

History of English Language and Literature
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Lecture No 3
Middle English Period after Chaucer

Good morning and welcome to the course on History of English language and literature. In the last session, we saw how during the Middle English period, Chaucer had emerged as a single most important literary figure in the history of English language and literature, so much so that so many historians began to consider him as a real starting point of English literary studies and all the other things that happened before that almost fell into believe him. We also saw how Anglo-Saxon language had almost become a dead language and the Middle English dialect, the East Midland dialect which Chaucer used became the vehicle of Standard English expression. It also became the language of unity, it also led to a lot of growth of national consciousness in Britain, the nation began to get unified, and things were sounding much better than what it used to be during the Old English period.

In today's lecture, we will be taking a look at, Chaucer was very important that he almost became grew up like a banyan tree and everything was falling into blooming under him. But later historians when they see the period after Chaucer, they are all the more convinced that there was hardly anything which could be highlighted in the period after Chaucer. So in that sense, we begin to take a look at the end of Middle English period which was beginning with wars, unrest, and chaos.

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End of Middle Eng Period

- Begins with wars, unrest and chaos
- Preparation for a great age to follow – a period NOT of production but of preparation
- Spirit of Renaissance running deep and strong
- Towards a settled dynasty, a reformed religion and a people united and progressive

Some of the wars we took a look at in the earlier session itself, the Hundred Years War which lasted for almost 116 years and also sapped all the resources and energy from the growing nation of Britain. And many historians feel that Middle English period, especially the period after Chaucer towards the fag end of the Middle English period, it was not a period of production but it was considered mostly as a period of preparation. It was considered as a preparation for a great age to follow, the great age soon after Middle English period being the Elizabethan period.

And also during this time, we find the spirit of Renaissance running deep and strong, the influence of the antique literatures of Greek and Roman being quite influential in the making of English language and literature. There is a time when we also find England moving towards a more settled dynasty; many of the internal conflicts are being resolved; the tensions with the foreign nations, especially with France are getting resolved.

And we also see that England is gearing up towards more sense of national progress, more ways in which the nation could consolidate itself. We also see a reformed religion emerging, thanks to the many movements as part of Reformation. The people are also more united and progressive in nature, focusing more on the things that would add-on to a great value to the nation itself, and this is how the literary period after Chaucer gets described.

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+ After Chaucer: 15th century

- "little enough to inspire, much to repress literary genius" – about the unproductiveness of the 15th century
- Unfavourable conditions for literary production
- Low state of education
- Universities buried deep in medieval philosophy – endless controversies
- Rising middle classes – hostile to intellectual interests – mercenary and sordid spirit
- Degeneration of religion - persecution
- Wars of the Roses – 30 years struggle – House of York vs. House of Lancaster

Middle Ages – Dark Age?

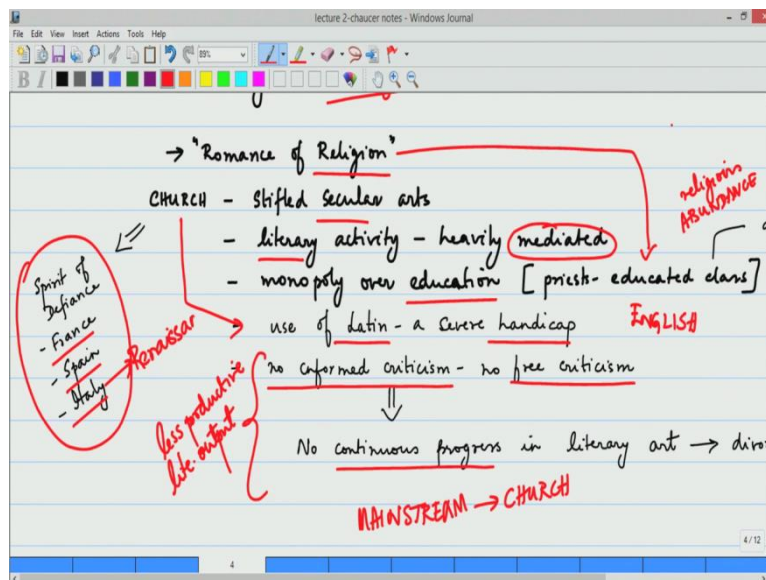
The historian, Hudson he says there was little enough to inspire and much to repress literary genius. And many historians do agree with him and we cannot agree better in fact, because we do see that there is a lot of unproductiveness in the 15th century after Chaucer. Many of

the conditions were also quite unfavorable for literary production. And one of them was low state of education in spite of the heavy investment that Church had on educating its own people and also the investments it had on the monasteries, the education institutions which were coming up.

