

There was a contemporary distinction between the *jongleurs*, or itinerant entertainers, and the *troubadours*, who were poets of the better social classes. The latter included the nobility, who not only wrote lyrics but were also the patrons of worthy poets with less wealth. The term *trouvere* ("finder" or "inventor") was usually applied to a similar class of poets in northern France.

In Spain the deeds of another heroic leader, Rodrigo Diaz de Vivar, the Cid, were also celebrated in poetry. Dating from about 1140 (only some forty years after the Cid's death), the *Poem of the Cid* is one of the best medieval folk epics, combining convincing character portrayal with realistic detail and unexaggerated narrative.

At about this same time there appeared in England a work that added a legendary conqueror to the list of those heroes who had emerged from the oral literature of an earlier age. Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Histories of the Kings of Britain* (in Latin) appeared in 1137 and launched a flood of narratives based on the quasi-historical Arthur and his fabled knights of the Round Table. Geoffrey devoted five of his twelve books to Arthurian tales. The Arthurian stories were soon retold in other languages. As we have seen, Gottfried von Strassburg's *Tristan* was a later version of another Celtic hero story from the mid-twelfth century. In England a Norman-French *trouvere* at the court of Henry II named Wace composed a French version of Geoffrey's tales. Then Wace's admirer, the priest Layamon, wrote a translation in alliterative English verse at the end of the twelfth century, dedicating his work to Eleanor of Aquitaine, Henry II's queen.

The themes of courtly love and knightly adventure were superimposed upon the tales of Arthur written in French and German. Because these themes were characteristic of the popular literature of Provence, which was expressed in a Romance language (a language sprung from the Latin spoken in the European provinces of the Roman Empire), the compositions using these themes came to be called romances.

Chretien de Troyes (fl. c. 1150-1190) mined the chronicles of Geoffrey and legendary materials, and his prolific works give us a glimpse of the range of subjects for the longer narrative romances. His translations of Ovid's *Ars Amatoria* and *Remedia Amoris* and parts of the *Metamorphoses* (all are lost, unfortunately) provided some of the doctrine for the fad of "courtly love." He did a version of the Tristan story (also lost) before beginning his Arthurian pieces. *Erec et Enide* is the earliest Arthurian romance in French; *Cliges* mingles Celtic and Byzantine elements; *Lancelot* was followed by *Guillaume d'Angleterre*, then by his masterpiece, *Yvain, ou le Chevalier au Lion*. His last work, *Perceval, ou le Conte du Graal*, left unfinished, was completed during the next fifty years by other versifiers. This composite work eventually reached more than 60,000 lines.

Chretien's admirers during the thirteenth century used his works in producing voluminous romances. Not content with his choices alone, they also returned to the chronicles of Geoffrey and Wace, and added other Celtic stories to the growing collection. Shorter Arthurian tales, called

Breton *lais*, had been penned by Marie de France (fl. c. 1170), who was possibly the illegitimate daughter of Geoffrey Plantagenet (d. 1151)--thus a half-sister to Henry II--who became an abbess at the English abbey at Shaftesbury. From her writings, we know only that she lived in England, knew Normandy, and drew her stories from the Celtic Bretons. Her noble birth is suggested by her knowledge of Latin and English as well as French, and certainly she knew well the dialects of Celtic Brittany.

Another major strain of subject matter for the romances came from the oldest literature, the Troy story. For example, the *Roman de Troie* by Benoît de Sainte-Maure, written about 1160, contains the oldest known medieval version of the tale of Troilus and Cressida ("Briseide" in Benoît's story), which was frequently imitated thereafter. Chaucer wrote a masterful version, based on Boccaccio's retelling in *Il Filostrato*; later Shakespeare also used the tale, reinterpreting it for his Renaissance audience.

