Sample Preview

British Literature: Middle Ages to the Eighteenth Century and Neoclassicism

Bonnie J. Robinson, Ph.D., and Laura J. Getty, Ph.D.

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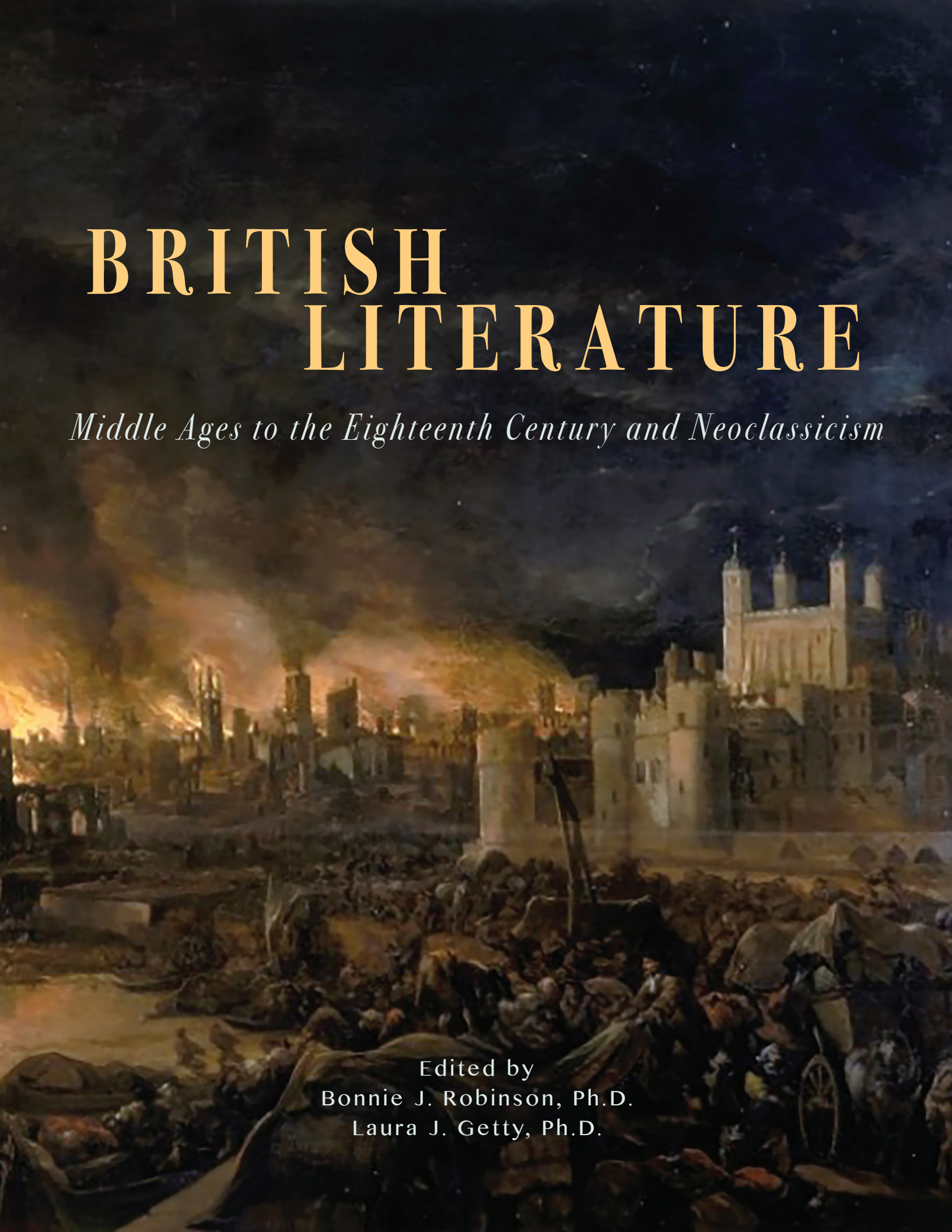
BRITISH LITERATURE