The common people remained quite distant from all these new developments. The universities, in fact, which had to be a center of which had to be ideally a center of intellectual challenges, they were in fact buried deep in medieval philosophy. And there were endless and quite fruitless controversies about things which were not taking the nation forward in any way. This was also the period when the middle class was emerging and we do see that the middle class, they did not take kindly to the new things which were coming up.

In spite of that, they were quite hostile to the intellectual interests, which were emerging and their spirit was largely mercenary and sordid nature. We also see a degeneration of religion in spite of the reformation activities going on, there is also a large scale persecution going on. Due to these reasons, the Middle English period as many of you might have heard from other sources as well, that the Middle English period, it was also known as the Dark Ages.

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So due to various reasons, the middle Ages were also known as the Dark Ages. In fact, much of social history and general history focuses a lot on the Dark Ages and how Medieval Age was dominated by certain things which were related to religion and Church. In fact, many historians feel that the only romance which was possible during the Middle Ages was a romance of religion and this was also because the priests were mostly the educated class due

to various reasons. The Church dominated like anything during this period and we find that the Church had stifled secular arts; it had stifled literary activity. And even when some bit of literary activity was made possible, it was heavily mediated by the Church.

And in that sense, the topic, the theme, the treatment of literature and everything was dictated in certain ways by the Church. And since Church had a monopoly over education as well, the priests were mostly the educated class and they also focused on the writings which were mostly religious in nature, so we find an abundance of devotional writing during this period. And again, due to the monopoly of Church, we also find that there is an increased use of Latin and this is as against the emergence of English language during this period. And we find that the clergy sticks to Latin for quite a long time just like the courtiers are continued to speak in French for a long time.

So Latin was also a severe handicap in using and producing any kind of literature. And the most important reason for the less productive literary output, less productive literary output during this period was that there was no informed criticism at all. Any serious student of literature would know that for any kind of literature to progress, there should be a mediation and an intervention in the form of informed criticism and not just blatant kind of criticism. So because of that, literature could not continuously progress in Britain during that period.

And in addition to that, there was no free criticism either which made sure that whoever was the favorite of the Church continues to enjoy lot of popularity and lot of support from the Church, and whoever was not and whoever attempted any kind of free criticism against the activities of the Church, they suffered heavily under the hands of Church patrons and sometimes even the common man. And this also brings us to another important point that the mainstream during that period was not anything secular, the mainstream was anything secular but it was the Church itself. And the history of art and literature does teach us that; anything which is divorced, any kind of literary activity, any kind of artistic activity that is divorced from the mainstream will continue to have a very hampered kind of growth.

So what happened during the Middle Ages, what happened during what is known as Dark Ages was that because of the domination of the Church, there was hardly any literary activity being made possible, but there is also another ray of hope over here we find that a sense of spirit of defiance was found from certain neighboring European nations such as France, Spain and Italy and it was from Italy, we find the spirit of Renaissance also had begun to emerge. So all was not quite dark about the Dark Ages, there was definitely a ray of hope which was

emerging from other parts of the world. And Britain was also a part of this Renaissance's journey shortly itself.

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The slide features a title 'After Chaucer: 15th century' in purple text with a plus sign icon. Below the title is a list of eight bullet points, each preceded by a small purple square. The bullet points are: '“little enough to inspire, much to repress literary genius” – about the unproductiveness of the 15th century', 'Unfavourable conditions for literary production', 'Low state of education', 'Universities buried deep in medieval philosophy – endless controversies', 'Rising middle classes – hostile to intellectual interests – mercenary and sordid spirit', 'Degeneration of religion - persecution', and 'Wars of the Roses – 30 years struggle – House of York vs. House of Lancaster'. In the bottom right corner, there is a purple rectangular box with white text that reads 'Middle Ages - Dark Age?'. The slide has a light green background and a dark purple vertical bar on the right side.

