



THE BARREN AGE

POETRY

Chaucer's followers

English poetry in the 15th century was represented mainly by Chaucer's followers and imitators. They are generally divided into two groups: the English Chaucerians and the Scottish Chaucerians.

- **The English Chaucerians** They can be considered as versewriters rather than real poets; the most representative were John Lydgate (c. 1370-c. 1450) and Thomas Occleve (or Hoccleve, c. 1369-c. 1450).

The former was a Benedictine monk, who completed the Knight's story told by Chaucer in *The Canterbury Tales* by writing the *Siege of Thebes* (1421-1422). Lydgate's other works are the *Troy Book* (1412-1421) and the *Fall of Princes* (1430-1438; based on a French translation of Boccaccio's *De Casibus Virorum Illustrium*). The latter wrote *La Male Règle* (1406), a sort of autobiographical poem, and *The Regiment of Princes* (1412), largely translated from *De Regimine Principum* by Egidio Romano. It consisted of a treatise on the art of government addressed to Henry, Prince of Wales.

Other poets of the time, who cannot be strictly considered as Chaucer's imitators, are John Skelton (c. 1460-1529), Stephen Hawes (c. 1475-c. 1530) and Alexander Barclay (c. 1475-1552).

John Skelton was one of the tutors of the future King Henry VIII. He wrote a satirical poem against the vices and dangers of the court life, *The Bowge of Court* (c. 1499), and a morality play (→ Drama), *Magnyfycence* (1515). In *Colyn Cloute* (1522) Skelton complained of the corruption of the clergy, and because of his attack against the powerful Cardinal Wolsey, he was forced to flee from Court. Even though he was an eccentric and original poet, Skelton was also capable of grace and tenderness in a poem such as *The Book of Philip Sparrow* (c. 1509), a mock-heroic elegy on the death of a young girl's sparrow.

Stephen Hawes was the author of the didactic poem *The Pastime of Pleasure* (c. 1505).

Alexander Barclay was responsible for the original English translation, or adaptation, of the *German Ship of Fools* (1509), a satire on human follies, and he wrote the *Eclogues* introducing the pastoral poetry into English literature.

- **The Scottish Chaucerians** The first of the Scottish poets to follow Chaucer was King James I (1394-1437). While prisoner in England he wrote *The King's Quair* (*The King's Book*), an autobiographical love-poem in seven-lined stanzas. This poetical metre was henceforth called «rhyme royal» because it was used by a king. Other poets are Robert Henryson (c. 1424-c. 1506), William Dunbar (c. 1460-c. 1520) and Gavin (or Gawin) Douglas (c. 1474-1522). Robert Henryson is one of the great names in medieval literature in general, and Scottish literature in particular; his best poem was *The Testament of Cresseid* (printed in 1593), a sequel to Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*: he described the woman's death in expiation of her unfaithfulness. He was also inspired by Aesop and wrote several *Fables* (*Morall Fabillis of Esope the Phrygian*): among them *The Town Mouse and the Field Mouse* which is famous for its humour. William Dunbar was the poet laureate at the court of James IV and by far the best poet of the Scottish group. Most of his best poetry seems to have appeared between 1503 and 1508. He followed the allegorical and courtly love tradition in *The Golden Targe* and in *The Thistle and the Rose*, written to celebrate the marriage of James IV with Margaret Tudor, daughter of Henry VII. But Dunbar reached his best in the satirical and realistic poems he composed in colloquial Scots, such as *The Two Married Women* and *the Widow*, a dialogue among three women recalling their own experiences in marriage.

Gavin Douglas is remembered for his famous allegorical poem *King Hart* and for his excellent translation of Virgil's *Aeneid*, the first version of a great classic poet in any Anglic dialect.

Ballads

Around the 14th and 15th centuries, alongside learned poetry, popular literary forms such as the ballads flourished. They were anonymous narrative songs handed down orally from generation to generation by minstrels. Their subjects and language were simple to suit the taste of an unsophisticated audience. Ballads related local events, family feuds, deeds of outlaws, love stories and legends, based on an elementary moral code; the heroes were rewarded and the villains punished. Descriptions were reduced to the essential and characters presented with extreme immediacy. The metre used in the ballads was the fourline stanzas and the device of repeating a refrain, to stress dramatic or sensational events, was largely used.

Most ballads were produced on the frontier district between England and Scotland and were known as *Border Ballads*. A great number of the existing ballads deal with the legendary hero Robin Hood, who lived in Sherwood Forest and who robbed the rich to help the poor. These ballads expressed the genuine reaction of the people against the oppression of the barons.





Among the earliest specimens we may quote Judas, belonging to the 13th century. Other famous ballads are The Nut-Brown Maid, Chevy Chase, The Battle of Otterburn and Edward. Many of these ballads were written down and published much later. A famous collection was edited in 1765 by Bishop Percy and it was due to his work that a considerable number of ballads have reached us.

PROSE

The most important prose-work of the 15th century is *Le Morte d'Arthur* by Sir Thomas Malory (c. 1405-1471), a knight who, at the time of The War of the Roses, fought both for the Lancastrian and the Yorkist factions, and, condemned for crimes, he wrote his work in prison. *Le Morte d'Arthur* is the most important collection of tales about the Arthurian legend. King Arthur bringing peace and serenity in his kingdom was a model for English kings in a period of political instability and social unrest, but this work also expresses the decline of chivalry and medieval institutions and the nostalgic melancholy for the passing of an age. The book, written in Middle English, was printed in 1485.

In 1476 William Caxton (c. 1422-1491) established the first English printing press, near Westminster Abbey, and began to publish the most famous works. The invention of the press contributed to spread learning and to bring discipline to the vocabulary and spelling of the time.

Among the prose-works of the period we may include the Paston Letters, a series of letters and papers exchanged between three generations of a middle class family in a Norfolk village, between the years 1422 and 1509. They contain important information about the social and domestic life.

DRAMA

English Medieval Drama grew out from the liturgy of the Church services. The oldest plays were the so called Mysteries, whose aim was to instruct people about the «mysteries» of the faith, by presenting them episodes from the Gospel. Later episodes from the lives and martyrdoms of Saints were taken in too, and these plays were called Miracles. At first they were performed inside the churches by the monks themselves, but as the length of the dialogues increased, they began to be performed in market-squares, Latin was replaced by vernacular and the trade guilds of the towns became responsible for the organization of the performances. The earliest specimens of Mysteries and Miracles date back to the 14th century and derive their names from the place they were first performed. The «York», the «Chester», the «Coventry» and the «Wakefield» are the four main cycles of the plays which have survived. The most representative works are *Adam* and *The Sacrifice of Isaac*.

A development in English drama was represented by the Moralities, in which virtues and vices such as Love, Obedience, Humility, Avarice, Ignorance and Corruption were personified, and their contention of man's soul symbolized the everlasting struggle between Good and Evil. The authors could handle their subjects more freely and reveal a certain degree of psychological analysis. Like the Mysteries and the Miracles, the Moralities too were intended to instruct people; the most famous are *The Pride of Life* (14th century), *The Castle of Perseverance* (c. 1425) and *Everyman* (16th century).

Later on, another kind of drama developed: it was the Interlude, whose aim was not to instruct people, but to amuse them, by presenting comic scenes and characters drawn from everyday life. With the Interlude the first example of comedy and also of secular play appeared. The most famous of these works are *Fulgens and Lucrece* (c. 1497) by Henry Medwall (?-1502) and *The Four P's* (c. 1530) by John Heywood (1497-1580).

