survive in literature the longest, while the peculiarities of the other dialects encouraged their neglect. The northern English, being close neighbors of the Scots, kept a certain identity of speech sound well into the sixteenth century, for they were isolated by regional politics and social pattern from the more cosmopolitan south. One curious effect of this change in language was to bring forth a late "school" of writers who were devoted to Chaucer. Known as the Scottish Chaucerians, these poets included King James I of Scotland.

Far more important to us than these Chaucerian imitators is the rather substantial quantity of ballad literature that was recorded during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. These ballads were originally songs, of course, transmitted orally, whose origins and authorship were long forgotten. Simple and direct, they tell a compact story without moralizing, focusing upon situation or episode. Explanation is not important, but action and dialogue are; many times the bloodier the story, the better the ballad. They portray simple fundamental emotions with a frank unconsciousness that contributes to their lasting appeal.

Ballad themes range from the sacred to the domestic, including tales of high adventure and stories of love won--and betrayed. Love is the theme in about one-third of the early ballads, and its consequences are frequently more unhappy than blissful. "Lord Randal," for instance, a ballad popular from Italy to England, tells of a mistress who poisons her lover (the reasons are not given). The deeds of King Arthur's court and of Robin Hood are celebrated in other ballads, as are the adventures of seafaring men. Of the latter, "Sir Patrick Spens" is probably the finest poetically. Telling of a sailor, Sir Patrick Spens, who goes across the sea to fetch the daughter of a king of Norway, it appeared throughout Scandanavia and Britain. Equally popular were weird tales of ghostly happenings. "Broomfield Hill," a fifteenth-century ballad, found in various versions throughout Europe, features a witch who works magic on humans, and another ballad, "The Twa Magicians," centers on a pursued hero who assumes many disguises. As early as the ninth century, riddle ballads were popular, and fairy ballads also appear early, especially in Scotland, where "Tam Lin" is one of the finest. Other early ballads draw upon Biblical personages and events: "Judas"; "The Cherry Tree Carol," which tells of Joseph and Mary; and "St. Stephen and Herod," which relates the visit of the wise men to Herod.

At first, ballads were evidently written in poetical miscellanies, manuscripts that were a kind of literary diary for various scribes. They wrote what they enjoyed, though often in less than sophisticated verse, and were probably more interested in the tales than in poetic polish. By the later fifteenth century some of the ballads were printed in broadside sheets and enjoyed wide distribution. Occasionally, the musical accompaniment is also recorded, but there were doubtless many tunes in use, depending on the performer's taste and abilities.

## LATE ROMANCE LITERATURE

In this period the *chanson de geste* and the Arthurian stories continued to be reworked and restated, sometimes as fictional chronicles, sometimes as reflections of the now defunct courtly love tradition. Sir Thomas Malory (b. 1405-1410, d. 1471) made a more or less definitive compilation under the title *Morte d'Arthur* to while away the last twenty years of his life--in prison. Malory's version, printed by William Caxton in 1485, was among the first printed books in English. Some parts of the eight romances included in Malory's edition are not included in the earlier manuscript versions, but most of his work can be found elsewhere. By Malory's time chivalry had passed its full flower, but, nevertheless, he gives us the models of chivalric conduct in an easy-flowing, melodious and romantic tale, retaining the moral force of the earlier Arthurian tales. Malory's story includes the coming of Arthur, Merlin and the sword Excalibur, Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere, Tristram and Iseult, Sir Galahad and the Holy Grail, and the death of King Arthur. Omitted are Joseph of Arimathea and the early history of the grail. Although Malory was scarcely an innovator, this late book of romances attests to the continued popularity of the genre. It became one of the main sources for the nineteenth-century British poets Alfred Tennyson, William Morris, Matthew Arnold, and Algernon Swinburne; for the American poets James Russell Lowell and Edwin Arlington Robinson; and for the German poet-composer Richard Wagner (*Lohengrin, Tristram and Iseolde,* and *Parsifal*).

In the late fifteenth century, Ludovico Ariosto (1474-1533) reworked the Roland epic in Italian in *Orlando Furioso,* one of the major masterpieces of Renaissance literature. He began his career as a writer of comedies, such as *La Cassaria* and *I Suppositi*, and also wrote satires in the manner of Horace, Latin poems and sonnets. The epic *Orlando Furioso*, however, is his only lasting work and has been widely translated. Cervantes, Edmund Spenser, Scott, and Byron, among others, made use of it in various ways.

