

Middle English Literature

A HISTORICAL
SOURCEBOOK

Matthew Boyd Goldie

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1328	Edward III marries Philippa of Hainault.	1340
1337	Beginning of Hundred Years' War.	1344–5
1348	First outbreak of pestilence.	ca. 1349
1349	Ordinance of Laborers.	ca. 1350
1351	First Statute of Laborers.	ca. 1354
		ca. 1356–7
1361–2	Second outbreak of pestilence.	1357
1363	Sumptuary laws.	ca. 1362
1368–9	Third outbreak of pestilence.	1369–1400
1369	Death of Philippa of Hainault.	ca. 1370
		1371–2
1375	Fourth outbreak of pestilence.	ca. 1375
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1377	Death of Edward II. Accession of Richard II. First poll tax.	1377
1378	Beginning of Great Papal Schism.	ca. 1377
1379	Second poll tax.	1380
1380	Third poll tax.	ca. 1380
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<i>Historical events</i>	<i>Literature</i>	
1381	Revolt.	1380–96
1382	Richard II marries Anne of Bohemia. Wyclif's writings condemned at Blackfriars' Council.	1380–1422 ca. 1382 ca. 1382–ca. 1385
1386	Wonderful Parliament.	1384
1386–7	Great and Continual Council rules England.	1384–7 ca. 1385
1387–8	Lords Appellant challenge Richard II.	ca. 1385–6
1388	Merciless Parliament. Third Statute of Laborers. Royal statute requiring returns from guilds.	ca. 1386–ca. 1390 1387
1389	Richard II resumes personal governance.	ca. 1387–1400
		ca. 1390
		ca. 1390
		ca. 1390
		ca. 1390
		ca. 1390
		ca. 1390–6
		ca. 1395
1394	Death of Anne of Bohemia.	
1395	<i>Twohe Conclusions of Lollards</i> displayed in London.	
		Walter Hilton, <i>Scale of Perfection, Of Mixed Life</i> . Thomas Walsingham, <i>Chronica Majora</i> . Geoffrey Chaucer, <i>Parliament of Fowls</i> . Geoffrey Chaucer, <i>Troilus and Criseyde</i> , translates Boethius. Death of John Wyclif. Thomas Usk, <i>Testament of Love</i> . John Gower, <i>Vox Clamanitis</i> . Geoffrey Chaucer, <i>Legend of Good Women</i> . John Gower, <i>Confessio Amantis</i> . John Trevisa finishes translating Ranulf Higden's <i>Polychronicon</i> . Geoffrey Chaucer, <i>Canterbury Tales</i> . Bodleian Library MS English Poetry a.1 (Vernon manuscript) Earliest English manuscript of Sir John Mandeville's <i>Travels</i> . <i>Parliament of the Three Ages, St. Erkenwald</i> . <i>Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Patience</i> , <i>Pearl, Cleanness</i> . William Langland, <i>Piers Plowman</i> C-text. Henry Knighton, <i>Chronicle</i> . Wilton Diptych.

<i>Historical events</i>	<i>Literature</i>
1396 Richard II marries Isabelle of France.	
1397 Revenge Parliament.	
1398 Exile of Bolingbroke and Mowbray.	1398 John Trevisa translates Batholomeus Anglicus' <i>De proprietatibus rerum</i> (<i>On the Properties of Things</i>).
1399 Deposition of Richard II. Accession of Henry IV. Death of John of Gaunt.	Death of Geoffrey Chaucer.
1400–9 Welsh rising of Owain Glyndwr.	John Gower, <i>Chronica Tripartita</i> .
	Alliterative <i>Morte Arthure</i> .
	John Mirk, <i>Instructions for Parish Priests</i> .
	Nicholas Love, <i>Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ</i> .
	<i>Dives and Pauper</i> .
	<i>Castle of Perseverance</i> .
	Adam of Usk, <i>Chronicon</i> .
1401 Statute <i>De heretico comburendo</i> , <i>One the burning of heretics</i> .	
1403 Henry IV marries Joan of Navarre.	
	Hengwrt and Ellesmere manuscripts of <i>Canterbury Tales</i> .
	<i>Dives and Pauper</i> .
1406 James I of Scotland taken prisoner.	Thomas Hoccleve, <i>La Male Regle</i> .
	Edward, second duke of York, <i>The Master of Game</i> .
	William Thorpe examined before Archbishop Arundel.
1409 Publication of Arundel's <i>Constitutions</i> . Death of Isabelle of France.	Death of John Gower. Lovell Lectionary.