- “little enough to inspire, much to repress literary genius” – about the unproductiveness of the 15th century
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Middle Ages - Dark Age?

And moving on, we find that it was not just the many internal conflicts, there was also this major event known as the Wars of Roses, the war spread over 30 years between the House of York and the House of Lancaster, this war also dominated the scene of British literary history for a very long time. And In fact, though the struggle was merely for 30 years, the problems began little before 30 years itself, and it was an ongoing struggle between two major noble families. It is very important to trace the trajectory of this in order to understand how these political events, how the interference of the kings and what had been happening within the royal families and their disputes were also influencing the general temperament of the nation.

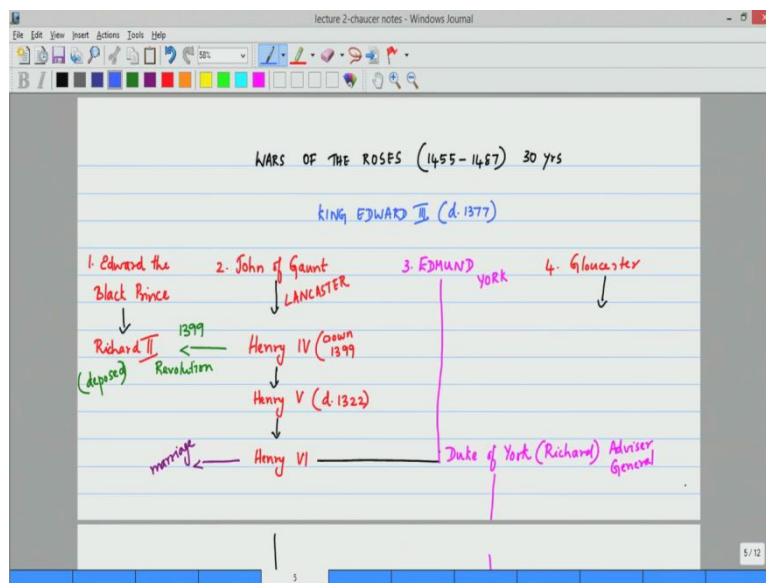
So we will continue to see amongst all these difficulties the Wars of the Roses that lasted for 30 years, also marked much of what was happening in Britain in the 15th century. In fact, alongside the Hundred Years War, the Thirty Years War was an internal struggle for power going on between the House of York and the House of Lancaster. This technically lasted for 30 years but however, we do find that the problems of this dated back to the time of Edward III leading to a lot of confusion in Britain during the 15th century because there were waging two wars, one internal, another with France.

And this had sapped much of its resources as well as its time and energy which could have gone into better productive things. So, all of these did amount to the unproductiveness of 15th century, leading us to be convinced that there was little enough to inspire and much to repress

literary genius. It becomes very important to take a look at how the Wars of the Roses was getting framed in order to understand how certain dynasties were established in England.

And we follow the history of England and try and understand it alongside the history of literature. We will get to know that it is very important to know the history of Britain, the history of how certain monarchies changed, how certain dynasties were established. It is very important in order to get a grounding of how literary tendencies were also getting shifted. So I would I would like to give a brief history of the Wars of the Roses which also includes a story of shifting loyalties and how it led to eventually the establishment of the Tudor dynasty.

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The Wars of the Roses which lasted from 1455 to 1487 30 years, it does bear a lot of weight on the history of Britain in general. For those of who are interested it is important to note that this was also the series that inspired the Game of Thrones. The series Game of Thrones is loosely, the drama in Game of Thrones is loosely based on the events which happened during the Wars of Roses between the House of Lancaster and the House of York.

This was basically a power struggle between two noble families spanning generations and this was also quite complex in nature. And here I try to recreate the scene for you leaving out certain irrelevant details and only focusing on what is essential for the understanding of the elision of certain dynasties and the formation of certain new ones. In fact, what happens was the War of Roses, it does not really begin in 1455, in fact, it dates back to a period as early as death of King Edward III in 1377.

