

GENRE PECULIARITIES OF THE LITERATURE OF THE NORMAN PERIOD (12TH 13TH CENTURIES)

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Summary

The period of French domination left an important mark on the later history of English literature, which, in some cases, is more common with the artistic devices and style of French literature of the Norman period than with the study of Anglo-Saxon literature, from which it was artificially divorced. The Norman conquest conditioned certain specific features of language development. The main one was the spread of three languages in the Kingdom of England – French among the ruling class, English among the broad masses of the population, and Latin in church affairs and administration. This affected the linguistic and genre character of English medieval literature. Methods used in the study: general scientific (analysis and synthesis, induction and deduction), methods of theoretical research (from abstract to concrete), historical method. Among the feudal lords, the most popular genre was chivalric poetry, which was brought from France by trouver singer-poets. The most common manifestation of chivalric poetry was the rhyming chivalric novel, which reflected the customs of the upper feudal class, promoted heroic deeds, the code of chivalric morality, and examples of human virtues. The novels about King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table became the most popular.

Key words: chivalric poetry, information, literature, Norman conquest, evolution.

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1. Introduction

After the death of King Canute, the struggle between the Anglo-Saxon earls for supreme power began again. The internal feud invited a foreign conquest. The Northmen who had settled in Normandy 150 years before did not miss their chance. In the year 1066, the Norman Duke William crossed the Channel and conquered the English in the great battle fought at Hastings. Within five years William the Conqueror was complete master of the whole of England. The lands of most of the Anglo-Saxon aristocracy were given to the Norman barons, and they introduced their feudal laws to compel the peasants to work for them. The English became the servile class.

William the Conqueror could not speak a word of English. He and his barons spoke Norman-French, not pure French because the Normans were simply the same Danes with a French polish. Yet during the following 200 years that the Normans kept coming over to England, they could not suppress the English language. Communication went on in three languages:

- 1) at the monasteries, learning went on in Latin;
- 2) Norman-French was the language of the ruling class spoken at court and in official institutions;
- 3) but the common people held obstinately to their own expressive mother tongue.

Norman-French and Anglo-Saxon were moulded into one national language only towards the beginning of the 14th century when the Hundred Years' War broke out. The language of that time is called Middle English.

2. The first universities

Most of the British writers and poets about whom we are going to speak were educated at universities. It will be interesting to know how and when the two great universities of Oxford and Cambridge were founded in England.

Before the 12th century people got to think that books and the learning that was to be found in books belonged to the Church only, and that common people who were not priests or monks had no business to meddle with books or book-learning. But with the development of such sciences as medicine and law, corporations of general study called "universitas" appeared in Italy and France. The fully developed university had four faculties: three superior (higher) faculties, that of Theology (the study of religious books), of Canon Law (church laws) and of Medicine; and one inferior (primary) faculty, that of Art, where seven subjects were studied: Latin Grammar, Rhetoric (the art of impressive speaking), Logic, Arithmetic, Geometry, Astronomy and Music.

Paris was the great centre for higher education for English students. In the middle of the 12th century a controversy on the study of Logic arose among the professors. A group of professors were expelled. Followed by their students, they went over to Britain and founded schools at the town of Oxford in 1168 which formed the first university. However, the plague and war and other trouble led to a temporary dispersion of the schools. A second university was formed in 1209 at Cambridge, to which a body of students migrated from Oxford.

The graduates were awarded with degrees: Bachelor of Science, Master of Arts, and Doctor. Towards the end of the 13th century colleges where other subjects were studied appeared around the universities.

It became the custom for students to go about from one great university to another, learning what they could from the most famous teachers in each place

3. How the language changed

Though the Normans had subdued the Anglo-Saxons, they nevertheless could not subdue the English language. But it had changed so much that something must be said about it.

1) Under the influence of the French language the pronunciation of the people changed, but it did not become French. Some French words could not be pronounced by the Anglo-Saxons, and some of the French sounds were substituted by more familiar sounds from Old English. There appeared many new long vowels (diphthongs), and the rhythm of the language evened out. This newly formed pronunciation was very much like Modern English.

2) What was particularly new were the French suffixes:

–**ance, ence**: ignorance, experience

–**ment**: government, agreement

–**age**: courage, marriage

–**able**: admirable.

The English soon found that these suffixes gave an abstract meaning to the noun and before long they made up many new words of their own out of English verbs and adjectives: unbearable, readable, etc.