<i>Historical events</i>	<i>Literature</i>
1437 Death of Joan of Navarre. Death of Catherine of Valois. Henry VI assumes the throne.	1440 First English–Latin dictionary.
1445 Henry VI marries Margaret of Anjou.	1443–7 Osbern Bokenham, <i>Legends of Holy Women</i> .
1447 Death of Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester.	1448–9 John Metham, <i>Amoryus and Cleopes</i> .
	1449 Death of John Lydgate.
	1449–55 Reginald Pecock, <i>The Repressor of Overmuch Blaming of the Clergy</i> .
1453 Fall of Constantinople to the Turks.	ca. 1450–1500 Robert Henryson, <i>Fables, Testament of Cresseid</i> .
1455 End of Hundred Years' War.	Wakefield pageants in Towneley cycle.
1461 Beginning of the Wars of the Roses.	Findern manuscript
Edward IV.	Inner Temple Library illuminations.
1464 Edward IV marries Elizabeth Woodville.	Compilation of York Corpus Christi pageant.
	Oxford, New College MS C.288.
1470 Deposition of Edward IV. Accession of Henry VI.	<i>Wisdom, Mankind</i> .
Deposition and murder of Henry VI.	N-Town plays.
Accession of Edward IV.	Death of Sir Thomas Malory.
	<i>Floure and the Leafe, Assembly of Ladies</i> .
	ca. 1475 Manuscript of N-Town plays.
	1476 William Caxton introduces printing to England.
1479 Outbreak of pestilence.	1478 William Caxton first prints <i>Canterbury Tales</i> , <i>Parliament of Fowls</i> .
1481 War with Scotland.	

<i>Historical events</i>	<i>Literature</i>	
1482 Death of Margaret of Anjou.	1482	William Caxton prints <i>Troilus and Criseyde</i> .
1483 Death of Edward IV. Accession of Edward V. Deposition of Edward V. Accession of Richard III.	1483–4	William Caxton translates Geoffrey de la Tour-Landry's <i>Book of the Knight of La Tour-Landry</i> .
1485 Death of Richard III. Accession of Henry VII.	1485	William Caxton prints Sir Thomas Malory's <i>Morte Darthur</i> .
1486 Henry VII marries Elizabeth, daughter of Edward IV.		
1492 Christopher Columbus arrives in the West Indies. Death of Elizabeth Woodville.	ca. 1490	William Caxton translates "The Caxton Abstract of the Rule of St. Benet."
1495 Treaty of Drogheda.		
1497 Cabot arrives in North America.		
1498 Erasmus at Oxford.	1499	John Skelton, <i>Bowge of Court</i> .
	ca. 1500	Composition of Digby <i>Mary Magdalen and St. Paul</i> .

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The publishers apologize for any errors or omissions in the above list and would be grateful to be notified of any corrections that should be incorporated in the next edition or reprint of this book.

Map from *Chaucer to Spenser: An Anthology*

Introduction

This anthology makes available a selection of historical texts, cultural documents, and images in order to further readers' thinking about the works of Geoffrey Chaucer and other Middle English writers. Several of the historical writings have been regularly mentioned in literary and historical studies in the past, while some are less familiar – for instance, the *Anonimale Chronicle's* account of the 1381 revolt and Henry Knighton's description of the pestilence alongside Jean Froissart's description of a tournament Richard II held in 1390. The cultural documents are necessarily of many kinds, some again frequently noted in literary and historical criticism while others less so: parliamentary and local acts and trials, letters and testimonies, moral, homiletic, and educational tracts. The images are principally of manuscript pages and illuminations and, like the others, chosen for the student of Middle English literature.

These texts and images represent a cross-section of social, economic, political, ideational, and epistemological developments. The most important criterion for including a text or image is that it contain something, preferably several features, that shed light on the themes, ideas, and styles commonly found in Chaucer and other Middle English literature. This broad measure is nevertheless reasonably finite: rulers and their exploits, guilds, labor, sumptuary, censorship, marriage, gender, the fraternal orders – to name a few topics – are of particular interest to authors of this period. The second most important criterion is the sheer significance of a historical event or cultural factor. The usurpation of the throne in 1399 and the persecution of Lollards, for instance, are historically momentous and had noteworthy causes and lasting effects. Texts such as John Gower's *Confessio amantis* and William Langland's *Piers Plowman* acknowledge them explicitly,

while they receive smaller or tangential references in others. The third measure for inclusion is the richness of the selection; that is, whether it is interesting in itself rather than merely in terms of some inert fact or idea that might simply be stated in summary form. The authors and artists who create these histories, cultural texts, and images appear actively engaged with the events and issues at hand, or are at least writing in a style or making an illumination that is complex enough to encourage comparison with more creative literature. In a few cases I have included more than one author's or artist's interpretations of a historical occurrence or cultural feature to allow readers to compare and contrast these interpretations themselves, as well as compare and contrast them with literary texts.

