

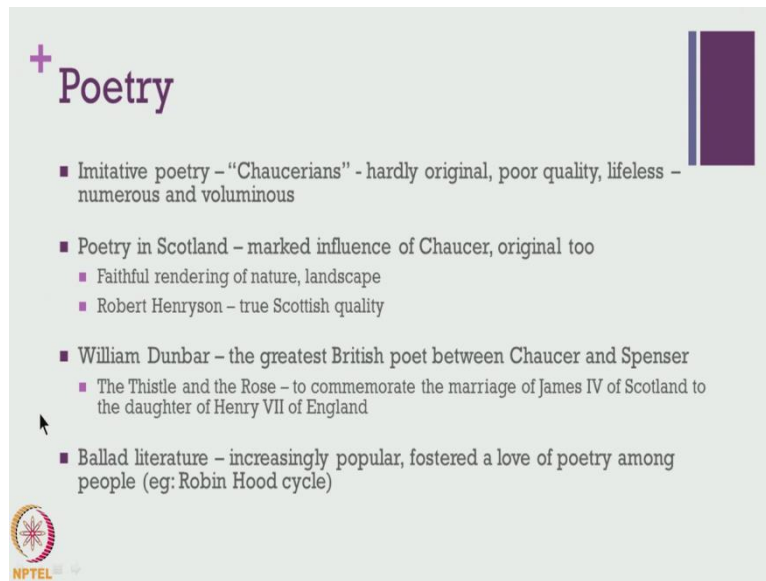
**History of English Language and Literature**  
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**Department of Humanities and Social Sciences**  
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**Lecture No 3A**  
**Middle English Period after Chaucer**

Good morning and welcome to the course on History of English language and literature. In the last couple of sessions, we have been trying to see how the history of English language laid its foundations from the early Anglo-Saxon period onwards and we progressed until almost middle of the Middle English period. In the previous session, we also saw how the progress of literature and arts was severely stifled during the Middle Ages, not just in Britain but also in certain parts of Europe.

We also saw how the influence of the Church as well as certain other social political factors including major wars fought externally as well as internally were hampering the progress and the continuity of English language and literature in the Middle Age period. And we also saw how Chaucer had emerged with a single most important literary figure in the history of literature, so much so that he even got branded as the first (1:07) of our English national poets.

So today's session, we will be taking a look at some of the other literary and nonliterary events, which in many ways could be summed up as the salient features of Middle English period. We will also be taking a look at some of the poetry which was available, poetry and prose in fact which is available during that period and some of which have survived into posterity alongside the towering figure of Chaucer.

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**Poetry**

- Imitative poetry – “Chaucerians” - hardly original, poor quality, lifeless – numerous and voluminous
- Poetry in Scotland – marked influence of Chaucer, original too
  - Faithful rendering of nature, landscape
  - Robert Henryson – true Scottish quality
- William Dunbar – the greatest British poet between Chaucer and Spenser
  - The Thistle and the Rose – to commemorate the marriage of James IV of Scotland to the daughter of Henry VII of England
- Ballad literature – increasingly popular, fostered a love of poetry among people (eg: Robin Hood cycle)

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Let us first take a look at the kind of poetry which was prevalent during the period. As obviously it sounds, most of the poetry was quite imitative in nature and most of them were nicknamed Chaucerians because they were imitating Chaucer in many different ways. The kind of poetry, the nature of poetry, the subject matter, the style, they imitated Chaucer because he was the most towering figure as well as it was supposed as the most obvious and the most appropriate thing to do.

And because of that, they almost forgot to be original, so the poetry available, it is hardly original; it has very foreign quality. Many of the historians and critics even feel that it was so lifeless that they even wonder whether there was any kind of readership for this, for the Chaucerians during the Middle English period. But in spite of that, they were numerous in number; most of the productions were quite voluminous in nature as well.

And also we find that the poetry flourished in Scotland at the same time but and also many of the historians and literary critics, they feel that the poetry which flourished in Scotland during that period, it was a little better than the poetry which was prevalent in Britain during the same period. They also had a marked influence of Chaucer in their writings; they also imitated him to a very large extent, but the distinct factor was that the Scottish poets were slightly more original and the poetry was considered a little better than what was getting produced in Britain.