If you remember King Edward III was the same king who even initiated the Hundred Years War and the dispute for territorial, dispute for territory with France. So King Edward III when he died, he had three living sons, John of Guant, Edmund of York and the Duke of Gloucester. Edward the Black Prince, his first son, had died much before the death of King Edward III that was much before 1377.

So this in fact had left the three sons, John of Guant, Edmund of York and Duke of Gloucester with lot of hopes about being the next crowned king. However, what happened was that soon after King Edward's death, Edward the Black Prince's son, Richard II, he gets crowned as the next king. And this was not taken very kindly obviously by the other 3 living sons. In fact, this is a saga, the Wars of the Roses is a saga of an entire generation, of 3 sons left lingering to the claims of throne and also the disputes among thereof springs that follow.

So soon after King Richard had taken charge of the English crown, we find that we find in Henry IV a very disgruntled soul, and he had raised a couple of unsuccessful rebellions against this Richard II. Initially, he was unsuccessful but eventually we do find that he was quite successful. And before me move on, this John of Gaunt we had actually encountered him even during the life of Chaucer, he was the same person who was the patron of Chaucer.

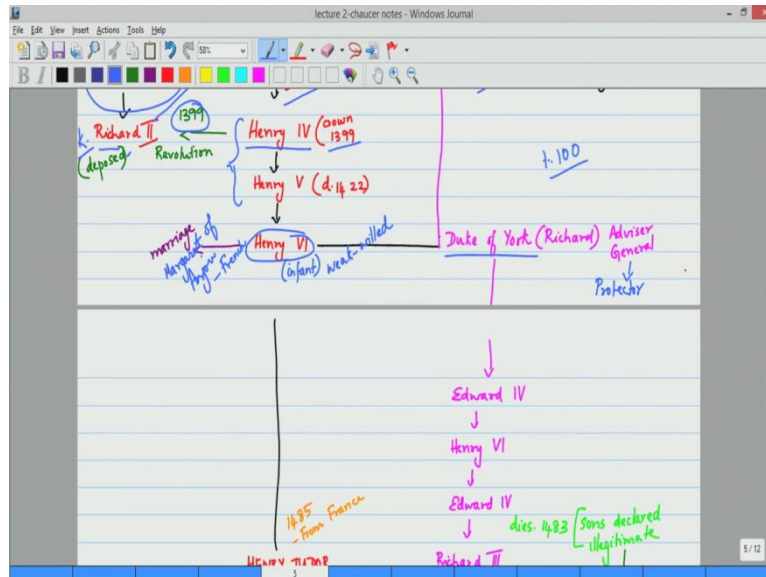
And if you remember there was a brief period when Chaucer fell into poverty and that was the time when Richard II had assumed the crown and had confiscated all the property of John Gaunt and Henry IV. And soon after, we find that Henry IV eventually launches a very successful revolution against Richard II; this is in 1399 and he is crowned the king of England by 1399. And they had a fairly smooth reign for a while at least and also this began the domination of the Lancaster group against the York group.

So basically, Wars of Roses is a series of wars waged between the Lancaster House and the York House. And the term Roses, this is also quite interesting as the Lancasters had for their symbol red rose and the Yorks had white rose, so this explains how and why this was termed as the War of the Roses. And Henry IV, he dies and his son Henry V assumes power. And Henry V also fairly had a smooth reign during his period. But however, around the same time, the Hundred Years War was also happening which led to a lot of confusions in terms of resources, in terms of managing territorial disputes, so on and so forth.

In spite of that, the House of Lancaster did assume at this point that they were going to be next monarch, the next dynasty in the land of Britain. And Henry V, however he died quite

all of a sudden in 1422, we find that Henry V had a sudden death in 1422 during one of his military combats. This had left Henry VI who was still an infant to take charge of the crown and from then onwards we find that England was falling into quite turbulent times.

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Henry VI, and he was an infant, he had many advices around him, he was also weak-willed to begin with. In fact, in history also he has gone down as the weak-willed king. He had many advisors; some of them were good, some of them just wanted to take advantage of the situation. Overall, Henry VI grew up to be a personality which was not quite admirable and he also had many moments which forced Britain to fall into debt, fall into a lot of confusion because he could not take any kind of decisions at any point of time.