Middle Ages to the Eighteenth Century and Neoclassicism



Edited by
Bonnie J. Robinson, Ph.D.
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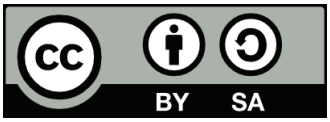

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1 The Middle Ages

1.1 LEARNING OUTCOMES

After completing this chapter, you should be able to do the following:

- Describe the migration and/or invasion of successive groups into Britain;
- Analyze the ways that Anglo-Saxon literature assimilated Christian themes;
- Compare how various groups and individuals used the story of King Arthur for political, religious, and revisionist reasons;
- Describe the languages used in Britain over time, leading to Chaucer's use of English when composing his works;
- Analyze the similarities and differences between the Anglo-Saxon warrior code and the knightly (or chivalric) code in Middle English literature, especially in Malory;
- Analyze the similarities and differences among the portrayals of women in Anglo-Saxon, Anglo-Norman, and Middle English works;
- Analyze the ways that writers use the concept of courtly love, from Marie de France to Malory.

1.2 INTRODUCTION

Medieval British literature exists because of the waves of successive groups that made the British Isles a melting pot of cultures, with each contributing a piece of the puzzle. The Middle Ages spans over 1000 years of history, which would be impossible to reproduce in much detail in a concise summary; the avid student of history would do well to pick up a textbook (or two) on British medieval history for a more complete picture of events. The purpose of this introduction is to give an outline of major events that affected literature, including who was in Britain at what time, and how literature responded to the changing times. To understand the context of medieval British literature, it is necessary to begin much earlier, in Roman times.

1.2.1 Roman Britain

Although Julius Caesar invaded Britain in 55 and 54 BCE, it was not until 43 ACE that the Romans began a systematic invasion of the British Isles. The inhabitants, called Britons by the Romans, were not a unified group, but rather many different tribes; popularly, they now are referred to as Celts, although archaeologists and historians suggest that calling them Celtic language speakers would be more accurate. The Celts were not the original or only inhabitants of the island (archaeologists have found evidence of settlements dating back to the Stone Age), and even some sites now associated with the Celts, such as Stonehenge, predate them. Although these Celtic tribes had an oral culture, rather than a written one, Roman authors wrote about them (not the most unbiased of sources); it would be difficult to imagine later medieval British literature without references to their cultures (such as the druids, who served as priests and advisors, among other functions) and their languages. The tribes in the south—the ones first encountered by the Romans—spoke Common Brittonic, a Celtic language that would develop into modern Welsh, Cornish, and Breton (and the now-extinct Cumbric). The Goidelic, or Gaelic, language developed into Irish Gaelic, Scottish Gaelic, and Manx (spoken on the Isle of Man). The influence of Celtic languages can be found most prominently in place names, such as London, Dover, Avon, and Cornwall.