And we also find that there was a very faithful rendering of nature. Most of them love to portray the landscape as they found it and there was an increased readership for them as well.

Robert Henryson is one of the renowned poets who also displayed alongside the Chaucerian influence, he also displayed a true Scottish quality in writings as well. Another important figure during this period was William Dunbar and he is considered as a greatest British poet between Chaucer and Spenser.

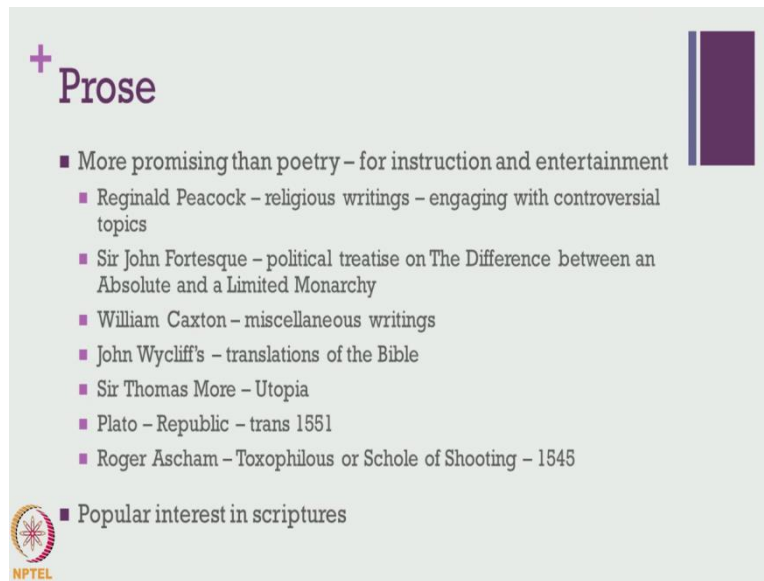
In fact, one of his works, *The Thistle and the Rose* is considered as quite commendable. This poem in fact, written to commemorate the marriage of James IV of Scotland to the daughter of Henry VII of England. Here we also find that there were lot of political connections between Scotland and England during the time and it has a direct influence on the writings of the period as well. We also find that many of the writers of this period regardless of they were of Scottish or English origin, we find them writing a lot to please the ruling class.

So even if Britain was gradually moving from feudal order towards a more democratic system, we do find that poetry and art continued to be heavily patron by people of the ruling class and the writings were mostly to please them in many different ways. So we do find an intervention of the stories of kings, the major events in their lives and also many of the writings which to praise their great deeds, so on and so forth.

Alongside conventional poetry, Ballad literature also flourished during this time. At a later period, in the 16th and 17th centuries we will also see that the ballad literature had a lot of influence in the general making of literature in Britain. We do see that ballad literature was increasingly popular in the Middle Ages because it was quite closer to what the common people knew, it also fostered love of poetry among people.


It was during this time that the stories of the Robin Hood cycle also became quite popular. When we come to prose, we find that prose was a little more promising than poetry but nevertheless it needs to be remembered that Middle English period was quite dominated by verse as we already noted that it was quite voluminous and numerous in nature. But the prose, even as it began to emerge, it showed more promise than poetry.

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**+ Prose**

- More promising than poetry – for instruction and entertainment
  - Reginald Peacock – religious writings – engaging with controversial topics
  - Sir John Fortesque – political treatise on The Difference between an Absolute and a Limited Monarchy
  - William Caxton – miscellaneous writings
  - John Wycliff's – translations of the Bible
  - Sir Thomas More – Utopia
  - Plato – Republic – trans 1551
  - Roger Ascham – Toxophilous or Schole of Shooting – 1545
- Popular interest in scriptures

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Prose was mainly produced for instruction and entertainment and this is also the time when English language began to consolidate and also the standardization and regularization of the language was also taking place alongside. Some of the major writers of prose include Reginald Peacock; his writings were mostly religious in nature. We always need to keep this at the back of our mind that Middle English period was dominated by the Church's influence, so most of the writings also had a bearing of what the Church dictated and how religion framed state of mind of the people and their conduct in general. Reginald Peacock's writings were very popular during that time because he had no hesitation in engaging with certain controversial topics of those periods.

