**Codruţa Mirela STĂNIŞOARĂ**

# HIGHLIGHTS OF
# BRITISH CULTURE AND LITERATURE:
## THE MIDDLE AGES AND THE RENAISSANCE
### - Interactive Readings -

# CUPRINS

# CUVÂNT ÎNAINTE

Alastair Fowler, reputat istoric şi critic literar american, îşi începe *Istoria literaturii engleze* într-o manieră surprinzătoare, excluzând din cadrul discuţiei literatura Anglo-Saxonă, şi trecând cu vederea importanţa acesteia pentru evoluţia ulterioară a literaturii engleze:

> „O istorie a literaturii engleze nu poate începe decât de la mijloc, iar cele mai timpurii scrieri în engleza veche care au supravieţuit prezintă deja forme deosebit de evoluate. De exemplu, din punct de vedere structural, poemul epic *Beowulf* (sec. xviii, păstrat într-un manuscris din sec. x) este construit cu migală, iar aluziile pe care le conţine presupun existenţa unor scrieri mult mai vechi, acum pierdute."[1]

Pe de altă parte, Andrew Sanders dedică aproape douăsprezece pagini aceleiaşi perioade, abordare întâlnită şi în alte studii.[2] După mai bine de o jumătate de secol, precizările făcute de Hardin Craig continuă să fie de actualitate:

> „În contextul istoriei, întreaga literatură engleză este fie medievală, fie modernă. Pentru a desemna oricare secţiune a acesteia ca fiind medievală înseamnă să o descriem, explicit sau implicit, ca aparţinând epocii care a format marea punte de-a lungul căreia lumea occidentală a avansat de la confuzia care a urmat prăbuşirii Romei la complexa lume modernă. Această eră a Evului Mediu, care a ocupat aproximativ mileniul dintre anii 500 şi 1500, reprezintă eforturile omului de a dezvolta un nou sistem de viaţă după dispariţia vechiului sistem în ruinele lumii clasice a Greciei şi Romei.
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> Pentru a traversa o punte este necesar să urmezi o cale prescrisă şi să utilizezi o structură existentă. Iată de ce nu trebuie să ne surprindă faptul că Evul Mediu a atins o unitate spirituală şi intelectuală care nu mai fusese atinsă până atunci, şi nici nu va mai fi atinsă din nou. Această unitate se manifestă în puterea copleşitoare a două mari instituţii umane ale Evului Mediu: biserica în religie şi sistemul feudal în societate. În timp ce aceste două instituţii predominante se dezvoltau şi îşi consolidau puterea, Evul

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[1] Alastair Fowler, *A History of English Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989). Traducerea noastră.

[2] Andrew Sanders, *The Short Oxford Histoyy of English Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994). Vezi, deasemenea: Ronald Carter, John McRae, *The Routledge History of English Literature: Britain and Ireland* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997); John Peck, Martin Coyle, *A Brief History of English Literature* (London: Palgrave, 2002).

Mediu a înflorit şi a prosperat; iar atunci când au început să apară fisuri în cele două mari structuri, şi Evul Mediu a început să intre în declin."[3]

„Declinul" la care se referă Hardin Craig face loc, inevitabil, Renaşterii, cu interesul aproape obsesiv al intelectualităţii pentru cultura Romei şi Greciei antice, care explică exodul tinerilor intelectuali englezi către acele zone de interes cultural. Nu este de mirare că Shakespeare, la şcoala din Stratford-upon-Avon, învăţase „un pic de latină şi ceva mai puţină greacă", dar cunoştinţele dobândite i-au deschis calea către marea performanţă intelectuală de mai târziu. Faptul că nu există documente care să ateste prezenţa lui Shakespeare în Europa renascentistă este mai puţin edificator. Contează nenumăratele trimiteri la cultura unei Europe altfel decât Albionul de curând eliberat de „declinul" unui Ev Mediu îndelungat şi nu atât de „întunecat" cum s-a scris de atâtea ori.

Dacă Shakespeare, acasă la „grammar school", avusese un contact preliminar cu textele clasice, nu trebuie să ne mire că – la cel mai înalt nivel – accentul pus pe cultura antică şi contemporană dădea roade: sunt cunoscute relatările referitoare la audienţele Reginei Elizabeta I, în timpul cărora se adresa ambasadorilor în mai multe limbi. Favoriţi ai curţii regale, apropiaţi ai Reginei Elizabeta I şi – după moartea acesteia – ai Regelui James I, adevăraţi sponsori ai culturii, au contribuit cu succes la construirea unei literaturi a cărei dimensiuni au determinat evoluţia ulterioară a literaturii şi culturii engleze.