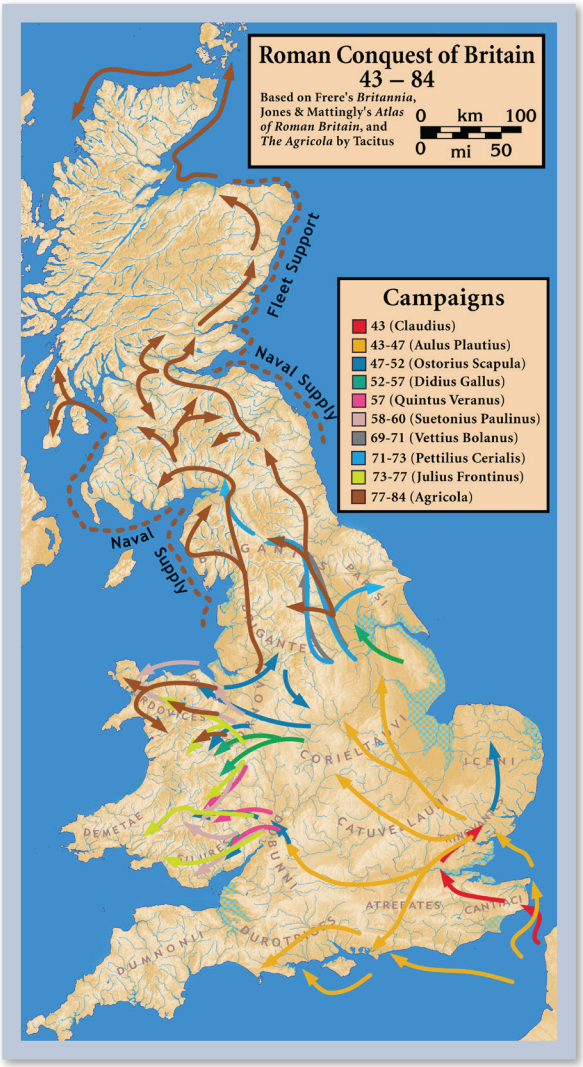

Image 1.1 | Map of Roman conquest of Britain
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The Roman conquest of Britain was met with considerable resistance; the most famous example was the revolt led by Queen Boudica of the Iceni, a Celtic tribe, in either 60 or 61 ACE. Boudica and her coalition of several Celtic tribes came close to driving out the Romans, but Roman forces under Suetonius managed to defeat the coalition and reassert control. To the north, the Roman Emperor Hadrian ordered the construction of a wall in 122 ACE to keep out

Image 1.2 | Map of Roman withdrawal from Britain
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the Picts, who inhabited what is present-day Scotland. The Picts may have been a combination of indigenous tribes (who predated the Celtic migration to the island hundreds of years earlier) and immigrants from Ireland (the word *Scoti*, from which the name Scotland derives, was used by the Romans to describe the Irish). The Picts were never conquered by the Romans, just as Ireland resisted Roman rule. Much later, in the Declaration of Arbroath (1320), the Scots would use this fact to argue to the Pope that they historically were an independent kingdom, and therefore Edward I of England had no right to their lands.

Although the Middle Ages in Europe are often seen as beginning after the fall of Rome in 476 ACE, the Middle Ages in Britain start with the withdrawal of Roman troops. By 383 ACE, Roman forces had withdrawn from the north and west, with the final departure of troops from the island in 410 ACE. The medieval legend of King Arthur and his knights comes from the events that followed this departure.

1.2.2 Anglo-Saxon Britain

When Roman forces abandoned their British outposts, the Britons were left vulnerable after several hundred years of Roman military protection. The Irish and the Picts began raiding the lands formerly controlled by the Romans, while Saxon pirates stepped up their raids along the British coastline. Although historical records from this time are scarce (most literature at this point was transmitted orally), some later authors claim that a leader named Vortigern (possibly itself a title) made the colossal mistake of inviting Saxon mercenaries into the country to protect Britons from the Picts and Irish. Instead, according to later literary sources, the Saxons began their own invasion of the island. Although modern historians debate whether the invasion was actually more of a migration, literary sources follow the version of events found in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (first composed in the ninth century). However it started, the Saxons, Angles, and Jutes would eventually overrun what is now England, or "Angleland," pushing many of

the Celtic tribes into Wales, Cornwall, Scotland, and Ireland, as well as across the British Channel to Armorica (modern-day Brittany in France).

The Romanized Britons attempted to repel the invaders, and it was during this time—approximately 450 to 550—that the legend of Arthur originates. There is no written evidence from that period that Arthur existed, although some historians have suggested that there may have been a leader (or several leaders) among the Romano-Britons who temporarily held back the Saxon invasion. Whether he was based on one war chief, or was a conglomeration of several historical figures, later authors named Arthur as the leader who defeated the Saxons in several key battles. Ironically, it would not just be later Celtic writers (such as the Welshman Geoffrey of Monmouth) who would write about Arthur, but also the very English/Anglo-Saxons against whose ancestors Arthur was supposed to have fought.

The Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of England (Wessex, Sussex, Essex, Kent, Mercia, East Anglia, and Northumbria, along with other smaller domains) were slowly Christianized in the seventh and eighth centuries. Missionaries often tried to convert the ruler first, who would then allow (or order) the conversion of his people. Bede describes part of this process in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, completed in about 731 ACE. Bede begins with the Roman invasion and continues to this present day. For the previously-pagan Germanic tribes, the process of conversion involved reconciling the warrior code with Christian teachings. Anglo-Saxon literature, therefore, often couches traditional warrior behavior in a Christian context. Stories such as *Beowulf* take a clearly pagan story and retool it into a Christian framework (scholars still debate the extent to which this effort is successful in that story). One of the most successful examples of this reworking is *The Dream of the Rood*, which tells the story of Christ's crucifixion as the actions of a warrior who defeats his enemies through his bravery. More frequently, as in the poem *The Wanderer*, the Christian meaning of the story appears added after the fact. The opposite transformation happens with the story of Judith, taken from *The Book of Judith* (still found in the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Bibles, but removed from both Jewish and Protestant versions). The Hebrew Judith who fights the Assyrian Holofernes is described as a type of Anglo-Saxon shield maiden, worthy of her share of the enemy's treasure. Our understanding of this process is limited as well by the scarcity of manuscripts that have survived; both *Beowulf* and *Judith* survive in only one manuscript, while only four manuscript books, or codices, of Anglo-Saxon poetry are extant.

1.2.3 Danelaw Britain

In 793, the Vikings raided the monastery at Lindisfarne, and Danish attacks on England began to increase. Over the next hundred years, Danish forces would occupy more and more Anglo-Saxon territory, at one point leaving only the kingdom of Wessex independent. Sections in the northern and eastern parts of England became known as the Danelaw, or areas where Danish laws were used, rather than Anglo-Saxon ones. Ironically, as Britain went through a temporary phase

where fewer people knew Latin, more books were translated from Latin to Old English (or Anglo-Saxon, which is basically a dialect of Old German). In particular, King Alfred of Wessex (who ruled from 871 to 899) oversaw the translations of numerous Latin texts into Old English, so that past learning would not be lost. At the same time, areas under the Danelaw picked up quite a few loanwords from Norse/Scandinavian languages, including words like "anger," "cake," "window," "glitter," "mistake," "eggs," and "awkward." Those words would spread to other areas of the island over time.

In 1016, King Canute of Norway and Denmark became king of all England, ruling until 1035. After a struggle with the succession among Canute's heirs, the Wessex line was briefly restored when Edward the Confessor took the throne in 1042. Edward ruled until 1066, and his death led to a fight for the succession that resulted in the Norman conquest of England by William, Duke of Normandy (more commonly referred to now as William the Conqueror). William defeated his main rival, Harold Godwin, at the Battle of Hastings, on October 14, 1066.

1.2.4 Norman Britain

The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* records the Norman Conquest as a punishment from God, although it is not complimentary about the instrument of that punishment, William, or his Norman troops. While suppressing revolts, William began the process of removing Anglo-Saxons from power and replacing them with his Norman followers. The *Domesday Book* (a survey of all the lands and wealth of England) records the removal of lands from Anglo-Saxon nobles, whose lands were then awarded to Normans. Many free peasants suddenly found themselves bound to the lord of the manor and required to work for him, signaling the start of the feudal system. At one point, fewer than 250 people owned most of the land in England.

