk of the King’s Works, meaning that he was responsible for looking after important buildings.
* Late 1399, he moved to a house in London.
* Despite hiring a 53 year lease Chaucer was there only to live briefly, he died at the end of 1400 and got buried in Westminster Abbey, in the area now known as Poets Corner.

Robin Hood:

* Many works of medieval literature feature ‘outlaws’: people expelled from mainstream society. In many cases, they lived ‘beyond the pale’ because they were wanted by authorities for earlier crimes, but there were just as many who had been forced to feel even though they didn’t commit a crime.
* Robin Hood was such, who made his home in the forest near Nottingham.
* He gathered a band of individuals around him, the best known being Friar Tuck, Little John, Allen A dale and Maid Marian.
* He was a hero of the common people, stole from the rich and gave to the poor, always pursued by the Sherriff, whom he consistently evaded, often by use of comic tricks.
* It’s not clear whether Robin every really existed: no scholar has ever found mention of him in any official documentation.
* Nevertheless, countless stories about his deeds have been told, many as ballads.
* As it has been told and retold, the historical setting for these series has gradually changed Robin Hood, so that he didn’t become a character of the 14th but one of the century before.
* Robin Hood is one of the most popular figures in English literature.
* The story begins with Robin stopping a butcher and buying his horse and all his meat, which he then takes to Nottingham to sell.
* He sells what he brought well below the going rate 🡪 the other butchers can attract no custom.
* They reason with Robin selling the meat off so cheap and invite him to join them at a feast.
* Robin pays for the meal, giving the impression that he is easily taken advantage of. (story continues in reader)

The Wife of Bath:

* One of the best known of the Canterbury Tales.
* In her case, not only the story she tells is important, but also her own life story.
* Some of the ideas that are introduced in the Prologue recur in her tale – a knight who has problems with women.
* The tale of the Wife of Bath is about a knight of King Arthur’s court, who rapes a pretty girl.
* As punishment, the Queen order s him to find out what women really want most of all.
* He has a year to find the answer, but as he travels around the country he is given different answers.
* Eventually, he promises an ugly old woman to give her whatever she wants, if she will help him.
* The woman gives as answer that women really want control over their own lives (preferably over their husbands as well!)
* When the knight appears to deliver his answer to the queen, the woman suddenly appears and demands that the knight marries her.
* To his great joy, the woman is transformed on their wedding night into a beautiful young woman, but she then asks him to make a difficult decision: to have her old and ugly yet loyal, or to be young and beautiful but every time his friends come over she betrays him.
* He leaves the matter to his wife decision

Sir Thomas Malory (1405 – 1471):

* Author of Le More d’Arthur, one of the best known mediaeval works about King Arthur.
* Very little known is about him, but he was very probably the Thomas Malory who was born in Newbold Revel in the early 15th century.
* About 1411 he was advanced to the nobility (expensive back then) and married Elisabeth Walsh, with whom he had a son, Robert.
* He was twice elected to represent Warwickshire at the English parliament, but spent the last 20 years of his life in prison – accused of crimes as attempted murder, rape and armed assault.
* He tried a number of spectacular escapes.
* Although he was imprisoned for so long, there’s no record of him being convicted.
* Le Morte D’Arthur is a collection of 8 romances about King Arthur and his Knights. It’s not primarily about love, but about chivalry.
* Arthur’s adventures are more important that the triangular relationship between Arthur, Lancelot and Guinevere, which is a dominant theme of many stories about Arthur.
* Mallory wrote a series of dramatic tales in simple language. His work may be seen as the most important link between that of Chaucer and Shakespeare.
* Le Morte d’Arthur became the standard reference for the later stories about Arthur.

(Most important chapters of the whole Arthur epic in reader)

The knights code of chivalry

* To fear God and maintain his Church
* To serve the current lord in valor and faith
* To protect the weak and defensless
* To aid widows and orphans
* To refrain from the giving of offence
* To live by honor and for glory
* To dispise rewards of money
* To fight for the welfare of all
* To obey those placed in authority
* To guard the honor of other knights
* To avoid unfairness, meanness and lying
* To keep faith
* To speak the truth at all times
* To persevere to the end in any enterprise begun
* To never refuse a challenge from an equal
* To never turn your back on a foe