Iată, pe scurt, contextul intelectual şi cultural al abordării de faţă. Desigur, cerinţele didactice ale unui curs de literatură engleză nu pot decât să accepte condiţiile curriculare restrictive ale sistemului de învăţământ, reflectate în cerinţele programei analitice.

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[3] Hardin Craig, *A History of English Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950), p. 3. Traducerea noastră.

# FOREWORD

Apparently this book is a course aiming at teaching English literature to University students of English, tightly enclosed within the limits of a syllabus choice. It is concerned with a historical and cultural background of the literary phenomenon, with glimpses of literary history and criticism, literary metalanguage, issues of literary analysis are touched upon, but there is a certain communicative and interactive attitude to teaching which is emphasized, based on the idea that affect is a necessary component of every learning.

Practically this book is an active communicative tool of teaching and acquiring knowledge of English literature in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance period, thus addressing both teachers and students. It is mainly concerned with assigning students new roles in the knowledge acquiring process which determine them to be active participants and not only passive recipients of knowledge of English literature.

Essentially this is a new kind of academic course-book. Our approach reflects a double perspective and implicitly a double professional background: that of the teacher and that of the methodologist; the teacher presents the teaching material through readings carefully organised into such sections as historical background, literary context, literary analysis of the targeted period of English literature, author's biography notes if the case, critical views. The methodologist interferes with the process making it more practically oriented, more motivating, and student-activating.

Students are involved into a three-stage process: **pre-reading**, in which they are asked to contribute with their own cultural/literary background in a kind of `predicting` practice about what they are going to read and learn. This will make them more involved in and motivated for what they are about to read.

**While-reading** activities are sometimes present before or within the continuum of the reading text in order to keep them stirred about the implications or detailed comprehension of the topics and permanently alert about their involvement in the process of acquiring new knowledge.

**After-reading** activities are most of them tasks to be solved by students in order to check their understanding of the new knowledge or to further develop and enrich it. At this stage students are also welcome to add their own ideas and opinions. The aim of such activities is not only to make them experience new ways of acquiring new knowledge, but also to provoke thoughts for future teaching because 'we teach as we learn'. They are also meant to entail discussions, reflections and even develop the students' own 'products' when working in pairs and groups.

**Pair and Group-work** activities are designed and used in the same idea. Moreover the students will develop teambuilding skills, as well as communicative and cooperative learning skills.

No **suggested answers/key** is available at the end of pre/while/after reading activities because this would restrict personal interpretations, debates and discussions.

We hope that students will find a positive resonance in what they are asked to do as active participants in the process of acquiring new knowledge of English literature and that this interactive course book will provide a stimulus for a more effective and new kind of affective learning. We would welcome feedback from both students and their 'feelings' about it, and teachers on any methodological aspect presented here.

# PART I
# The Middle Ages to the Renaissance

## I.1. Historical Background

Pre - Reading:

Related to your knowledge of English history, in what terms would you define the emerging consequences of the Norman Conquest? Are they significant or not?

Group-work:

Debate and argue in pairs before and after you have read the course.

### I.1.1. The Norman Conquest

Even before the Norman Conquest the influence of France was manifesting itself among the English, but it was William, Duke of Normandy, who, in 1066, at Hastings, defeated the Anglo-Saxon king, Harold, and established the dominance of French rule. Historians talk about a very strong resistance of the Anglo-Saxons in front of the Norman army whose occupation lasted for at least twenty years after William's coronation. The most troublesome places were at the borders with Wales and Scotland. Between 1066 and the mid fourteenth century there were only thirty years of complete peace. Most of them divide The Middle Ages period in the British history into Early Middle Ages and Late Middle Ages.

The historical background of the Early Middle Ages (Feudalism) is dominated by recurrent fights for the Crown of England among William's successors – Robert, William and Henry – and the Norman nobles had to choose between two of them. The same fights started after Henry I's death between his heirs Matilda and Stephen. Due to their fragment fights England was invaded and thus devastated by many wars which gave birth to an internal turmoil. Henry II was the first unquestioned ruler of the English throne for a hundred years. Henry was followed by his rebellions son, Richard, one of the most popular Kings of England even if this nickname Coeur de Lion, "lion-heart", shows that his background, like that of the other kings before him, was French. Richard had no son, and he was followed by his brother, John, who was very unpopular with people, the nobles, the merchants and the Church because he was very greedy that is why they all turned

against him and his actions and finally was forced to sign a new agreement Known as the *Magna Carta*, the Great Charter, that became an important symbol of political freedom. Hundreds of years later, it was used by the Parliament to protect itself by a powerful king. It also bears a very significant historical importance because it marks a clear step forward in the collapse of English feudalism.