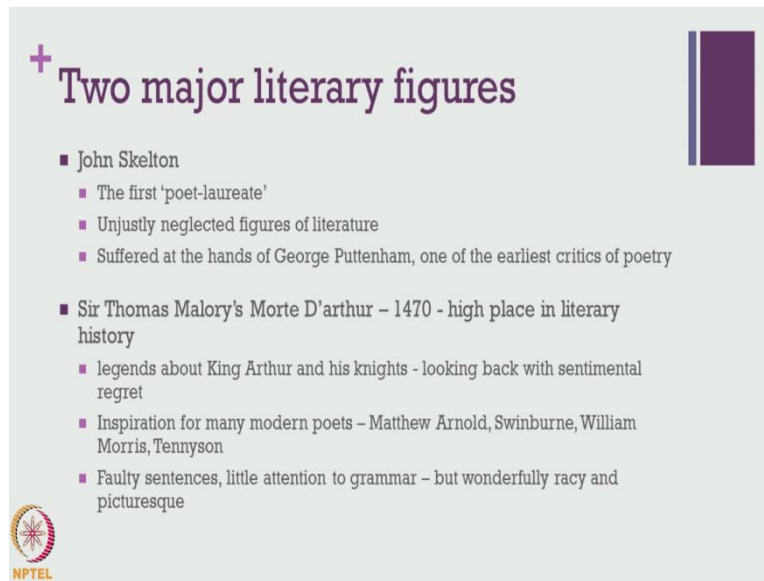
And we also find his works engaging in a debate with the prevalent religious conventions and also making the readers a little more familiar with what had been happening within the reformation of the religious system. There was Sir John Fortesque whose political treatise on The Difference between an Absolute and a Limited Monarchy is also considered as a masterpiece work of the period. We need to remember that none of these prose writings exhibited a fine sense of language or literature, but they were quite useful in laying the foundations of the early English period. And this political treatise also gives us an insight into the fact though there was a lot of stifling in terms of political freedom, in terms of free expression, free criticism, etcetera, there were also these works, sporadic works which flourished which also loved a certain kind of engagement with political debates, religious debates, etcetera.

And William Caxton who is also credited as the one who brought the printing press to England, he had a series of miscellaneous writings, none of which are worthy enough to be pondered upon, but nevertheless they were popular during those times. And John Wycliff's translations of the Bible, he produced two translations of the Bible. There is a lot of contestation about whether he originally and directly contributed to the entire translation or it was commissioned by a group of his colleagues and his allies.

But however, these two translations, the entire translation of the Bible, it does deserve a special mention because this was the literary even which brought religion closer to the common people and away from the imposing rigidities of Latin. Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* and Plato's translation of the *Republic* in 1551, Roger Ascham's treatise on the *Schole of Shooting*, these were produced almost at the fag-end of Middle English literature and also some after beginning of the 16th century.


However, we do find that all of these works together contribute to our understanding of the Middle English literature when we look at it from the contemporary point of view. And in general, there were lot of pamphlets, lot of sporadic writings which became popular and those were mostly religious in nature. And all this also helped people generate a lot of interest in scriptures. This was very important during that time because religious controversies were at its peak during that time. We also find that the Church had a very stifling influence, so it was very important that for the people to have access to some reading material on their own so that they could figure what was happening at the center. And also it enabled them to frame opinions, to understand the scriptures on their own and also to form critiques of the prevalent systems in general.