And we find that what changed the fate of Henry VI and eventually the fate of Britain is his marriage with certain Margaret of Anjou, she was French. And many of the supporters of Henry VI and some of the his well-wishers assumed that this connection, this marriage alliance with a French princess is going to be of great use because that will in some form or the other alleviate some of the territorial tensions between Britain and France.

However, this did not prove to be a very wise decision because Margaret of Anjou was quite strong-willed; she had her own ambitions to pursue. And she was quite capable of raising an army on her own and even doing many of the things on her own. This was not quite an encouraging thing for Britain at that point of time. And since Henry VI was quite inept in carrying out his duties, for a brief time, we do find that the Duke of York who had descended

from the House of York, we find the Duke of York who is Richard being the advisor general to Henry VI for a brief period of time.

And also it is useful to remember that the Duke of York was hugely popular and he was very well liked by the common people, but he was not for obvious reasons favored by Margaret of Anjou. And there were specific reasons as well, one was the Hundred Years War that he (())(18:16) so because of that even for a while, Richard, the Duke of York was even banished from court and he was sent an exile to island for a brief time. However, due to various turns of events and largely due to the inept nature of Henry VI, Duke of York again came back and he assumed a greater position of power in fact, in that sense, from advisor general, he was appointed as the lord protector. So there was lot of power that he had in hand and with those powers, his ambitions also grew in enormous ways. And he had his eye on the crown like all the other descendents of Edward III.

So he came into the scene assuming that he and two of his sons, he had two sons, so both of them laid claim to the throne of England that point of time. And this was quite easy to do because Henry VI continued to be weak-willed and there was no way in which Margaret of Anjou could do much to protect his throne. So there was a series of battles going on and back and forth. And during this time, just when Duke of York was getting ready, Richard Duke of York was getting ready to be the next crowned prince of Britain; he gets killed in a battle which was set up by Margaret of Anjou.

So that kind of takes him out of the competition however, we have two of his sons lined up for putting a claim for the throne. And we do find that it becomes quite an easy succession for them because Henry VI and Margaret of Anjou together, they cannot do much. And in between Henry VI also has these bouts of mental illness which makes his case all the more difficult as well. And we find that Edward IV who is the first son of Richard of York, he quite easily assumes power and he becomes crowned as the king of England. And this again ensued another series of conflicts because until then as we can see, it was the House of Lancaster and power gets transferred, the kingly power get transferred from the House of Lancaster to the House of York, this again open another can of worms.

And we do see that they have a peaceful reign for a very short time and we also find that in between Henry VI who is that time still alive but quite inefficient to take back power, for a brief period, he is reinstated to power. But again, he does not have the capacity to hold on to power or to run a proper government at that point. And also when he is again recaptured at

this point, when is recaptured, his wife Margaret of Anjou, they had to flee from England to France along with their son and Henry VI is forced to spend the rest of his life in prison. And we also get to read from history that he loses life in prison and that is all we hear about him from then. And after that, history of Britain continued to be eventful. So Edward IV, the son of Duke of York was thrown from power, thrown away from power twice but he manages to come back both the times and also he dies in 1483.

And before that, what made him a little unpopular in between was his marriage again. We do find that in the history of Britain, especially in the lives of the monarchs the marriage alliances play a very significant role in changing the future of the nation. We do find that most of the marriage alliances also lead to great disputes, great internal disputes and also to a lot of untoward turn of events within the nation as well. In many ways, we will see later on that this all had a great implication in the way in which the literature of the period was also getting fashioned.