The beginning of the English Parliament dates back from the Middle Ages, too. The first attempts were during the reign of Henry III but it was only a council of nobles, the real one was brought by his son, Edward I. It was able to make statues, or written laws, and to make political decisions. This Parliament was special because the House of Commons contained a mixture of gentry belonging to the feudal rural class, merchants and freemen.

### I.1.2. The Late Middle Ages

The fourteenth century was disastrous for Britain, as well as most Europe, because of the effect of wars and plagues. In the 1330s England began a long struggle against the French Crown. England was exhausted economically by the cost of maintaining armies. England had the additional burden of fighting the Scots, and maintaining control of Ireland and Wales. Edward III declared war on France in 1337. He claimed the right to the French Crown. The war Edward began – the Hundred Years War – came to an end as late as 1453.

Few Middle English writings deal directly with the war but its importance is evident in opening the age of chivalry in the Arthurian literature. During this period a number of notable Arthurian works appeared on the literary landscape from the Gawain-poet, in the fourteenth century, to Malloy, in fifteenth century England. Of course, we can talk about a French influence which was felt all over the Continent, starting with Chretien de Trois in twelfth century France, but the British Knight would make his appearance only later with Gawain who is different from the French Knight.

According to Brian Gastle, the literary presence of the Arthurian myths was reclaimed by the England in the Hundred Years War to define its own political and religious character. He finally concludes that "much of the ME Arthurian literature does not follow the French tradition in either content or form."[4]

According to the code of chivalry, the perfect knight fought for his good name if insulted, served God and the king, and defended any lady in need.[5] These ideas

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[4] Brian Gastle, "Historical Context for Middle English Literature", in Daniel T. Cline (ed.), *The Medieval British Literature Handbook* (London and New York: Continuum, 2009), pp. 23-48.

[5] One development conventionally associated with chivalry is the highly controversial doctrine known as "courtly love". This institution apparently was given its major impetus late in the eleventh century through the love lyrics of the troubadours in

were expressed in the legend of the Round Table, around which King Arthur and his knights sat as equals in holy brotherhood. It was Edward III who introduced the idea of chivalry into his court. He chose as members of the order twenty-four knights, the same number the legendary Arthur had chosen.

During the fourteenth century, towards the end of the Middle Ages, there was a continuous struggle between the king, and his nobles. The first crisis came in 1327 when Edward was deposed and cruelly murdered. His eleven-year-old son, Edward III, became king.

Richard II and his deposition influenced Middle English literature in ways more directly than any other event in the life of the English monarchs. The literature of Richard II's reign (Ricardian Literature) was famous for its political allegory and social commentary. John Gower dedicated the first version of his *Confessio Amantis* to Richard II but after a revision work he shifted the dedication to Henry IV.

At the end of the Middle Ages period in the English history the most notable event was the war of the Roses. It represented a battle over the throne between the House of York and The House of Lancaster. The War of the Roses lasted from 1455 to 1487 and it ended with the accession of Henry VII to the throne. The year 1485 has usually been taken to mark the end of the Middle Ages in England.

Some historians argue that the historical event of The Norman Conquest is not at all significant, that we remember it simply as last of a series of conquests of lowland Britain, and that it did not have all that much impact on the country. Other historians would take a different line (in the process, dismissing the alternative view as a rather suspect form of English nationalism). They would argue that it is not the Norman invasion itself that is significant, but how it affected the country,

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Provence (southern France), though it seems also to have had close links with Arabian love literature. The rules of the courtly love had a bearing upon medieval literature, particularly the romance. True love is impossible between husband and wife, but under no circumstances is marriage to be considered an excuse for not loving. The courtly lover is required to worship at the shrine of a beautiful lady, generally the wife of somebody else. After being singled out for the favours of his mistress, he must swoon, send her the appropriate gifts, and obey her every whim. Moreover, he risks anything – even his life – to defend her reputation. The passion is, by definition, adulterous, but whether or not it is in every case supposed to be consummated is a moot question. Secrecy, of course, becomes imperative in the relationship; and medieval romance abounds in references to secret love. At one point courtly love seems to be partially reconciled with the chivalric ideal. This kinship appears in the insistence that the courtly lover is never promiscuous. He remains faithful to his one lady; she, in turn, inspires him to perform acts of courtesy in behalf of all womanhood. Despite the efforts of some poets in the Middle Ages, and later, to make courtly love appear respectable, the code could not possibly be accommodated into medieval Christianity, which sanctified marriage. Indeed, some writers, notably Malory, emphasize the destructive force of courtly love.