

English Literature

Part 2: Middle English

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Module 2

English in the Middle Ages

In part one of the course, you learned about the (very) early Middle Ages, and now it's time to turn our attention to the late middle ages.

Some important dates

1066	Norman Conquest
1154-1189	Reign of Henry II
ca. 1200	Beginnings of Middle English literature
1204	The loss of Normandy
1360-1400	Geoffrey Chaucer, <i>Piers Plowman</i> , <i>Sir Gawain and the Green Knight</i>
1476	Invention of the printing press (William Caxton)
1485	William Caxton's printing of Sir Thomas Malory's <i>Morte D'Arthur</i> , one of the first books printed in England

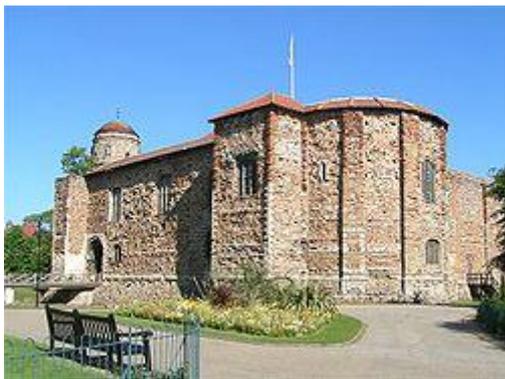
A bit more history

After 1066, the upper strata of Anglo-Saxon society came under the influence of the Norman nobility. William the Conqueror, Duke of Normandy, defeated the Anglo-Saxon army at the Battle of Hastings, thus securing the English throne. He proceeded to appoint Normans to key positions in government, the Church, the army and the judiciary and rewarded them with generous grants of land. The old Anglo-Saxon structure of kings and warriors disappeared, to be succeeded by a feudal system, based on lords and vassals. Thus Medieval English society became divided into three classes: the nobility (mainly French-speaking), the clergy (who conversed and wrote predominantly in Latin) and the commoners (whose language was English). The first two groups held almost all the land, which was nevertheless worked predominantly by free farmers and serfs from the third group. The English commoners and the French nobility led quite separate existences, certainly up until the late twelfth century. The first king of England who actually spoke English was Edward III, who did not reign until 1327 to 1377!



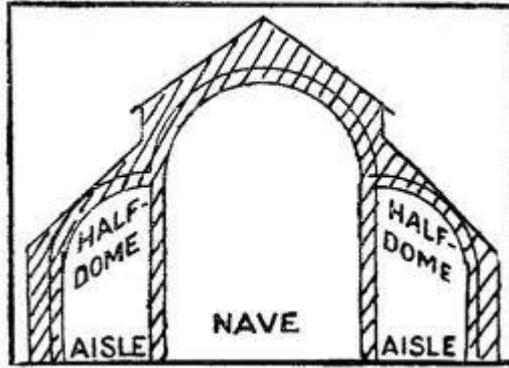
Edward III

To demonstrate their power and protect themselves from possible rebellion, the Norman lords built castles, one of which was Colchester Castle in the county of Essex.



Colchester Castle

With the population expanding rapidly, a lot of new churches were also built in the Romanesque style imported from France: robust buildings with heavy pillars, buttresses and characteristic round-arched windows. Religion played an important role in society: life on earth was regarded as merely a precursor to the ever after. The emphasis was therefore firmly on spirituality; the mortal individual was not supposed to take precedence. The spirit of the age of the age was perhaps summed up by the Latin motto *Memento Mori* (remember that you will die).



A Romanesque Church

All a Crusader's sins were automatically forgiven, with the result that many felons and social misfits set sail for Jerusalem.



The Crusaders

After considerable struggles a new dynasty assumed the English crown in 1154: the Plantagenets. Over time, the Plantagenet monarchs sought to acquire still greater power and wealth for themselves, at the expense of the nobility and the church. This almost led to civil war, when several nobles rose against King John. In 1215, he was forced to sign the Magna Carta, a sort of contract under which the nobility were granted certain privileges in return for their loyalty.

From 1066, the domain of the English monarch consisted not only of England itself, but also parts of France. King Edward III claimed to be heir to the French throne through his mother's family and declared war on France in 1337. The French crown remained in dispute, with periodic outbreaks of open hostility, for more than a hundred years. Historians therefore refer to this long-running disagreement as the Hundred Years' War. The fighting came to an end in 1453, with the English left only in control of the area around Calais. However, it was not until 1801 that the English finally gave up their claim to the French throne.