Around the middle of the twelfth century, a tale appeared in France which partially resembles the romance but also includes similarities to the folk tale and the adventure story. *Aucassin and Nicolette* is told in an unusual fable form, with alternating verse and prose sections--one of the few examples of this type of narrative from medieval times. It has been suggested that the prose sections were intended to be read aloud and the poems sung by an entertainer. Although the author is unknown, Oriental origins are suggested for the story by the name of the hero, Aucassin (which resembles the Arabic name Al-Lassim), and by the background of the heroine, Nicolette (who is a Saracen princess). This is the tale of two lovers who refuse to remain separated (not a new story by any means) and overcome all obstacles to their reunion, including imprisonment and abduction. Although the theme is hackneyed, the narrative is lively. In fact, the directness and preciseness of the action have led some modern scholars to conclude that the work was intended as a satire. Whether or not this is true, it remains an entertaining and engaging tale, with the world of the noble pictured as a charming place of rose-covered lodges and romantic castles.

By the thirteenth century, the courtly tradition of romance based on Celtic stories had spread to Spain and Italy. The Spanish romances were usually condensed versions, equivalent to ballads, while the Italians welcomed Provençal troubadours and French trouveres to their feudal castles, transcribing their tales in both French and Italian. Before the end of the century, Dante was thoroughly schooled in the romance literature, and Boccaccio ornamented the fourteenth century with his Italian tales steeped in the courtly values of the feudal world. Thus the romances, though ranging widely in style and treatment, constituted the first large body of international literature based on similar subject matter since the Latin middle ages several centuries earlier.

The shorter lyrics comprise another huge body of literature, widely influential for three centuries or more, though the freshness and ingenuity of the earliest pieces soon faded. The courtly lyric of the troubadours appears first in Provence, the region of southern France spanning



the northern slopes of the Pyrenees, where Duke William IX of Aquitaine (1071-1127), who also bore the title of Count William VII of Poitou, found time from a busy schedule of small wars and the First Crusade to write poetry. The rich courts of Provence were impoverished by the Albigensian holy wars early in the thirteenth century, however, and the lyric poets were widely dispersed. Many emigrated to Italy, where they were welcomed and admired. The influence of vernacular troubadour lyrics had by then spread to Spain and to Sicily and Naples where Spanish nobles ruled.

Taking ideas from Provence, the minnesingers ("love singers") in Austria and Germany were flourishing by the late twelfth century. Some of their work was epic in spirit, but more often it was lyrical. Although the earlier poems expressed an admiring, almost worshipful love for a married woman, later subject matter broadened to celebrate nature and, more importantly, religion. The Crusaders' hymns, for instance, are obviously religious in both a militant and chivalric manner. Very popular during the later Middle Ages in the courtly society of central Europe, the poems of the minnesingers were probably delivered orally by the poet, accompanying himself on a small harp or a lute. Although the writers of many of these lyrics are unknown, we do know the names of some, among which Walther von der Vogelweide (c. 1170-1230) is one of the finest. A member of the nobility, he wandered from court to court, singing the poems he had written to music he had composed. However, toward the end of his life, the art of the minnesinger, like the institution of feudalism itself, began to decline.

The major noble patrons during the great flowering of lyric poetry included Eleanor of Aquitaine, Duke William's granddaughter, and queen of Louis VII as well as Henry II of England. Eleanor's personal troubadour, the elegant lyricist Bernart de Ventadorn, accompanied her court to England. Eleanor's daughter, Marie de Champagne, was the patroness of both Chretien de Troyes and Andreas Capellanus (fl. 1175-1180), another adapter of Ovid. One of Eleanor's sons, Richard coeur de Lion, was the patron of Arnaut Daniel (fl. 1180-1200) and several others.

The themes of troubadour poetry included honor, war, and love, interpreted according to the elaborate game of courtly love. The poets probably reflected the actual social manners of the time: praising illicit love, developing refinements of amatory suffering in extraordinary detail. The art of courtly love is portrayed allegorically in the *Roman de la Rose* (*Romance of the Rose*), a French poem of the thirteenth century. The lover, in a dream, is ushered into the Garden of Love by Dame Leisure and discovers the maiden of his heart, his Rosebud, but is prevented from reaching her by Danger, Shame-Face, Fear, and Slander. Before the poet, Guillaume de Lorris, could finish the poem, he died; but it was picked up some forty years later by Jean de Meung, who completed it in quite a different spirit. The allegorical framework, though retained, became secondary to a series of lengthy digressions, whose probing questions and frequent satire were a provocative but bitter commentary on the social and philosophical foundations of his day.