3) The prefix **-dis** also helped to make up words where the negative meaning was obvious: distrust, disappear, distaste.

4) The spelling changed altogether. The Norman scribes brought to England their Latin traditions. The Anglo-Saxon letters P and for the sounds [θ] and [ð] were runes (letters used by

the Anglo-Saxons before they came to Britain). The Normans replaced even these letters by the Latin **t+h-th**.

5) The indefinite article was coming into use, from the numeral “one” used without a stress before a noun: an apple.

6) Two words never adhere to (stick to) the same object or to the same idea if they mean exactly the same. They naturally struggle for supremacy. The struggle between French and English words went on in the following way:

a) If the word meant something the English did not have, then the French word came into the language. Such words were those relating to: government, church, court, armour, pleasure, food, art.

b) If the object or idea was clearly expressed in English, then the English word remained.

c) If both words remained, then it was because of a slight but clear-cut difference in the meaning. Here is an interesting example from the first chapter of “Ivanhoe” by Walter Scott. The Anglo- Saxon word means the living animal and the French word means the dish that is cooked from it:

ox -beef

calf-veal

sheep-mutton

swine-pork

7) As a result of this process there appeared a store of synonyms larger than in any other European language. Each word has its own shade of meaning. Many synonymous words are used for different styles. Note the difference between the following verbs; those of Anglo-Saxon origin are used to express homelier ideas, while the verbs of French origin are used in formal speech:

to give up to – abandon

to give in – to surrender

to give over – to surrender

to come in – to enter

to begin- to commence

to go on-to continue etc.

The history of literature shows us how the popular tongue became the language of the educated classes because it was spoken by the majority of the population, by those who tilled the soil, sowed and reaped, produced the goods and struggled against the foreign oppressors. The language of intercourse gradually subdued Norman-French, and a single national language developed.

4. The romance, the fable and the fabliau

The Norman barons were followed to England by churchmen, scribes, minstrels (singers who walked from castle to castle), merchants and artisans. Each rank of society had its own literature. 1) During the 12th and 13th centuries monks wrote historical chronicles in Latin. The scholars at Oxford University (such as the monk Roger Bacon who introduced gunpowder) described their experiments in Latin; even antireligious satires were composed in Latin. 2) The aristocracy wrote their poetry in Norman-French. 3) But the country-folk made up their ballads and songs in Anglo-Saxon.

The Romance The aristocracy idealized the feudal system, showing the bravery and gallantry of loyal knights. Their exploits were described in great epics. The court had love

stories and lyrical poems praising a chivalrous attitude towards women. These stories, poems and songs were very much admired. Many of them came to the Normans from old French which was a Romanic dialect, and the works so written were “romances”.

During the reign of Henry II and his wife Eleanor, English poetry was influenced by French chivalric romances. In southern France (in Provence) the lyric poets of the Middle Ages were called “troubadours”. The troubadours invented the dancing-songs called “ballades” (=ballet). Queen Eleanor was the granddaughter of a duke who had been called the first troubadour. During her reign Provençal poetry penetrated into England.

Wace. The Norman poet Wace lived at the Court of Henry II. He was born on the Island of Jersey (in the Channel) at the beginning of the 12th century. He spent his childhood at Caen [kein]. When he grew up, he went to the Paris University where he studied theology. A few years later, he was invited to the Court of Henry I (grandfather of Henry II) as a chaplain. A chaplain was a clergyman who conducted services in the private chapel of a great person; if he was a learned man he acted also as secretary or as teacher. Rich families always had a chaplain in their households. The Norman kings and queens were very particular about their possessions, and Henry II ordered Wace to write a history of England. Two rhyming chronicles were his chief works. These romances were called:

- 1) “Brut or the Acts of the Britts” (Deeds of the Britons) and
- 2) “Rollo (or Hrolf) or the Acts of the Normans”.

In the first romance the poet tells his readers how Brutus, the legendary forefather of the Romans, is said to have discovered the Island and called it Brutannia (=Britain). Wace imitated the Latin books of history and added to his composition the songs of the Welsh bards who never ceased singing of the freedom they used to enjoy before the Anglo-Saxons had come to their island. Arthur, a Celtic chief, and his warriors are mentioned here for the first time. The Normans, wishing to justify their claims to England, pretended to be the descendants of the ancient Britons and made Arthur their hero.

Poetry has given the Celtic chief so much lyrical glory that King Arthur is now only a connecting link between real history and legend. This work of 15,000 lines was written in 1155.