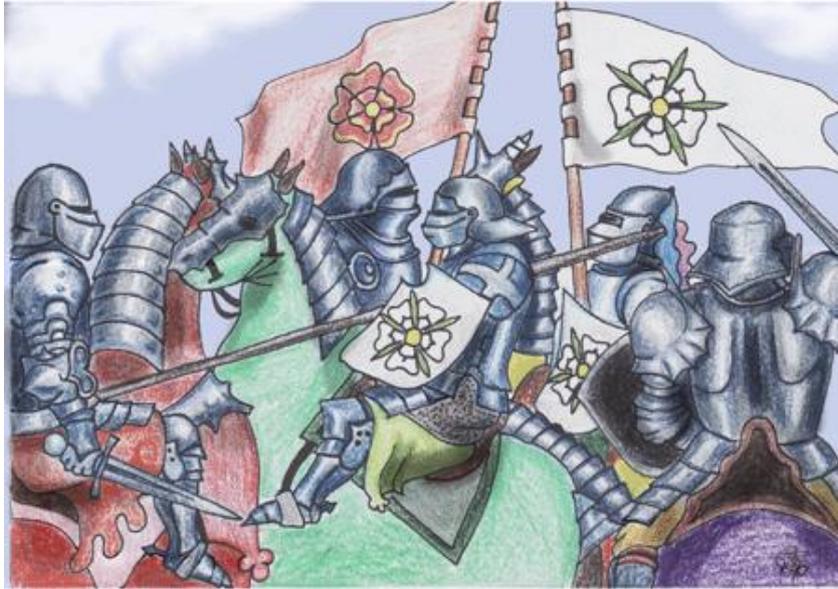
Midway through the fourteenth century, the period of population growth came to an end, not only in England, but also throughout Europe. The cause was the plague, also known as the Black Death: a highly virulent disease spread by rat fleas, whose host animals came from Asia to Europe in the holds of ships. Around the world, an estimated 75 million people died of the Black Death. England was first hit in 1348. Nearly half the population perished, leading to major labour shortages and to cultivatable land being left untilled. This in turn caused a major economic downturn.

While the monarchs were still preoccupied in France, there was disquiet among the common people back home. The labour shortage caused by the Plague made the peasantry more self-confident and they began to demand greater rights, culminating in an open rebellion, the Peasants' Revolt, in 1381. King Richard II, then just fourteen years old, managed to put the rebellion down, and subsequently was a severe as ever with the lower classes.



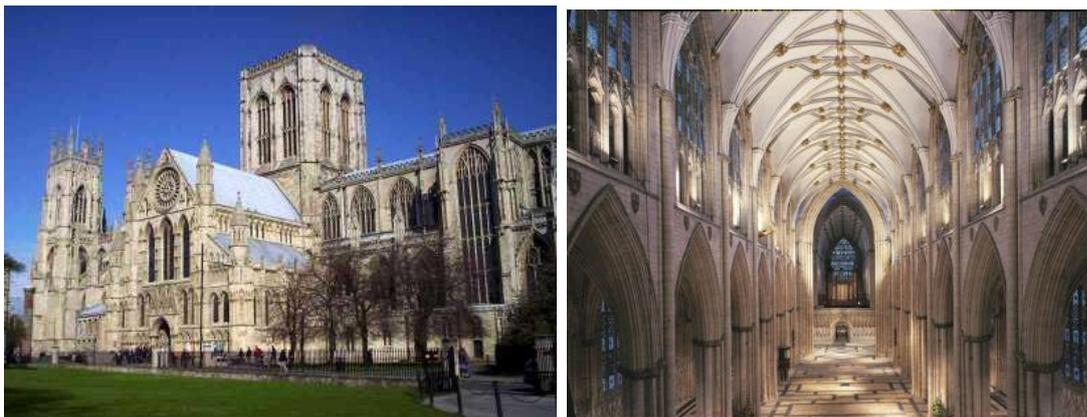
The Peasants' Revolt

Immediately following the Hundred Years' War, in 1453, internal power struggles resurfaced in England. The crown was contested by two noble houses: the House of Lancaster and the House of York. There was a lot of fighting, as the throne was seized first by the one side, and then by the other. The symbol of the House of Lancaster was a red rose, while that of York was a white rose; the conflicts that characterised the period 1455 to 1485 are therefore referred to as the War of the Roses. These wars ultimately brought a new dynasty to the throne in 1485: the Tudors, who ruled until 1603.



War of the Roses

Not surprisingly, the architecture and literature of this period exhibits strong French influence. In architecture, this is most evident in the predominance of Romanesque style, particularly in churches and monasteries. This style gradually gave way to what later became known as the Gothic style, which also originated in France, characterised by higher buildings with pointed arches and an increased use of decorative elements. In literature, we find French-language stories in circulation and the introduction of rhyme. It is not until the fourteenth century that literature written in the language of the ordinary people begins to gain prominence. The most famous name from this period is Geoffrey Chaucer, whose best-known work was the *Canterbury Tales*. Another major literary figure of the period was Thomas Malory, whose *Morte d'Arthur*, a collection of English-language stories about King Arthur, appeared in about 1500.