In troubadour poetry the formal patterns were closely followed and

soon became standardized, even artificial: the *canço*, or love-song, was pre-eminent; the *planh* was a lament, the *tenso* a dialogue; *alba* was a dawn-song; the strophæic *sirventes* was used for political satire. The *chanson* was a long poem with five or six strophes or stanzas of twenty or more lines, all the lines in each strophe ending in the same rhyme. Many of these songs have surviving instrumental accompaniments.

The world of courtly lovers, the troubadours and their admirers throughout Europe, was artificial in the best sense, and though the conventions of their verse soon led to obscurity and sterility, later poets have found much true feeling--even sincere passion--in their work. A recent scholar says of the courtly love scene:

*This was a noble game, an exalted play, and even after historical events and aesthetic shifts separated the lyric from the conditions of its performance, this early courtly love poetry has remained one of the major sources of the language of passionate devotion down to our own time.*<sup>2</sup>

## MIDDLE ENGLISH LITERATURE

The Norman Conquest of England in 1066 closed a chapter in literary history for more than two centuries. Since the English court spoke French and educated churchmen belonged to the international community of Latin scholars, the native language was kept alive only by the non-literate, or barely literate, lower classes. We have little evidence of outright oppression of the English by their masters, and doubtless many native-born Englishmen soon rose to positions of importance among their Norman peers. Nevertheless, literacy was still minimal, and French was the major vernacular in England until the late fourteenth century. A few documents from the earlier centuries are of interest to students of Middle English, and there was certainly a thriving business in copying manuscripts in both Latin and French that continued unchecked. The twelfth century has left us chronicles in the English that was rapidly showing change from the Old English of about 1000; some doctrinal and didactic pieces, an outstanding example being *The Owl and the Nightingale*, written near the end of the century as a dialogue between the Owl, a symbol for religious didactic poetry, and the Nightingale, representing lyric and sensuous poetry; and Layamon's version of the Arthurian stories, mentioned earlier, which was the first of several Middle English "translations" or renderings of the Arthurian cycle tales.

The thirteenth century has little more. A few lyrics survive, mostly in manuscripts devoted to more serious subjects; the story of King Horn,

---

<sup>2</sup>Frederick Goldin, *German and Italian Lyrics of the Middle Ages* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Anchor Books, 1973), p. 83.



the oldest indigenous romance in English, was probably composed for recitation and based on old British traditional tales from the times when the Celts were in conflict with the invading Saxons. Another romance, *Havelok the Dane*, comes from the same folktale tradition and survives in Middle English from the later thirteenth century, though the story had already appeared more than once in French.

The early fourteenth century provides a few major works in the vernacular, virtually all of them surviving in manuscripts written a century later. Robert Mannyng of Brunne wrote his *Handlyng Synne* in 1303, as he tells us, based on an Anglo-Norman *Manual of Sins* that was probably compiled about a generation earlier. Mannyng also compiled a *Chronicle* in 1338, presenting a substantial account of the Arthurian material according to the, by then, traditional sources. All the manuscripts suggest that he was--if not really an "important" poet--representative of those writers who concerned themselves with the preservation of literary materials in the native English of the age.

#### INTERNATIONAL LATIN LITERATURE

The proliferation of Latin manuscripts during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries was partly the by-product of the new universities. Throughout the earlier Middle Ages, education of all kinds had been entirely pragmatic; the Church maintained basic schools for training monks and clerks. The cathedrals had song schools and provided the secular priesthood with literate men, who also served as spiritual advisors--and secretaries--to the nobility. The curriculum was restricted to the seven liberal arts identified in Cassiodorus' sixth-century education treatise: *The Handbook of Sacred and Secular Learning*, a compilation of education theory and a Bible commentary. Grammar (Latin, of course), rhetoric, logic, arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy were the only permitted subjects, following the ancient Roman plan. The first three subjects (the trivium) were studied in the lower schools, and the last four (quadrivium) were the curriculum of the upper schools.