(Wace's second romance “Rollo” tells the story of the first Northmen in France and their chief, the rover Rollo, who was made first Duke of Normandy)

Layamon. In the early 13th century, during the reign of the wicked King John, the interest in Norman- French poetry declined; this was due to some historical events. King John had lost Normandy and other lands in France, and many Norman and French barons came over to England as to their colony. John gave the lands and castles of the first Normans, who had now become quite English, to the new-comers. He put foreign bishops over the English. Thus he made himself hated by everybody in the country. At last the old barons and bishops and also the Saxons, who suffered from the French feudal laws, united and threatened to drive the king off the throne unless he would sign the Magna Charta [ˈmæɡnəˈkɑ:tə] (the Great Charter). It was a big parchment granting certain rights called “liberties” to the barons. The protest against the French brought back Anglo- Saxon traditions and the feeling of patriotism. Patriotism is felt in works of Layamon, an English priest

In the year 1205, Layamon created a version of Wace's “Brut”. It was called “Brut or Chronicle of Britain”. This immense epic (32,000 lines), written in Old English, may be divided into three books.

Book 1 deals with ancient history from Brut to the birth of King Arthur.

Book 2 retells various legends about King Arthur and the “Knights of the Round Table”. Arthur is endowed with all the virtues of a hero. He has magical power. Wherever he goes, he

is helped by a clever wizard Merlin. Arthur is honest and wise and fair to all his knights. They had their meetings at a round table so that there should not be any first or last, at the top or at the foot of the table. Book 3 continues the history of the Briton kings from the death of King Arthur to the victory of the Anglo-Saxon king Aethelstane over the Britons.

Layamon borrowed his material from Latin histories, songs of the troubadours, romances, the book of Bede and even "Beowulf", because he wished to show England as a powerful and glorious country. The work is written in rhyming couplets and in the rhythm of Norman-French poetry, though sometimes the author uses alliteration as in Anglo-Saxon poetry.

"King Horn" The earliest of all chivalric romances is that of King Horn. It was a very popular poem written about 1225. Its original subject was taken from a Danish story (a saga). It tells us about Prince Horn's adventures and his love for Princess Rymenhilde.

Arthurian Legends. In the 13th, 14th and 15th centuries there appeared a series of Arthurian legends in English: "Arthur and Merlin", "Iwain and Gawain", "Lancelot of the Lake", "Morte d'Arthur" ("Death of Arthur"), "Perseval of Wales", "Sir Tristram" and "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight".

The heroes in these romances unlike the characters in the literature of the Church were simple human beings who loved and suffered. Their worship of a fair lady becomes the plot of the story. A certain idea of individualism appears in these romances: when a knight retires to a lonely castle or wanders in the woods or mountains, the author depicts him as an individual opposing the general. His conduct is that of a particular person. He becomes a character. In the literature of the townfolk we find the fable and the fabliau. Fables were short stories with animals for characters and conveying a moral. Fabliaux were funny stories about cunning humbugs and the unfaithful wives of rich merchants. They were metrical tales (poems) brought from France. These stories were told in the dialects of Middle English. They were collected and written down much later. Contrary to the romance the literature of the towns did not idealize their characters. These stories show a practical attitude to life.

5. Conclusions

English literature is an integral part of world culture. The best traditions of English art have enriched world literature; the works of masters of English fiction and poetry, translated into many languages, won recognition far beyond the borders of England.

Usually the beginning of English literature is attributed to the beginning of the Anglo-Saxon period. As for the most ancient monuments of the Anglo-Saxon language, major poetic works reach us from the 11th century, except for documentary monuments, chronicles, and texts of laws. Writers from the Christian clergy revised some pagan poems ("Vidsid", "Complaint of Deor").

The most remarkable monument of ancient English poetry is the poem about Beowulf. It describes events related to the first half of the 6th century, the era of the struggle between the Franks and the Goths.

The "golden age" of Anglo-Saxon literature before the Norman invasion is the era of Alfred the Great, the conqueror of the Danes, who devastated Britain for almost two centuries. Alfred did a lot to restore the destroyed culture, to raise education, he himself was a writer and translator (translated, among other things, into Anglo-Saxon Bede's Church History, written in Latin).

In the second half of the 11th century, England is subjected to a new invasion of the Normans. It falls under the rule of the Normans, who for several centuries maintain the dominance

of the Norman dialect of the French language and French literature in England. A long period begins, known in history as the period of Anglo-Norman literature.

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