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**+ Two major literary figures**

- John Skelton
  - The first 'poet-laureate'
  - Unjustly neglected figures of literature
  - Suffered at the hands of George Puttenham, one of the earliest critics of poetry
- Sir Thomas Malory's Morte D'arthur – 1470 - high place in literary history
  - legends about King Arthur and his knights - looking back with sentimental regret
  - Inspiration for many modern poets – Matthew Arnold, Swinburne, William Morris, Tennyson
  - Faulty sentences, little attention to grammar – but wonderfully racy and picturesque



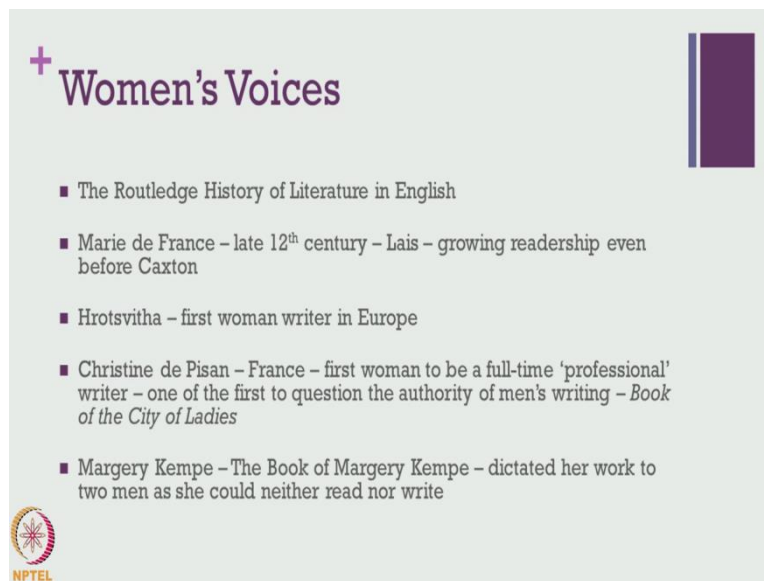
There were two major prose literary figures during this period, the first one is John Skelton. He was also incidentally the first poet-laureate of Britain and he was neglected by the literary critics and historians for a very long time. It was only in the recent times that some of his poetry has been begun to be discussed in the academic circles. In fact, he is said to have suffered at the hands of George Puttenham who is credited as one of the earliest critics of poetry, we will be seeing little more about Puttenham's works in one of the later sessions.

Sir Thomas Malory's Morte D'arthur, this is considered as a masterpiece and also it holds a high place in literary history. Incidentally, we know very little about Sir Thomas Malory and however, this work was one of the most printed works by William Caxton alongside Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, so it also tells us about the kind of popularity and the kind of influence that it had on the ages.

And Morte D'arthur is nothing but a series of legends about King Arthur and his knights and also it looks back at the Old English period with a sense of sentimental regret. So people had a lot of regard for reading Morte D'arthur because it brought alive for them a distant past which they also understood that was an instrumental in laying the foundations of their culture, their identity and the formation as a nation, so Malory's Morte D'arthur is also important for many other reasons. It lived in the posterity very well, so much so that it was an inspiration for many modern poets such as Matthew Arnold, Swinburne, William Morris and Tennyson. But Malory's Morte D'arthur was not a flawless work; it did have a lot of faulty sentences when we look at it from a later point of view. And there was very little attention paid to grammar.

But in spite of these many blemishes, *Morte D'Arthur* continues to hold its place in the literary history. It is wonderfully racy and picturesque, so much so that many of the contemporary readers also find it quite interesting. At least some of you must have now realized that there is a conspicuous absence of the women's voices in the entire series of history that we had been narrating so far. In fact, the women's presence entirely was negated by most of the historians until recently it is only in a handful of works that we find a few women writers getting mentioned.

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The slide features a purple plus sign icon and the title "Women's Voices" in a purple serif font. To the right of the title is a vertical purple bar. Below the title is a bulleted list of five items, each preceded by a small purple square. At the bottom left of the slide is the NPTEL logo, which consists of a circular emblem with a red and white design and the text "NPTEL" below it.