In the latter half of the tenth century, Gerbert of Aurillac, son of a serf, became the schoolmaster at the cathedral school at Rheims after a brief exposure in Spain to the more extended educational system of the ruling Moors. This early contact with the Islamic scholars was followed in the centuries of the Crusades by many other enlightenments: the Christians who accompanied the Crusaders rediscovered much of the learning of the ancient world through manuscripts in Arabic, Greek, and Hebrew on medicine, astronomy, mathematics, and philosophy. Gerbert, himself a brilliant scholar, rejected the traditional confinement of the seven liberal arts and began collecting manuscripts from new sources and training a group of superior students which included the great Fulbert, Bishop of Chartres. Fulbert's successors at Chartres were Ivo, Bernard, and Thierry--each generation more curious and speculative, more willing to go beyond the dead hand of tradition. By the twelfth century Abelard

was chopping away at the old educational system and, in spite of condemnation, lighting the scholarly lamp that has burned ever since.

The universities began with different patterns in different places. Universities meant any corporate group, whether of students or masters. In Italy, where the students were usually older men pursuing law or medicine, the masters were hired by the students; in France and England the students were younger and the guilds of masters maintained closer control--even over their leisure time--prescribing conduct and manners as well as the curriculum. But students were more or less free to go wherever they wished and frequently travelled from one city to another seeking masters in the subjects they wanted to learn. Much of the Latin literature was based on lecture notes, students' compilations of tales for use in future sermons, lyrics composed to lighten the hours of drudgery, philosophical treatises that are more like sophomoric term papers, Biblical paraphrases and explications, and any other scraps that were recorded for individual or collective use.

One special by-product in this period is the short lyric on secular subjects written by scholars in their more bibulous moments: the Goliards. A little clutch of ten poems by an anonymous Archpoet dating from the middle of the twelfth century reveals him as the creator of scurrilous, sometimes blasphemous Latin verse. His lyrics probably circulated widely, for they are often mentioned by his admirers. The Archpoet's "Confessio" is a drinking song, a revelation of the poet's delight in laughter, carousing, wenching. The successors of the Archpoet were also anonymous, and most of their rebellious verse has doubtless been lost. One manuscript, however, the most famous medieval anthology of Latin lyrics, was the *Carmina Burana*, a thirteenth-century collection of songs of all kinds, which included two plays, for Christmas and Easter, at the end. Some of the lyrics are in German; the spirit of young German students informs the Latin pieces as well. They are, taken altogether, the boisterous voices of wandering scholars, whether at the universities of Oxford, Bologna, Paris, Salerno, or Pavia, temporarily the home of the Archpoet himself.

The twelfth-century legacy of Latin literature owes much to the revived devotion of the friars, brilliant men emancipated from the cloister, who preached throughout Europe to rich and poor alike. When Francis of Assisi (1182-1226) renounced his inheritance and trudged off in sandals and sackcloth to save the souls of wayward Christians, many devout young men followed him. The fervor of his message attracted the best minds during the next two centuries, including, within a generation, the philosophers and theologians, the classical scholars, and several important ecclesiastics, as well as university-trained preachers ministering to humble parishioners everywhere. The Franciscan movement--and at about the same time that of the Dominicans and the other orders of friars--revitalized preaching and provided enlightenment for the masses of peasants long neglected by monastic Christianity.



## EARLY RENAISSANCE LITERATURE IN ITALY

The pontificate of Innocent III (1198-1216) marked the height of the medieval papacy; his sponsorship of the Franciscans was one of the major achievements, partially offset by his preaching the Fourth Crusade (a total failure); nevertheless, he was certainly the most powerful pope, humbling no less than five emperors and kings by excommunication or interdict. Simultaneously, the Church was faced by the Albigensian and Waldensian heresies, the former growing in southern France, while the followers of Peter Waldo (fl. c. 1170) lived in the Alpine valleys of Piedmont, Dauphine, and Provence. The Church's determination to stamp out heresy matched the fervor bestowed on the Crusades and prompted formation of the Inquisition by Pope Gregory IX in 1229. This infamous chapter in church history was to become a full-scale revolt in the Reformation. The attempts to suppress the Provençal Albigensians ruined the flourishing courts, dispersed both patrons and poets, and had the indirect effect of leavening the literature all over Europe.

Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), the Florentine poet who has long been regarded as the transitional literary figure between the medieval age and the Renaissance, was born into a world in political turmoil. Italy had no central government--and would not be unified in any way for centuries to come--and each duchy or principate was ruled by autocratic nobles whose hobby was war with each other. The Church controlled vast areas throughout central Europe as well as the Papal States on the Italian peninsula, ruling through its bishops as well as vassal nobles. Further, the diaspora of poets and the displacements during the Crusades had brought new ideas, ferments of intellectual controversy that were already beginning to have an effect. Italy afforded some of the most vigorous universities, already causing major defections from the established institutions of the Church.

Dante reflected these changes and was, at the same time, the supreme poet of the medieval cosmology: the world was the stepladder to a purer afterlife. In his earlier career, he chose to write in Italian rather than Latin, defending his choice in a long tract entitled *The Illustrious Vernacular*--written in Latin--in which he attempted to justify his native language as the peer of French or English, German, or Latin itself. His major argument is that change and growth is inherent in language and that one should not be eclipsed in favor of another that has proven to be a vehicle for beauty, reason, or logic.

Among Dante's other subjects were *The Banquet*, a study of popular philosophy, and *On Monarchy*, a justification of his political theories. He was himself a political figure in the turbulent early years of the fourteenth century, but his writings always overshadowed his public service; he was recognized as the foremost intellectual of his time even before his political fortunes forced him into exile from Florence.

His first major work was *The New Life*, an autobiographical frame for his youthful poems in praise of the lovely Beatrice Portinari, whom he

adored in the style of courtly love--from afar. The poems struck the note that would be characteristic of later Renaissance poetry. Dante's expression of the poet's inner life returns to the characteristic theme of all lovers: poetry is the expression of the poet's otherwise ineffable feelings. In form, *The New Life* imitates Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*, with poems interspersed in a prose dialogue framework. Dante's thralldom to Love--the personification that appears to him in visions as he writes--helps him to describe his concealed devotion to Beatrice. The tone is the conventional one of courtly love, but his sensitive lyrics redeem even his "scholastic" explanations of the lyrics. Dante's youthful tenderness and complete sincerity are still appealing, while many of the poems seem to be exercises for his later poetic preoccupations.

While Dante's earlier work opens vistas for the Renaissance poets to follow, his masterpiece, *The Divine Comedy*, which occupied him for the last twenty years of his life, is a summation of medieval ideas. *The Comedy* is, nevertheless, the most subtle and supremely artistic poem of its age. The plan of the poem is explained by a modern scholar thus:

*Dante, the protagonist, wanders through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise under the guidance first of Virgil, symbolizing intelligence without revelation, then Statius, the slothful Christian, then Beatrice, who symbolizes illuminating grace, and finally Bernard, the mystic, and Mary, the intercessor, until at last he comes to the beatific vision of Unity, wherein the scattered leaves of the universe are bound in one volume by that Love which moves the sun and all the stars. In Dante's footsteps we, the readers, pace the gallery of the universe, seeing with his eyes portraits of worthies and unworthies, circle on circle, ledge on ledge, and sphere on sphere.*<sup>4</sup>

*The Divine Comedy* belongs to the allegorical tradition, to the vast body of philosophical treatises in verse, to the ages, in fact, when poets constantly seek to objectify and immortalize their vision. It has never been neglected.