William did not speak English, so Norman French became the most commonly-used language of the British royal court—as well as government offices and the legal system. Just as the Christianization of the Anglo-Saxons had introduced Latin words into the language, Old English incorporated more and more French vocabulary over time. As a result, English speakers can say that they are going to have a "drink" (Anglo-Saxon origin) or a "beverage" (Old French origin), or that they are going to "weep" (Anglo-Saxon) or "cry" (Old French). Additionally, the very word "government" is of French origin, as are the words "office," "city," "police," "tax," "jury," "attorney," and "prison."

The Norman invasion also led to a resurgence of interest in King Arthur, and it would be during the next few centuries that the most common modern image of Arthur was created. The three main topics of literature in medieval Britain were "the Matter of Rome" (stories of the Trojan War, using Virgil's *Aeneid* as a reference), "the Matter of France" (mostly stories of Charlemagne and his men), and "the Matter of Britain," which were mostly stories related to King Arthur. Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*, written around 1135-1139, introduced

many Normans to the story of Arthur, including a new character from a different tradition: Merlin. (Well over two hundred years later, Chaucer would mention in *The House of Fame* that some people considered Geoffrey of Monmouth a liar.) Many of the most well-known elements of the Arthurian legend were added over the next forty years or so; the Anglo-Norman writer Wace, in his *Roman de Brut* (1155), added the Round Table, while the French writer Chrétien de Troyes added a French knight, Lancelot, as the lover of Queen Guinevere and the greatest knight of King Arthur's court in his *The Knight of the Cart; or Lancelot* (written roughly between 1175 and 1181).

The quest for the Holy Grail evolved during this time as well. In the Welsh *Peredur*, the grail is a platter with a severed head on it; in Chrétien's *Perceval*, it is a serving dish with contents that light up the room; and in Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*, the grail is a stone (possibly a meteorite) guarded by the Knights Templar. It is in Robert de Boron's *Joseph d'Arimathe* that the grail becomes the cup used by Jesus at the Last Supper and used by Joseph of Arimathea to catch blood from Jesus during the Crucifixion. By the time that Sir Thomas Malory wrote his huge compilation of Arthurian stories in *Le Morte d'Arthur*, the Grail knight was no longer Percival, but Galahad, the son of Lancelot and Elaine, the daughter of King Pelles (a version of the Fisher King of the Grail stories), although Percival accompanies Galahad on his quest.

Several British monarchs attempted to use the Arthurian stories for their own political advantage. Henry II (who reigned from 1154-1189) claimed to have found the grave of Arthur and Guinevere in Glastonbury, possibly to discourage the popular idea that Arthur might return one day. During the reign of Edward I (1272-1307), a Round Table was constructed (5.5 meters in diameter), which now hangs on the wall in the Great Hall of Winchester Castle. Edward III (1327-1377) created the Order of the Garter (rather than a Round Table, which he considered at one point) to create a new type of community of knights. It was during Edward III's reign that the English language, rather than French, slowly became prominent again. In 1362, English was re-established as the language of the legal system (before the Pleading in English Act of 1362, all legal proceedings were conducted in French, even though most of the English did not know French), although it would not be until the reign of Henry V (1413-1422) that English would be re-established as the official language of government for the first time since the Norman conquest.

By the time that Geoffrey Chaucer began writing, English was slowly becoming the language of literature in Britain once more. Although some of his contemporaries, such as John Gower, wrote in French and Latin as well as English to reach a wider audience, Chaucer wrote his works in Middle English, as did the anonymous author of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, William Langland with his *Piers Plowman*, and other authors. By the time that William Caxton printed a copy of Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* in 1476 (long after Chaucer's death in 1400), Chaucer was considered the master that many English and Scottish authors

sought to emulate. In the Renaissance, Shakespeare took Chaucer's poem *Troilus and Criseyde* and turned it into a play, writing in Early Modern English.