- The Routledge History of Literature in English
- Marie de France – late 12<sup>th</sup> century – Lais – growing readership even before Caxton
- Hrotsvitha – first woman writer in Europe
- Christine de Pisan – France – first woman to be a full-time 'professional' writer – one of the first to question the authority of men's writing – *Book of the City of Ladies*
- Margery Kempe – *The Book of Margery Kempe* – dictated her work to two men as she could neither read nor write

In fact, *The Routledge History of Literature in English* published in 2001, it gives a very short section on the women's voices of the Middle English period. The literary history there talks about one, Marie de France who lived in the late 12th century and also her work pronounced "Lais" and pronounced as "Lai", it had a growing readership even before Caxton, even before the prevalence of printing press. In fact, it was considered as a series of directions for women, how to live well and also set religious instructions on how to live a good decent life. So Marie de France is considered quite popular, her translations were prevalent through manuscripts and by word of mouth in fact. And there is a mention of Hrotsvitha who is considered as the first woman writer in entire Europe.

And there was also another French writer, Christine de Pisan. She was in fact, the first woman to be credited as a full-time professional writer. That was a rare distinction during that time in fact, women hardly pursued any proper profession during those times. And for a one to pursue a profession such as a writer was quite incredible as well. And she was incidentally one of the first women to question the authority of men's writing. In her *Book of*

the City of Ladies, we find her heavily critiquing one of the misogynist text which were quite common during that time. We find the reference to this misogynist text through the Wife of Bath's Tale in Chaucer as well. So Christine de Pisan in that sense gave a very distinct identity to women's voices during that time.

But for various reasons in literary history as well as the other various political forces that have gone into the canonization and standardization of literature, we do not find much attention given to these women's voices until recently. There was also Margery Kempe who was a hugely fascinating figure of the Middle English period; she had a book on her own name, named The Book of Margery Kempe. This was very interesting because she did not she was a person who could neither read nor write, it is said that she had dictated her work to men who produced this almost faithfully. In this book of Margery Kempe, we do find her covering a lot of things which were considered taboo during that period. She talks about her journey as a woman, her transformation, the internal desires that she had; the sexuality which was quite repressed during those times, so on and so forth.


So in many ways, women's voices do give a different sense of history of the Middle English period which is of course a topic for another lecture altogether as well. Since this is slightly outside the scope of our own course, we will not be delving too much into this, but for those of who are interested in pursuing this may find it fascinating that, an entry into the women's voices gives a very different tilt to the literature of the period and also to the ways in which history has been written in general.

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**Three Phases of Middle English**

- English in decline: 1066-1204
  - English aristocracy replaced by Norman aristocracy
  - English language – language of the lower classes
  - Almost disappeared as a written, official language – Latin, French
- English in ascent: 1204-1348
  - King John 'Lackland' – lost the English possessions in France – makes French a less important language in England
  - English – The language of communication, instruction – less dialectal differences
  - 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries – French NOT learnt even by the children of nobility
- English triumphant: 1348-1509
  - The Black Death (1348-1351) – wiped out 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of the population – labour shortage – increased the prestige of the language of the working class
  - The Hundred Years War (1337-1453) – loss of all French holdings – no longer had any important reason for learning French

The survival of English language – almost a miracle?





We do find that there were three major phases through which English language journeyed. First, was the period from 1066 to 1204, that was a period when English was in decline; secondly, 1204 to 1346 when English was in ascent and thirdly, 1348 to 1509 when English eventually triumphed. Generally, the survival of English language in spite of these various hurdles and difficulties, it is seen as something close to a miracle and we will shortly see why and how?

In 1066, after the Norman Conquest of which we saw in detail in the first session itself, we find that the English aristocracy was gradually replaced by Norman aristocracy. So there is a growing French influence during the time, so much so that politically and historically French began to dominate the scene and English language and life of English, the English lifestyle also took a back seat at least for a while. And we find that English becomes a language of the working classes; the lower classes during that time. The Anglo-Saxons, the native population was largely working either for the clergy or for the nobility whose language was Latin and French respectively. And in that sense, English as the language of the Anglo-Saxons, as a native tongue, it almost disappeared as a written and official tongue.