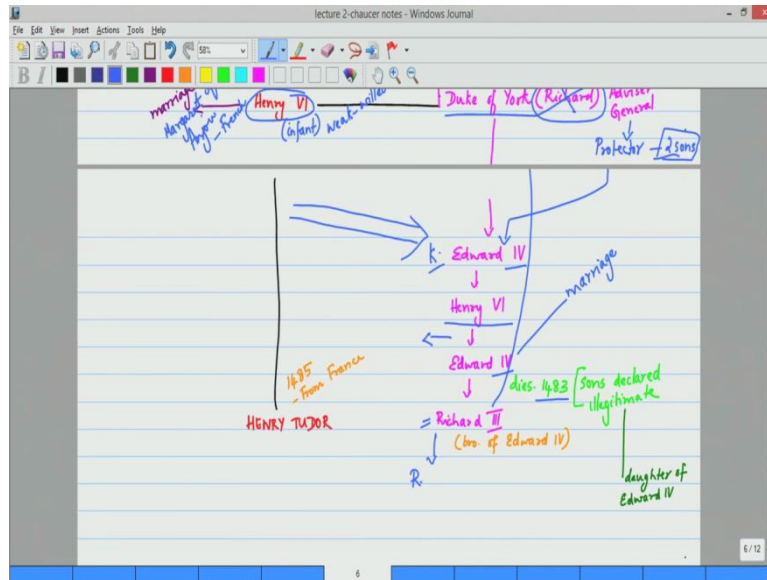
And his marriage was scheduled to happen with another French princess and many of his counsels thought that this was going to be a very wise decision as this will help solve many of the territorial disputes that existed between France and England. If you remember, let me reiterate, the Hundred Years War was still going on in the in the background, so but Edward IV was not keen on this marriage with the French princess, instead he goes and secretly marries a widow of a minor noble and this had alienated most of his allies, many of the other lords and other dukes who had given him support for him to assume power, mostly the allies of Duke of York as well, they all had felt quite unhappy with this new secret marriage that had taken place and they had even withdrawn many of the support.

But, however until his death he continued to remain in power and that had not affected his fortunes as a king for a very long time. But he dies in 1483 assuming that two of his sons can automatically inherit the crown, but as soon as he dies, Richard II who is Edward IV's brother which also means that he was the second son of Duke of York; he also had ambitions on the crown. So Richard III, as soon as Edward IV dies, he very quickly he declares the sons illegitimate because the sons were born out of wedlock and also from a secret marriage and this marriage was not recognized by the Church or by the other dominant persons in the country during that period.

So the sons were declared illegitimate; they were forced to be imprisoned and history tells us that we do not hear about those two sons after that. And it was quite a tragic incident as they

were quite young as well, the oldest son when he was ready to assume the crown; he was barely 12 years old. They also had an older sister who was a daughter of Edward IV and we do not hear much about her either except that there is a lot in store for her in the future.

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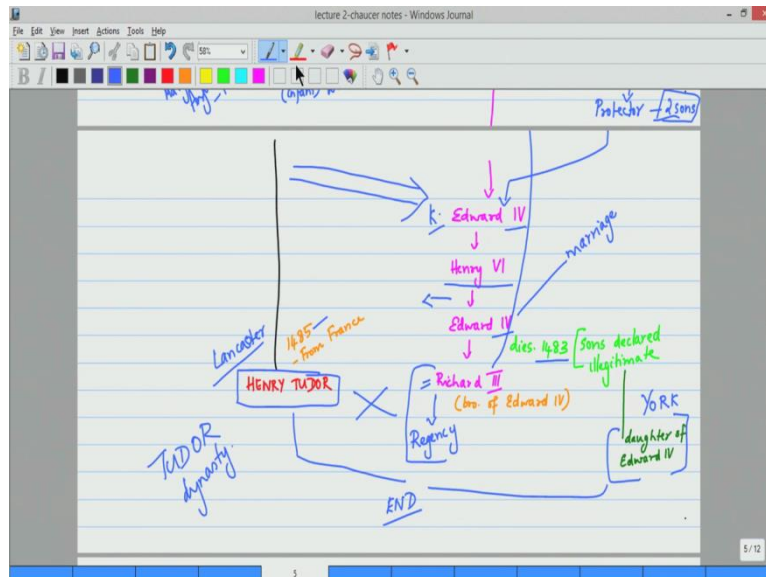
And meanwhile when all of these things are happening, Richard III conveniently takes charge of the crown but he does not become crowned as the king; instead, he is appointed as a regent. So he assumes the regency and with a lot of ambitions to become the next king of England. Meanwhile, history has other quite an expected turn of events in hand. In 1485, crossing the English Channel and from France, there emerges Henry Tudor who is going to change the history of England forever.