The Middle Ages in Britain end (more or less) in 1485, when Henry VII ends the Wars of the Roses (and the Early Modern Period begins). Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* was published in the same year, and it is the literary reaction to the wars between the houses of Lancaster and York that had just ended. As the Middle Ages drew to a close, Malory records a picture of knighthood that is both nostalgic and, at times, cynical: celebrating the concept while criticizing the practice of it. Just as the start of the Middle Ages gave rise to the legend of King Arthur, *Le Morte d'Arthur* serves as a bookend to the period.

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ANGLO-SAXON LITERATURE

1.4 *THE DREAM OF THE ROOD*

Author unknown
Approximately seventh to eighth century

Image 1.3 | The Ruthwell Cross
Artist | Lairich Rig
Source | Wikimedia Commons
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The Dream of the Rood dates from at least the early eighth century, when eighteen verses of it were carved on the Ruthwell Cross in runic letters. The Ruthwell Cross, in southern Scotland, stands over eighteen feet tall and includes Gospel scenes, Latin inscriptions, and elaborately-carved vines in addition to the fragment of *The Dream of the Rood*. Like other Anglo-Saxon poems, *The Dream of the Rood* uses alliteration rather than rhyme; it is divided into half-lines (with a pause, or caesura, in the middle) that vary between short rhythmic sections and longer hypermetrical sections (with more syllables). The 156 lines of the complete poem are found in the tenth century Vercelli Book, a manuscript rediscovered in 1822, in the cathedral in Vercelli, in northern Italy. Just as the Ruthwell Cross is meant to appeal to a variety of audiences, the poem presents a Christian subject (the Crucifixion) in a way that would appeal to the traditions of a warrior class only recently converted to Christianity in some cases. Warriors followed a lord (who could be a king or a chieftain), who distributed gold and other rewards to loyal retainers. When the Rood (Cross) speaks of its history, from tree to loyal retainer of Christ (his liege lord/Lord), it describes Christ as a warrior who climbs up onto the cross freely and bravely to defeat sin. An Anglo-Saxon audience could not help but see a comparison to Odin/Woden sacrificing himself on the Tree of Life (Yggdrasil) to gain the secret of the runes, the very language in which the fragment is written. The poem is also a dream vision, a popular genre in medieval English literature (see, for example, Chaucer's *Parlement of Fowles*, found in this anthology). When the dreamer awakes, he longs to rejoin his companions, who have gone on to feast at the Lord's table in heaven: a situation similar to that found in the Anglo-Saxon poem *The Wanderer* (also in the anthology). Near the end, the dreamer refers to Christ saving those who "suffered the burning," an indirect reference to the popular *Harrowing of Hell*, found in the (now) apocryphal *Gospel of Nicodemus* and in numerous medieval works, from mystery plays to Dante's

Divine Comedy. In it, Christ descends to Hell after the Crucifixion, breaks open the gate, scatters the demons, and frees all the righteous souls, leading them to heaven. The reference survives to the present day in the Apostle's Creed, which states that Christ "descended into hell" (or in some recent versions "descended to the dead"). The poem therefore celebrates Christ's victories in battle, eschewing the later medieval focus on Christ's suffering and image as the lamb of God.