Fifty years after Dante's death, the city of Florence established a professorship for the purpose of studying his poetry; the first to hold the post was Boccaccio, admirer and imitator of the master, and himself a poet and prose stylist of great stature. Born only eight years before Dante's death, Boccaccio (1313-1375) was brought to Florence by his merchant father and, as a youth, sent to Naples to learn his father's trade. He was dissatisfied with commerce and undertook the study of law, which was also unsatisfactory, then turned to the study of literature. While in Naples, he pursued an affair with Fiametta, daughter of Robert, king of Naples, and the unfaithful wife of a Neapolitan nobleman. Her fidelity

---

<sup>4</sup>Charles W. Jones, *Medieval Literature in Translation* (New York: Longmans, Green and Company, 1950), p. 776.



to her lover quickly failed as well, leaving him disillusioned and bitter, but equipped, as we might expect, with the inner sorrow of all disappointed lovers. He returned to Florence about 1340 and began a long struggle to succeed as a professional writer, student and admirer of Dante, and also of Petrarch (1304-1374), who was then the supreme lyricist of Italy. Though they were acquainted, Boccaccio and Petrarch met rarely; the professorship offered by the city in 1373 came almost too late, for poor health and financial reverses plagued him the rest of his life.

The roster of Boccaccio's works is most impressive, and he was widely admired. His first long novel, *Il Filocolo*, was requested by Fiametta, who was also the "muse" for his *L'Amorosa Fiammetta*, *Ameto*, and *L'Amorosa Visione*. Between 1348 and 1353, his masterpiece in prose, *The Decameron*, was compiled, using the plague situation as a frame tale for a collection of narratives retold from various sources. In his later years Boccaccio wrote several erudite works in Latin, and sometimes expressed regret for his youthful works, particularly the bawdiness of some of the *Decameron* tales.

Petrarch's Latin prose version of Boccaccio's *Decameron* may have been Chaucer's immediate source for the tales he adapted in *The Canterbury Tales*, but Chaucer also used *Il Filostrato* and *Il Teseide* and acknowledged his debt.

Petrarch (1304-1374), the third of this amazing triumvirate, reflected the age of courtly love and sounded the true Renaissance keynote during a long and productive life. Like Dante's Beatrice, a symbolic lover, Laura, was idealized and celebrated in Petrarch's sonnets. But unlike Boccaccio's mistress, Fiammetta, Petrarch never consummated his courtly love for Laura. His works include several major volumes of poetry in all styles, both Italian and Latin, as well as treatises, quasi-philosophical and meditative. Although he struggled all his life to find a balance between his secular passion, including a passion for the literature of antiquity, and his religious obligations (he was a canon, but rarely let his ecclesiastical duties interfere with either study or composition), he is chiefly remembered for his exquisite lyrics. As a scholar, he is one of the first humanists, concerned with preserving the best thought of the past.

Imitators of Petrarch were among the most distinguished Renaissance poets; his lyrics were set to music everywhere. It would be impossible to overestimate his influence, not only in the Renaissance but on all lyric poets thereafter. He combined the best of the older lyric patterns with the sensitivity of an introspective, supremely accomplished lyricist.

## THE BEGINNINGS OF MODERN DRAMA

When the early medieval dramatic embellishments of the mass were literally thrown out of church, the need for popular entertainment encouraged

the laity to participate in dramatic festivals. No doubt the latent desire to dramatize, to mime, to "create" drama again was present, but it is certainly doubtful that the early script writers knew they were resurrecting a literary form with a long and distinguished history. The Roman drama, dead for a millennium, was perhaps known to a few scholars, but it was proscribed along with all other licentious pagan writings. Only Hrotswitha, the learned nun of Gandersheim who translated Terence in the tenth century, has left us anything remotely resembling classical drama.

A transitional development, not directly related to what would later produce the major body of medieval drama, came about through the development of polyphonic music as part of the liturgy. Some of the Biblical stories were set to music, with Latin scripts and costumes appropriate to the tales; manuscripts even have rudimentary indications of instruments used to accompany the performance. A unique manuscript from the late twelfth or early thirteenth century, for example, contains a kind of "medieval opera" called *The Play of Daniel*, with its music. Written for a boys' choir at Beauvais, the Biblical story of Daniel and Belshazzar is more or less faithfully told in Latin. The stage instructions and explanations in the manuscript show that the play was intended for performance by soloists and choir, with a variety of instruments, but the precise instrumentation is lacking.