Even though today it seems we can only talk about more and less explicitly literary works rather than a clear distinction between literature and historical or other writing, I have pragmatically allowed current and hopefully up-coming literature textbooks – both anthologies and editions of individual authors – to shape my selection of documents to include here. That is, I rely on those publications to take care of literature, and I have tried to choose more explicitly historical and cultural texts. I have also been somewhat restrictive in my selections from among these usually less-consciously literary writings. Rather than simply aim to represent historical and cultural items from a primarily inert and generalized Middle Ages, this collection contains only fourteenth- and fifteenth-century texts and images that existed in England. The idea in limiting the selection to these two centuries and this country of origin or production is to introduce descriptions, arguments, narratives, and images that are often articulated in a temporally specific manner and in forms that correspond to or differ in interesting ways from contemporary poetry, prose, and drama. While the historical and cultural distinctions between England and the Continent were by no means clear, England of course claiming a good deal of France during the period, it was felt that sufficient translation, not only in the literal sense of “carrying across” but also of adaptation to the target audience – English readers and writers – made it possible to include only documents that existed in material form in England. My only regret is that because of the practical constraints of course offerings and literature textbooks produced, my selection is narrowly English and excludes substantial material on Ireland, Wales, and Scotland. Obviously, on a more practical level, the strictures of time period and country have also helped to limit the potential number of inclusions from approximately four hundred documents I considered.

The principal idea that informs the collection is that fourteenth- and fifteenth-century English literature may most fruitfully be read alongside

less deliberately literary texts. The “textual environments,” in Paul Strohm’s useful phrase, of the poems, prose, and dramas are diverse but finite.¹ As even a cursory examination of the Chaucer or Middle English selections we most commonly read reveals, medieval literature demands that we look beyond the borders of its lyrics and narratives. It is messy, habitually pointing to forces and texts outside the enclosure of a whorling hypotactic opening “Whan . . .” and the declarative and conventionally terminating “. . . Amen.” Readers of medieval literature may begin at the most material and seemingly concrete starting point, the physical page of a poem, prose work, or drama, but they quickly find that manuscript survival and versions, authorial anonymity and scribal preferences, intrusive glosses and expository illuminations, combine to multiply and connect such a beginning to a web of historical starting points beyond the single text. Moving off the vellum or paper, one is immediately struck by the openly allusive nature of Middle English literature. It may refer to itself, even to the act of authorial composition, but it also loves to echo – often concurrently – a range of religious and secular, and Latin, French, and English discourses. In the process the works, passages, lines, even words, suggest historical and other events, both large scale and more mundane, forcing a binocular perspective on the historical level as much as on the practical, one eye on the line and another on the footnotes. A reader familiar with the literary work at hand and yet still wishing to avoid delving into historical and cultural contexts might resort to beginning his or her research from the other end, commencing with the most recent reception of a text. However, there again the critical responses thread together back into the past beyond medievalisms and John Dryden until one ends up examining fourteenth- and fifteenth-century responses; reception becomes an issue of near-contemporary influence, scribal recension, even authorially reworked texts and an author’s anticipation of responses to his or her own works.

The student of Middle English literature has to love the mess yet try to find a way to enjoy such complexities while not losing focus, perhaps out of baffled exhaustion. Studying this conglomeration of materials is undoubtedly challenging and demands a range of skills that other periods do not always require. While the fundamental goal of this volume is utilitarian, it is hoped it will encourage more of an interdisciplinary approach, that is, thinking about how, on the one hand, historical and cultural items and, on the other, literary texts of various kinds register each other, correlate, and “quite.” It is for the student of the literature who wants to rise to the challenge of considering him or herself a “literary historian,” an appellation that compresses the potentially daunting idea that the specialities of literary and

historical study are both possible nowadays despite the inadequate time institutions and society at large make available for such development. In fact, a trinity appears to characterize the goal of medieval studies today, of literary and historical abilities as well as theoretical sophistication. Literary theory offers not only the chance to reconsider one's assumptions but also expands the field of interpretation so that more and more thoughtful readings become possible. Indeed, theory has always been essential to medieval study, for instance leading to the inclusion of more texts in the medieval canon, not only texts by women but works of different genres such as nonfiction prose as well as writings that were formerly labeled as simply minor, derivative, or somehow not literary enough. Textual-literary study, historical examination, and theoretical abilities are three very powerful tools that one can see employed in ever more eloquent combinations in articles and books on medieval literature, making the Middle Ages an exciting period for those who like playing in a multiform and diachronic field that may be characterized by what the sciences currently call "complexity."

Students of medieval literature already have resources and training they can draw on to comprehend and think imaginatively about the materials in this volume, not the least of which is a tendency to read all phenomena, whether textual, cultural, or historical, with sensitivity. Cultural critic Stuart Hall is worth quoting at some length here because he suggests why we might already be at an advantage: "Meaning is a social production, a practice. The world has to be *made to mean*." A person looking at incidents in the past, for instance, consequently wants to ask

which kinds of meaning get systematically and regularly constructed around particular events. Because meaning was not given but produced, it followed that different kinds of meaning could be ascribed to the same events. Thus, in order for one meaning to be regularly produced, it had to win a kind of credibility, legitimacy or taken-for-grantedness for itself. That involved marginalizing, down-grading or de-legitimizing alternative constructions. Indeed, there were certain kinds of explanation which, given the power of and credibility required by the preferred range of meanings, were literally unthinkable and unsayable.

So questions might include:

First, how did a dominant discourse warrant itself as *the* account, and sustain a limit, ban or proscription over alternative or competing definitions? Second, how did the institutions which were responsible for describing and explaining events of the world . . . succeed in maintaining a preferred or delimited range