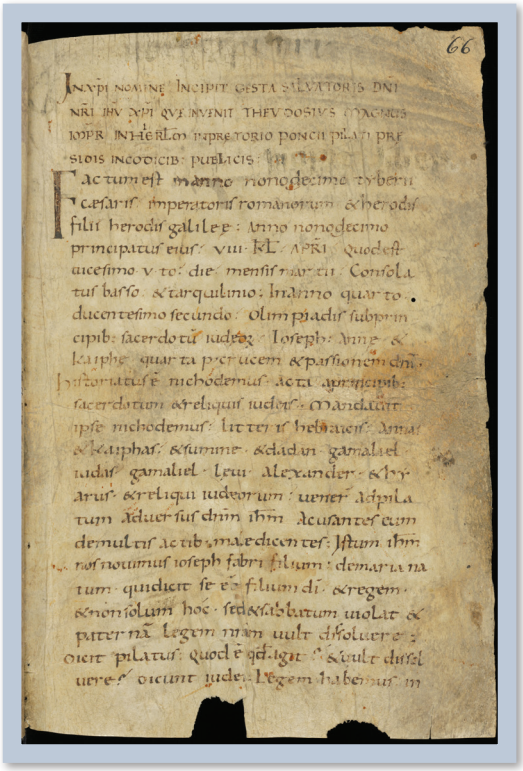

Image 1.4 | The Gospel of Nicodemos
Artist | Nicodemos
Source | Wikimedia Commons
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1.4.1 *The Dream of the Rood*

Lo! choicest of dreams I will relate,
What dream I dreamt in middle of night
When mortal men reposed in rest.
Methought I saw a wondrous wood
Tower aloft with light bewound,
Brightest of trees; that beacon was all
Begirt with gold; jewels were standing
Four at surface of earth, likewise were there five
Above on the shoulder-brace. All angels of God beheld it,
Fair through future ages; 'twas no criminal's cross indeed,

But holy spirits beheld it there,
Men upon earth, all this glorious creation.
Strange was that victor-tree, and stained with sins was I,
With foulness defiled. I saw the glorious tree
With vesture adorned winsomely shine,

Begirt with gold; bright gems had there
Worthily decked the tree of the Lord.
Yet through that gold I might perceive
Old strife of the wretched, that first it gave
Blood on the stronger [right] side. With sorrows was I oppressed,
Afraid for that fair sight; I saw the ready beacon
Change in vesture and hue; at times with moisture covered,
Soiled with course of blood; at times with treasure adorned.
Yet lying there a longer while,
Beheld I sad the Saviour's tree

Until I heard that words it uttered;
The best of woods gan speak these words:
“’Twas long ago (I remember it still)
That I was hewn at end of a grove,
Stripped from off my stem; strong foes laid hold of me there,
Wrought for themselves a show, bade felons raise me up;
Men bore me on their shoulders, till on a mount they set me;
Fiends many fixed me there. Then saw I mankind’s Lord
Hasten with mickle might, for He would sty upon me.
There durst I not ’gainst word of the Lord
Bow down or break, when saw I tremble
The surface of earth; I might then all
My foes have felled, yet fast I stood.
The Hero young begirt Himself, Almighty God was He,
Strong and stern of mind; He stied on the gallows high,
Bold in sight of many, for man He would redeem.
I shook when the Hero clasped me, yet durst not bow to earth,
Fall to surface of earth, but firm I must there stand.
A rood was I upreared; I raised the mighty King,
The Lord of Heaven; I durst not bend me.
They drove their dark nails through me; the wounds are seen upon me,
The open gashes of guile; I durst harm none of them.
They mocked us both together; all moistened with blood was I,
Shed from side of the man, when forth He sent His spirit.
Many have I on that mount endured
Of cruel fates; I saw the Lord of Hosts
Strongly outstretched; darkness had then
Covered with clouds the corse of the Lord,
The brilliant brightness; the shadow continued,
Wan ’neath the welkin. There wept all creation,
Bewailed the King’s death; Christ was on the cross.
Yet hastening thither they came from afar
To the Son of the King: that all I beheld.
Sorely with sorrows was I oppressed; yet I bowed ’neath the hands of men,
Lowly with mickle might. Took they there Almighty God,
Him raised from the heavy torture; the battle-warriors left me
To stand bedrenched with blood; all wounded with darts was I.
There laid they the weary of limb, at head of His corse they stood,
Beheld the Lord of Heaven, and He rested Him there awhile,
Worn from the mickle war. Began they an earth-house to work,
Men in the murderers’ sight, carved it of brightest stone,
Placed therein victories’ Lord. Began sad songs to sing
The wretched at eventide; then would they back return