Surviving evidence of the shift from liturgical drama to secularized skits, called "miracle" or "mystery" plays, is lacking; we can only conjecture about it. According to a modern scholar:

*. . . We can observe the tendency . . . for the episodes of liturgical drama to collect in sequences, but there is no sequence of episodes in liturgical drama comparable in scope to the great mystery cycles. At one stage we see the drama in the process of passing out of the church and the control of the clergy. We next see it in the hands of the craft guilds . . . and in the control of the civic authorities. The intermediate steps are missing.*<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, manuscripts of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries found all over Europe attest to a rather considerable body of dramatic material based on Biblical texts and probably written by clerks or monks for the use of the craft guilds at dramatic holidays. They used the growing tradition of sermon stories, comic episodes suggested by the sources of the tales, and much of their native wit, while striving to keep some kind of doctrinal validity and adhere to the Biblical narrative. It is easy to see why the drama was banished from the church, however, for many characters are clearly blasphemous in language and conduct. The verse is crude and uninspired but often unintentionally comic. We may assume that the amateur townspeople made the most of every chance to enliven their

---

<sup>5</sup>A. C. Baugh, et al, *A Literary History of England* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1948), p. 277.



performances.

The plays surviving are all quite short and most of them were performed in cycles, presented during a holiday period, such as the Corpus Christi season (at the end of May or early June). The subjects included selected episodes from the "fall of man" (with Adam and Eve and their sons), then the Old Testament prophecies (including those of Daniel), the Nativity, the Crucifixion and Resurrection, and the triumph of Judgment Day at Corpus Christi. The larger towns, with affluent craft guilds, produced the more elaborate cycles, while smaller market towns could afford only an occasional play or the entertainment provided by itinerant troupes of actors.

The manuscripts of the plays provide meager evidence about staging and performance, while the records of the craft guilds sometimes provide other clues. Some cycles were performed on wagons, called *pageants* (the origin of this term is disputed), which were moved from one station to another to accommodate the crowds. Others were evidently performed on stationary sets. The audience strolled to another set between performances. For a very long cycle, such as the one performed at York late in the fourteenth century, several days were needed to go through all the fifty-seven different plays. Other cycles customarily included twelve or more plays, but these original scripts were augmented over the years, sometimes by dividing up one of the old plays to provide a dramatic vehicle for other guilds. Many cycles remained in use over a period of two centuries, rewritten and embellished and rearranged, finally reaching manuscript form early in the fifteenth century.

Very few of these early plays have any literary merit, as distinguished from their value as dramatic or antiquarian curiosities, but they suffice to indicate a long tradition of amateur performance that would be continued in later drama.

## BYZANTINE AND ISLAMIC LITERATURE

The Byzantine Empire (the Eastern center of Christendom) and the Moslem world (stretching during this period from India to Spain) have hitherto been omitted from our study of literature, although both civilizations produced a body of writing that merits attention. While they share, at times, common influences, the literatures of Byzantium and Islam retain their individual identities.

In Byzantium the preservation and dissemination of ancient literature had always been the major concern of scholars, while originality of content and expression had never been prized or sought. Byzantine works, written in Greek and derived mainly from Greek and Roman models, did not begin to assume the characteristics of the East that mark it as Byzantine to us until about the eleventh century, when writing in the demotic (popular language) became widespread, even among scholarly authors. The

slavish devotion to Greek antiquity was challenged by forces from the East which brought, in addition to the new emphasis on vernacular language, a very different interest in a secular society.

By the twelfth century evidences of modernity appear. Writing in the demotic as well as in learned Greek were the chronicler Michael Glykas and the poet Theodore Prodromus, whose farcical satires contrast sharply with his sycophantic verses to great men, on whom all poets depended for a living. Furthermore, the use of the vernacular stimulated numerous new types of writing: animal fables or legends, verse romances on Western and Eastern themes, and legendary and historical epic poems about famous heroes and events.