In fact, Henry Tudor was one of the first descendants of also a direct descendant of the first Duke of Lancaster which also makes him a Lancaster to begin with. He belongs to the House of Lancaster, so Henry Tudor arrived in the scene, he already saw how weak the courtly scene in England was and he also came with the ambitions of becoming the next king of Britain. He came all prepared, in fact, he had raised an army right from France and also because of these ongoing problems between France and England, he also got a lot of help in raising an army.

He was raised in exile and nobody knew about his existence until that point until 1485. So Richard the Richard the III was quite taken by surprise when Henry Tudor attacked in 1485 with an army that he raised from France. Not only did Henry Tudor manage to completely

wipe out the army and the power of Richard II, but he also did something which brought an end to the Wars of the Roses yeah.

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The daughter of Edward IV who was a descendant of the House of York and Henry Tudor, the descendant of the House of Lancaster, yeah, both of them they get married and here we find that the Wars of the Roses come to an end. And not only has that, with this, Henry Tudor inaugurated the Tudor dynasty. Tudor dynasty as we would see in the later ages, most important to the fashioning of literature, he find that it is during the Tudor period that the English literature begins to flourish a lot.

So the century long dispute as long as soon as it ends, it also begins it also inaugurates a fresh period in the history of Britain and also in the history of literature. So this long and complicated history, it is quite important for us in order to understand that Britain was going through turbulent times. So it was not an easy period when Britain was as you can see how complicated this scheme of things look, so Britain was going through a turbulent time all through these 100 years after Chaucer.

And it was quite a difficult time for them to focus on any other thing. All these internal disputes and alongside if you remember the Hundred Years War with France was also happening, so all of these things became quite unproductive for any of the other things to happen. But however as we pointed out at the beginning, this was just the beginning of a this was just a preparatory period for another wonderful age to follow which ensured not just political stability but also a flourishing period in terms of art and literature as well.

With the end of the Wars of Roses, we also come to the inaugural point of the Tudor dynasty. As we can see over here, it was quite a complicated turn of events. And even when we are trying to recreate the history, it becomes all the more complex and complicated to begin with. However this period was quite important in showing how the trajectory of the nation was quite influential in the trajectory of the literature itself.

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- "little enough to inspire, much to repress literary genius" – about the unproductiveness of the 15th century
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Middle Ages – Dark Age?

Yeah, moving on, we also see continuing with the concerns that we had right at the outset about the unproductiveness of the 15th century, the Wars of the Roses and the ensuing struggle that went on for 30 years and perhaps a little more, it shows us how unfavorable the conditions continued for literary production. In fact, as and when we speak, perhaps the Thirty Years War can be explained in barely 30 minutes.

However as we can see, it continued to drain the energy of the nation. It continued to shift the concerns of the middle class. It continued to affect the growth of the universality; overall it affected the intellectual thought process of the period. So with this, we also realize that soon after Chaucer because of these various reasons, there was no literary output at all. Some of the historians do have these concerns about whether this was due to a dearth of literary talent.

But we would note this significant point that even if there was literary talent available, amidst this huge chaos, it would be quite difficult to find a fertile land for making such kind of literature available also more so for making such kind of writings to flourish. And as far as the common man is concerned, there were having quite a tough time because as we also saw in one of the previous sessions, the taxations continued to increase because as Britain

was fighting wars internally as well as externally, money was needed to fund all these turn of events, so there was heavy taxation leading to an unrest peasant group.

So all of these things were also getting into the literature of the 16th and the 17th century focusing more on how the common man fared through all these difficult times. And also focusing a little bit more on Chaucer, we also noted this point that throughout 15th century and even till the beginning of the Elizabethan era in the 16th century, we do not have any notable poets who are taking the place of Chaucer.

But however we would also take look at some of the writers who existed alongside Chaucer. And in the next session, we would be focusing on the minimal literacy output which featured in the age after Chaucer that would also give a sense of continuity as we enter the 16th century soon after this. So that is all we have got about the 15th century after Chaucer. Thank you for listening and see you in the next session.