The romance certainly did not die in the Renaissance. Few poets (or prose authors) improved upon the old tradition, yet the allegorical tradition, the frequent attempts to raise romance situation to epic grandeur, the desire to retell old stories in more "regular" or "classical" style attest to continuing interest.

## ESSAYS, POLITICAL TRACTS, SATIRE, AND OTHER PROSE

The invention of printing, attributed (with some dissent) to Johannes Gutenberg (1400?-1468), was one of the most important contributions to what we might loosely call the "modern world." Without communication--in print, by all other media--the world as we have it today is impossible to conceive. Whether we ever return to a barbaric state in which literacy is minimal, where we rely entirely on visual and auditory media

rather than printed modes of communication, the effect of the invention of printing in the mid-fifteenth century will still leave an ineradicable mark on civilization.

The choice of what was to be printed, what was considered important in Gutenberg's time, however, was still the choice of those who expected to make commercial profit from their efforts. If we look at the body of incunabula critically, we would have to say that much of it was scarcely worth its consignment to posterity. How very much better to have had the best, rather than the merely propagandistic or controversial, topical, inflammatory subject matter that was actually printed. In England, William Caxton (1422?-1491) made a superb contribution by printing mostly literature--including Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, among other fascinating pieces--but most of the early printed books were the kind of material that is of little interest today and often merely continued the tradition of the late fourteenth and early fifteenth-century scriptoria in reproducing religious controversy and other very heavy works of interest to a limited literate audience. Nevertheless, the incunabula comprise some extremely interesting productions from the artistic point of view. They are beautifully designed, printed with precision and loving care, often illustrated superbly--by hand, so to speak--and anyone fortunate enough to acquire a book printed before 1500 is probably very wealthy and possessed of great discrimination.

The dissemination of printed books, however, caused some drastic changes in literary history. Just as publishers today undertake printing as a commercial venture, almost entirely without discrimination of quality, so the sixteenth century saw the publication of much trash, generally speaking, and one can no longer judge either popularity or value by the choices of material published. A few major prose writers emerge, however, for reasons more suitable to lasting value or reflection of the culture of the age.

Baldassare Castiglione (1478-1529), another international courtier employed by the Dukes of Milan and Urbino and envoy to Henry VII of England, wrote a curious book of manners, *The Courtier* or *Il Cortegiano*, that became the Emily Post source book for generations of noble Renaissance men. It is nostalgic, in a way, prescribing the code of conduct of the ideal nobleman, resurrecting ideas and ideals more suitable to a vanished knightly class than to the actual rapacious brutes who spent most of their time in war and chicanery. But because Castiglione's prose was graceful--and he had already earned a considerable reputation in poetry and letters--his work enjoyed international popularity.

Another Italian, even more famous and for totally different reasons, was Niccolo Machiavelli (1469-1527), author of *The Prince*, a cynical, but deadly serious discussion of the actual practice of Renaissance rulers. While the humanists, such as More and Erasmus, were trying to bring some kind of political ethics into the turmoil of the age, Machiavelli was describing the rapaciousness and cold-blooded techniques regularly employed by princes to gain power. Even Renaissance nobles condemned the book. Machiavelli's career as a political writer began during the period

when Lorenzo di'Medici ("The Magnificent") was the ruler of Florence. Using the example of Cesare Borgia (son of Pope Alexander VI), whom he met during the height of a bloody, treacherous career, Machiavelli drew a portrait of the "ideal ruler," a man whose doctrines were inhumane, vicious, and violated all the rules of political diplomacy. One may do ruthless acts to gain power, but one must always espouse humanity and ethical behavior.

## THE HUMANISTS

A major development of the Renaissance--in fact, one of its defining principles--was the concern for revival of education in the classical Greek and Roman manner. Humanism, fundamentally, restores mankind to the center of concern, directly opposed to the god-centered, otherworldly medieval mode of thought. Ambiguously, two of the leaders of the humanist movement (if we can call it a movement) were also profoundly religious. Desiderius Erasmus (1465?-1535), the Dutch scholar and intellectual, was ordained a priest in 1492 but devoted most of his life to writing, teaching, and translation. His *Praise of Folly* was written in England, where he was a close friend of the English humanists. Sir Thomas More (1478-1535, who was canonized in 1935), author of *Utopia* (1516) and several other Latin works, was among the group that included mostly educators: John Colet (1467?-1519), Thomas Linacre (1460?-1524), and William Grocyn (1463-1494). All these men, in various ways, reflect the changing times, the concern for reform within the Church, and the enthusiasm for reviving what had been considered "pagan" learning until their time.