So all the communication, all the official documents were in Latin and in French. In fact, if we come to think about it, in any land if the mother tongue of the land is replaced entirely by another imposing foreign official tongue, often we would find that the mother tongue, the native tongue would find it very-very difficult to survive. But we do find that in spite of being almost forgotten and almost sidelined for about 200 years, English makes a miraculous comeback. And also we find a series of historical and political conjectures almost conspiring together to bring English back. And we do find this fascinating when we look at it in hindsight because there was no force deliberately pushing English into the forefront. It just so happened that the political and social history converged in such a way to assure the progress and the ascent of English language.

And from 1204 to 1348, we find that English is gradually making a comeback. And this is also because of certain other political factors. After the Norman Conquest, if you remember the history so far, we find that English had certain French possessions which they quite fond about guarding. But we do find that by the time King John Lackland takes his position, there is a certain difficulty in continuing to persist the lands in France; English also ends up losing much of its French territory.

And once it begins to lose the territorial importance, the language of France, French language also loses its prominence gradually. And this in fact, has a lot of political implication to begin with, but later we find that implication that it had on English language which was more significant than the political and historical implications. And we also find that English replaces French and Latin as the language of communication and as the language of instruction, so much so that in the 13th and 14th century, even the children of children of English nobility, they stopped learning and converging in French language.

French ceases to be the language of prominence, the language of style and the language of political importance. So this is all thanks to the ways in which English began to lose their possessions in France. Though it was seen as certain lack during that time, gradually it proves to be quite useful in the progress of English language. In fact, incidentally, John Lackland was nicknamed thus because he lacked possession of most of the land in the continent and as well as because he being the fourth son, he also had very little inheritance to claim. So the people generally nicknamed him John Lackland and the name in fact continued into the posterity as well.

It is in 1348 onwards that we find English becomes quite triumphant and the reasons for those which sound all the more quite ironical because those two events were supposedly quite tragic and quite complex in English literary history. The first event was Black Death which claimed almost one-third of the population; one-third of the population being wiped out, there was a severe labor shortage. And this labor shortage in fact led to the increase of demand of laborers and also the prestige of the language that they used began to gradually develop. So we find that alongside the losing of possessions in the French territory and this buildup of the prestige of the working class, English makes a dramatic comeback to the native speakers.

And Hundred Years War also had a very significant influence. In fact, until this point of time there was a lot of liaisoning with the French in terms of trade, in terms of interactions and mostly in terms of the conquest and war. With Hundred Years War coming to an end, English also on the one hand, English loses out in terms of its resources but on the other hand, it begins to consolidate itself as a single land free from all kinds of external foreign influences. And also once England had lost most of its holdings almost all of its holdings in France, there was no longer an important reason for any of the English nobility to learn French. And English completely replaces French and Latin as a spoken language, as a language of

communication, as the language of jurisdiction and the language of literature most importantly.

So in that sense, it is English went through a miraculous journey of survival from the Old English period till the end of the Middle English period, so that by the time the Middle English period ends, English is already consolidated into a proper standard language. various other factors also had played a significant role in this journey. Having spoken about the trajectory of English language over the periods, it would be interesting to take a look at how the language had evolved with varied influences from different sources.

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A handwritten table on a digital notepad titled 'LECTURE 3a'. The table lists words in three columns: Old English, French, and Latin, with their corresponding modern English equivalents. A blue oval encircles the entire table. To the right, a diagram shows 'FRE' (French) and 'L.A.T.I.N.' (Latin) in a circle, with 'G.M.C.' (Germanic) in the center, and an arrow pointing down to 'ENGLISH'.

OLD ENGLISH	FRENCH	LATIN	
ASK	QUESTION	INTERROGATE	FRE G.M.C. L.A.T.I.N. ↓ ENGLISH
KINGLY	ROYAL	REGAL	
HOLY	SACRED	CONSECRATE	
FIRE	FLAME	CONF LAGRATION	
CLOTHES	ATTIRE		
HOUSE	MANSION	DOMICILE	
SHEEP	AUTTON		
CALF	VEAL		