Of the epic poems, *Digenis Akritas*, about a tenth century hero whose deeds make him the Byzantine equivalent of the French Roland or the British Arthur, surpasses all others. Digenis is the son of a Syrian emir who has converted to Christianity because of his love for the daughter of a Byzantine general he had defeated in battle. Possessing incredible strength and grace, their son, Digenis (named "twice-born" because of his parents' two worlds), also wins a foreign beauty through his valorous deeds. He is made ruler of the border country, slays monsters, and governs wisely in his mosaic Byzantine palace until his death at thirty-three, at which time his beautiful wife embraces him so closely that she suffocates. Reflecting a remarkably tolerant blending of races and religions, the epic was probably the work of a learned monk who drew together the complex parts of the story from classical and popular sources.

The world of Islam, without any one cultural center and comprising five separate ethnic strands (Arab, Berber, Turkish, Persian, and Indian) and their diverse languages, was naturally outside the realm of Western scholarship. By the eleventh century, however, Arab conquests in the western Mediterranean and dominance in the Near East brought to the Christian world a new and exotic subject matter, rich in color and fantasy, as well as a tradition of secular poetic style that would influence Western literature, particularly in Spain. Thus, by the twelfth century, the Western Arabs, who had brought elements of Indian, Persian, Turkish, Syrian, and even Byzantine culture to the West, were absorbing some of the themes and styles then popular in European literature: homage to nature, courtly love, and romantic sentiments in polished verse.

In Arabic literature we find no such heroic poetry as the *Digenis Akritas* of Byzantium. Lacking the national background for epic, they yet excelled as a race of poets, known and admired for their delight in exquisite language and possessing a long history of versification, from tribal desert poetry to the elegant lyrics of the Moslem poets of Spain. Two lyric forms which would be assimilated into European poetry, the al-muwashshaw and the al-zajal, developed in Spain at this time. A highly ornate and stylized poem of ten stanzas with the last line of each rhyming, the muwashshaw was cultivated as a courtly art during the twelfth century. The more colloquial zajal reached its height with Ibn Qusmān, the premiere poet of Moslem Spain (d. 1160), whose spontaneous, good-humored verse brought a vivid story-telling technique and dramatized dialogue



into Arabic poetry. Most scholars note the impact of Arab poetry upon Castile and Provence and believe that the improvisational, colloquial nature of troubadour poetry, as well as its fanciful imagery, derived from the Arab bards.

Better known in the West, however, are two typically Eastern works: *The Thousand and One Nights* (also known as *The Arabian Nights*) and the poems of 'Umar al-Khaiyam. Although some of the stories in *The Thousand and One Nights* probably date from the tenth century, the collection as we know it was probably written down during the thirteenth century. It pictures the medieval Arab in romantic, fairyland stories such as "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves," "Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp," and the "Seven Voyages of Sindbad the Sailor." Not considered literary by the Arabs, the tales were the province of professional entertainers in coffee houses. The distinctive framework that binds this heterogeneous collection together is the story of a king of India and China who, upon discovering his first wife's infidelity, vows to marry many times and kill each bride the morning after the wedding. Eventually, Shahrazad (Sheherazade), a vizier's daughter, weds him and beguiles him with her suspenseful telling of marvelous tales nightly until he hears them all and, in gratitude, makes her his queen.

Second in popularity in the West is 'Umar al-Khaiyām (d. 1123), who reaches us through the translation of Edward Fitzgerald in 1859 called *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*. Though he was known in his time as an astronomer, mathematician, and teacher, we see him as a witty yet melancholy skeptic, whose hedonistic teachings mirror our own nostalgic longings for the beauty of life.

I.S., 1974  
E.J.K., H.G.M.  
Rev. 1976

#### FOR FURTHER READING

Arberry, A. J. *Aspects of Islamic Civilization*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1964.

Baugh, A. C. et.al. *A Literary History of England*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1948.

Bishop, Morris. *The Horizon Book of the Middle Ages*. New York: American Heritage Publishing Co., Inc., 1968.

Herlihy, David, ed. *Medieval Culture and Society*. New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, Torchbooks, 1968. Parts II and III.

Hitti, Philip K. *Islam: A Way of Life*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1970.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Islam and the West*. London: D. Van Nostrand Company, 1962.

Jones, Charles W. *Medieval Literature in Translation*. New York: Longmans, Green and Company, 1950.

Trask, Willard R. *Medieval Lyrics of Europe*. New York: World Publishing Company, 1969.