More's career as diplomat and servant to Henry VIII--who executed him--has made him more famous than his contributions to literature; yet *Utopia* was the first of many literary fantasies, perhaps one of the major contributions to the genre of satire. Topical, imaginative, but deadly serious, *Utopia* has long stood for idealism in political-social matters, almost entirely impractical, but still worthy of study because of its fundamental concern for humanity. Erasmus' *Praise of Folly*, on the other hand, is more topical and concerned with satire against the clergy. Although it was probably influential in its own time, the satire is of little interest today except to specialists who can reconstruct the intellectual climate of Erasmus' time. The Reformation, of course, followed closely on the pioneering work of Erasmus and the other humanists, taking some direction from their ideas, but becoming increasingly iconoclastic and--in the seventeenth century--more violent in the espousal of revolutionary ideas. The work of the humanist educators, however, also has a bearing on the development of Renaissance drama, since Latin plays were used to teach the language and thus became part of the curriculum.

One other important humanist deserves discussion here: Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494), master of several languages and writer on theology, philosophy, and mathematics, among other subjects. His writings on theology incurred the wrath of Innocent VIII, who accused him of heresy, but he

was later cleared by Alexander VI. Like the other international writers in Latin, he helped to stir the cauldron of controversy that eventually boiled over during the Reformation.

## DRAMA

By the fifteenth century the great cycles of mystery and miracle plays that had developed over the past three hundred years were completed and being presented throughout Europe and England, in productions that stretched over several days. Now totally separated from ecclesiastical ceremony, the cycles were performed and revised by laymen for purposes of entertainment rather than instruction. Also, by the fifteenth century, almost all of the dramatic literature accumulating and being reworked steadily for a century or more reached manuscript form. Continental preoccupation with more "serious" matters perhaps prevented indigenous drama from being recorded, but there is a considerable body of English drama of the "mystery" genre surviving. The cycles of England have been named according to the great market center each was associated with, such as York, Wakefield, Norwich, Coventry, or Chester, and they remain the treasured possessions of these cities even today, where they are presented on special occasions by both amateur and professional groups.

One of the finest examples of the genre, the Wakefield cycle (also known as the *Towneley Plays*) was added to and revised in the fifteenth century by a remarkably gifted writer whom we know simply as the Wakefield aster. Inventive and lively, he brought an exuberance of spirit to the old stories in his use of humorous situations and dialogue. His best work, *The Second Shepherd's Play*, is a delightful mixture of the secular and the religious. Ostensibly a nativity play, it is actually a wonderfully funny story of the trickster Mak, who steals a sheep and hides it from some shepherds in a cradle as his own new-born son. The farcical situation of the new "lamb" provides a charming contrast to the brief adoration scene that follows, with the shepherds worshipping the true "lamb of God." While many of the later mystery and miracle plays show much evidence of tampering, usually resulting in more secular drama of a ribald, even scurrilous character, the *Second Shepherd's Play* presents an authentic dramatization of the lives and times of the poor folk of England.

Perhaps as a reaction, or perhaps to suit a more sober audience, a new style of drama emerged in the fifteenth century in the "morality" play. These curious works are distinguished by the use of abstractions as characters (such as Beauty, Strength, Gluttony, Peace) or generalized classes of people (dukes, peasants, clerks). Deliberately written as sermons in dramatic form, few of these productions are of any interest except to specialists.

The most famous, *Everyman*, dating from perhaps as early as 1485 or as late as 1500, is most typical. Everyman is an ordinary sinner, given to

vice, greed, and other selfish pursuits. When he is informed that Death is about to claim him, he goes on a futile search to find someone to accompany him. The personifications of his heedless life all desert him: Fellowship, Kindred, Cousin, and Worldly Goods are of no use now. Only Good Deeds--whom he scarcely knows--is willing to go down to the grave with him.

The morality plays do not belong to the history of drama in the usual sense, for they are clearly designed for purposes other than entertainment. It is even doubtful if they enjoyed a theatre audience. However, enough of them survive to indicate that the form of drama was becoming familiar again, and that serious writers were concerned about making use of it for their own purposes.

Meanwhile, outside England and medieval drama proper, a new type of secular theatre was unfolding in the courts of Italy. Played indoors to a small audience, it combined classical staging and Roman comic plots (the Renaissance had come in Italy) with the kind of romantic trappings found in the stories of Boccaccio and others. Ariosto, with four comedies, and Machiavelli, with *La Mandrogola (The Mandrake)*, display the new form of humor at its liveliest. The plots of the comedies, usually stereotyped stories of identical twins, cuckholded husbands, misers, and quacks, would provide a rich mine for French and English playwrights for the next two centuries.

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