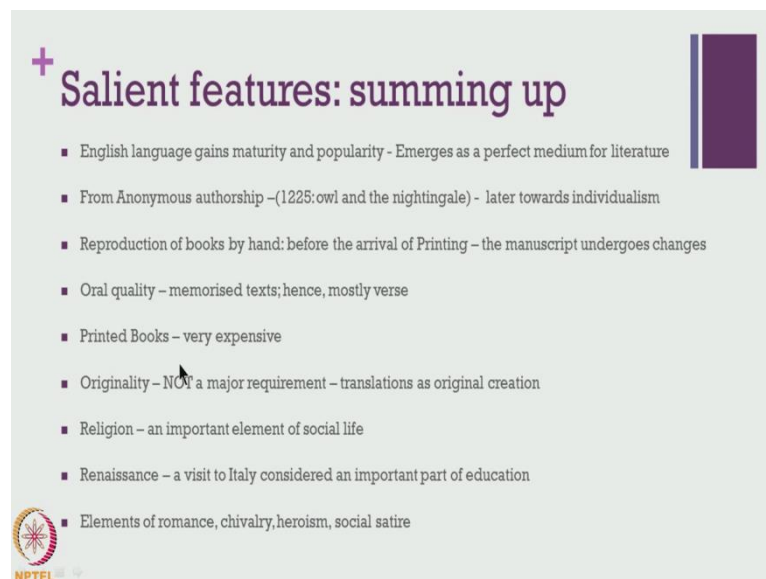
If we try to understand English language linguistically, in fact we do have the Germanic language at the core of English language and also the French influences outside. In the sense that the structure remained Germanic for a very long time, but that did not really stop the French and even Latin influences in shaping the structure as well as the vocabulary of English language. We shall not be going into the linguistic details of the same, however it would be interesting to take a look at how certain synonymical words that we do have in English language even in the contemporary has different kinds of origins. In fact, if we take a look at the Old English term 'ask', in French the term 'question' had emerged from French and the term 'interrogate' in Latin.

In the same way, the Old English term was "kingly" to which we had the French term 'royal' and the Latin term 'regal'. The Anglo-Saxon word 'holy' also had the French term 'sacred'; excuse me, and the Latin term 'consecrated'. We may note that all these terms are now

considered as proper English but it is very important for us to understand the origins and the etymology of each of these terms. In same way, the Old English term ‘fire’, the term ‘flame’ is of French origin and the term ‘conflagration’ is of Latin origin. And for ‘clothes’ we have the French term ‘attire’; for ‘house’, we have ‘mansion’ and also the term ‘domicile’ used for mostly for official purposes these days. And for the common term ‘sheep’, the French nobility used ‘mutton’ and for ‘calf’, ‘veal’. So now we know that all of these terms put together forms the vocabulary, the vast vocabulary of English language.

And if we try to take a look at how various influences came into shaping English, we will also understand that English was a language which was a lot into the “give and take” policy. So we do find terms such as loan words because English had heavily borrowed from Latin and French without losing its original fervor. We will be looking at this in a little detail in another lecture when we will be looking at the evolution and the progress of English language from the Old English period through the Middle English period.

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**Salient features: summing up**

- English language gains maturity and popularity - Emerges as a perfect medium for literature
- From Anonymous authorship –(1225:owl and the nightingale) - later towards individualism
- Reproduction of books by hand: before the arrival of Printing – the manuscript undergoes changes
- Oral quality – memorised texts;hence, mostly verse
- Printed Books – very expensive
- Originality – NOT a major requirement – translations as original creation
- Religion – an important element of social life
- Renaissance – a visit to Italy considered an important part of education
- Elements of romance, chivalry,heroism, social satire

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Having said that, it is time for us to sum up some of the salient features of the age as we have seen in the last couple of lectures. First of all, in the Middle English period, we see English language attaining maturity and popularity. It also emerges not just a perfect medium for jurisdiction, for communication, also as a perfect medium for literature and similar kinds of arts. And we find the dominance of anonymous authorship during that period, there could be various historical reasons for the same. But many of the historians also feel that it was not considered quite fashionable to give the name of the author alongside the writings during that period because a sense of private ownership had not yet come being in a strong way. For

because of this, even some of the popular prominent writings such as ‘The Owl and the Nightingale’, though the text has been preserved into posterity, we do not know about its authorship, it is only given as anonymous.