Mourning from the mighty prince; all lonely rested He there.
Yet weeping we then a longer while
Stood at our station: the [voice] arose
Of battle-warriors; the corse grew cold,
Fair house of life. Then one gan fell
Us all to earth; 'twas a fearful fate!
One buried us in deep pit, yet of me the thanes of the Lord,
His friends, heard tell; [from earth they raised me],
And me begirt with gold and silver.
Now thou mayst hear, my dearest man,
That bale of woes have I endured,
Of sorrows sore. Now the time is come,
That me shall honor both far and wide
Men upon earth, and all this mighty creation
Will pray to this beacon. On me God's Son
Suffered awhile; so glorious now
I tower to Heaven, and I may heal
Each one of those who reverence me;
Of old I became the hardest of pains,
Most loathsome to ledes [nations], the way of life,
Right way, I prepared for mortal men.
Lo! the Lord of Glory honored me then
Above the grove, the guardian of Heaven,
As He His mother, even Mary herself,
Almighty God before all men
Worthily honored above all women.
Now thee I bid, my dearest man,
That thou this sight shalt say to men,
Reveal in words, 'tis the tree of glory,
On which once suffered Almighty God
For the many sins of all mankind,
And also for Adam's misdeeds of old.
Death tasted He there; yet the Lord arose
With His mickle might for help to men.
Then stied He to Heaven; again shall come
Upon this mid-earth to seek mankind
At the day of doom the Lord Himself,
Almighty God, and His angels with Him;
Then He will judge, who hath right of doom,
Each one of men as here before
In this vain life he hath deserved.
No one may there be free from fear
In view of the word that the Judge will speak.

He will ask 'fore the crowd, where is the man
Who for name of the Lord would bitter death
Be willing to taste, as He did on the tree.
But then they will fear, and few will bethink them
What they to Christ may venture to say.
Then need there no one be filled with fear
Who bears in his breast the best of beacons;
But through the rood a kingdom shall seek
From earthly way each single soul
That with the Lord thinketh to dwell."
Then I prayed to the tree with joyous heart,
With mickle might, when I was alone
With small attendance; the thought of my mind
For the journey was ready; I've lived through many
Hours of longing. Now 'tis hope of my life
That the victory-tree I am able to seek,
Oftener than all men I alone may
Honor it well; my will to that
Is mickle in mind, and my plea for protection
To the rood is directed. I've not many mighty
Of friends on earth; but hence went they forth
From joys of the world, sought glory's King;
Now live they in Heaven with the Father on high,
In glory dwell, and I hope for myself
On every day when the rood of the Lord,
Which here on earth before I viewed,
In this vain life may fetch me away
And bring me then, where bliss is mickle,
Joy in the Heavens, where the folk of the Lord
Is set at the feast, where bliss is eternal;
And may He then set me where I may hereafter
In glory dwell, and well with the saints
Of joy partake. May the Lord be my friend,
Who here on earth suffered before
On the gallows-tree for the sins of man!
He us redeemed, and gave to us life,
A heavenly home. Hope was renewed,
With blessing and bliss, for the sufferers of burning.
The Son was victorious on that fateful journey,
Mighty and happy, when He came with a many,
With a band of spirits to the kingdom of God,
The Ruler Almighty, for joy to the angels
And to all the saints, who in Heaven before

In glory dwelt, when their Ruler came,
Almighty God, where was His home.

1.4.2 Reading and Review Questions

1. In what ways is the Rood a loyal retainer of Christ? How does he not betray his lord/Lord, despite the circumstances?
2. How much does the Dreamer seem to identify with the Rood, and how much does he seem to identify with the "hero?"
3. Which passages of the poem could be used in any Anglo-Saxon heroic poem, and which are specifically religious? Why?
4. How does the image in this poem of Christ on the cross compare to depictions of Odin hanging on Yggdrasil in Norse mythology? Compare how each one is described and what each one accomplishes.
5. Do the last three lines of the poem go off-topic in a small way? Why or why not?