So we also find that it is only towards the later periods that a sense of individualism begins to emerge. And Middle English literature is also dominated by the existence of manuscript; this is a time which is prior to the existence of printing press in London. And we also find that the reproduction of books by hand had certain major drawbacks because the scribe used to reproduce the manuscript and they used to work together communally.

At the same time, there was a good chance of the text getting altered or certain words or certain even ideas getting altered or being forgotten or left out. So such problems were also inherent when the texts were being reclaimed at a later point after the arrival of the printing press. And for the same reason, we find that there was an increased dominance of verse as against prose because it was easy to memorize, the oral quality of literature was quite important for practical purposes as well.

And even after the printing press was set up by William Caxton, we find that though books were available, they were also quite expensive. So the common people still could not afford to buy books on their own, books were considered as a very prestigious property. So the common people largely relied on manuscripts and oral transmission of writings. This also accounts to the limitations for us to access the works which were produced during that period.

And we also saw in some of the works that we briefly took a look at that originality was not a major concern, we do find lot of imitations during that period. We also find the translations were seen as almost original during the period and also borrowings from certain other text, taking the story line of other text written in other languages, those were not seen as copyright violation then. It was seen as a common repository from which anyone could borrow, anyone could use ideas.

So in that sense, originality was not a requirement and for a long time it was not even seen as a commendable quality to begin with. It was only the later historians and the later critics who began to attribute a sense of originality to certain writers compared to the other. And we also noted that religion was an important salient feature which defined and shaped many of the things happening including the shaping of literature.

And Renaissance was so important to the shaping of the literary and social life in Britain that a visit to Italy was considered as a must for any educated person. His education and his capability to produce art were not considered complete until he had visited one of the centers of Renaissance in Italy. And we also find the different kinds of literature and different styles emerging amounting to romance, chivalry, heroism, social satire, etcetera.

So all of these were in a germinating stage at that time, we find that this age had prepared English people as well as English literature for greater things to come in the following centuries. And also taking a look at the iconic events which framed the Middle English period; the two translations of the Bible by John Wycliff, they continue to hold a very important place for various social, political and religious reasons. They also shaped the ways in which religion began to influence Britain in a very different way and not in a stifling and a regressive manner.

And also William Langland's *Piers Plowmen*, Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, their influence and reach of their work, we did notice in the previous sessions. And the invention of printing press and its installation in Westminster by William Caxton in 1476, this event continues to be mentioned for a while because it was quite important in revolutionizing the ways in which intellectuality was being dealt and negotiated with in the land of Britain.

It also changed the ways in which text were becoming available. It also changed the ways in which text could be preserved. And more importantly, it inaugurated an awakening, an intellectual awakening in the land of Britain which spread to the rest of the world as well. And this is also the time when England consolidates itself as a nation. There is an increased sense of 'nationness'. Almost all of the internal and external struggles also come to an end towards the end of the Middle English period. The Hundred Years War do come to an end putting an end to the foreign influence in Britain. The Wars of the Roses come to an end consolidating and forging a new dynasty known as the Tudor dynasty. And also English literature and language also consolidate helping to articulate the nation its concerns and many of its wishes for the forthcoming period.

So in many ways, though at the outset the Middle Ages and the Middle English period might look a little repressing to begin with, as Hudson had put it, it might look as if there is very little inspire and much to repress. But on hindsight, we do find that the age was going through turbulent times in order to prepare England for a better future and also to provide a better soil, fertile soil for the production of better literature. And what culminates all of these events is

the discovery of new worlds and the beginning of colonization by the end of the Middle Ages.

In fact, as soon as the beginning of the next period begins, the Elizabethan age begins, we note that England benefits a lot from the discovery of new worlds and new voyages that it undertakes and politically also and economically as well, it benefits a lot from the new phase which begins then. So we wind up with these thoughts about Britain and also let us prepare ourselves to engage with Britain in the new phase in the next lecture. Thank you for listening and this is all we have for this session.