York Minster

The most popular genres of the day were fables, ballads, and “romances”. Early examples of literature written in the language of the masses included the thirteenth century ditties and folk songs celebrating the arrival of summer or the beauty of a young woman. The late Middle Ages was therefore a rich period in literary terms, especially when one considers how little material has

actually been preserved. Much was never written down, and that which survives is just a small and unrepresentative portion of what was produced.

Nobility, Clergy, and the Rest

In the Middle Ages, society was organised along very different lines from those that we are used to today. There was no democracy, but what is known as a feudal system with three levels, dominated by the nobility. In the Early Middle Ages, the king had absolute power, which he sought to retain at all costs. He surrounded himself with allies, who supported him in return for material rewards.

The king “lent” pieces of land temporarily to men who had served him well in the army. As well as enabling him to secure their loyalty, this aided good government, since the king often owned too much land to manage it all efficiently himself. The men to whom the king’s land was lent, known as vassals, swore an oath to the king, promising to rule the land in the name of the king and to aid the king in times of war. Over time, the lands that had originally been lent out temporarily became the vassals’ hereditary property. This meant that it was no longer up to the king who should rule over each area; instead, control was handed down from father to son. The vassals began to govern their lands as they saw fit, rather than as the king told them to. Thus, the increasingly independent and powerful descendants of the vassals became a distinct social class: the nobility.

The second tier of feudal society was the clergy. The Church was in effect part of the political system of the day. Following the conversion of the Anglo-Saxon kings to Christianity, not only warriors, but also bishops and other powerful church leaders were lent or given land. Other rich Anglo-Saxon nobles left property to the Church, in the hope of securing a place in heaven. So the clergy acquired considerable wealth and power.

Beneath the nobility and clergy came a class made up of peasant farmers, traders and craftsmen (later to be known as commoners). These people were largely free to run their own lives, although it was normal for them to have to give a proportion of what they produced to the nobility or clergy as a sort of tax.

As well as the three classes described above, medieval society included serfs, villeins and slaves. Across large parts of Europe, serfs formed the largest social group. A serf was a farmer who owned a small piece of land, but also had obligations to an overlord (a member of the nobility or clergy). These obligations involved paying taxes or providing services. Villeins and slaves did not own land. A villein was a bound servant, who was obliged to, for example, work a small piece of his lord’s land. Unlike slaves, they were at least free to have families and to support them with what they were able to produce on the land they worked for their lords. Furthermore, they could not be sold separately from the land they worked or separately from their families. By contrast, slaves had no rights whatsoever.

Text 1: Robin Hood

Many works of medieval literature feature ‘outlaws’: people expelled from mainstream society. In many cases, these people lived ‘beyond the pale’ because they were wanted by the authorities for earlier crimes; but there were just as many who had been forced to flee despite having committed no crime. Some outlaws lived in forests and other unpopulated places for their own safety, since they had no legal rights and could be killed without fear of penalty.

Robin Hood was supposedly one such, who made his home in the forest near to Nottingham, but was certainly no reclusive or sorry character. He gathered a band of disenfranchised individuals around him, the best known being Friar Tuck, Little John, Allan A Dale and, of course, Maid Marian. He was a hero of the common people, who stole from rich nobles and cloistered communities and gave to the poor ... always pursued by the Sheriff of Nottingham, whom he consistently evaded, often by the use of comic ploys.

It is not clear whether Robin Hood ever really existed; no scholar has ever found mention of him in any official documentation. Nevertheless, countless stories about his deeds have been told, many in the form of ballads. As tends to happen when stories are told and retold over and again, the historical setting for these stories gradually

changed Robin Hood, so that he gradually became a character not of the fourteenth century, but of the century before, when the Crusades were taking place.



Robin Hood ranks alongside King Arthur as one of the most popular and enduring figures in English literature. His adventures have been immortalised in many cartoons, films and TV series, some serious, some comic parodies. From the structure of *Robin Hood and the Butcher*, it is clear that this ballad was intended to be sung. The first line of each stanza is followed by a refrain ‘with hey, down, down an a down’, which the audience probably joined in with. In this ballad, he not only proves himself too clever for the other butchers, but also makes off with a good sum of the sheriff’s money.

The story begins with Robin stopping a passing butcher and buying his horse and all his meat, which he then takes in to Nottingham to sell. Knowing nothing about the normal prices, he sells what he has brought well below the going rate. As a result, the other butchers can attract no custom. The butchers reason that Robin is selling off the meat so cheap because he has recently disposed of his land,¹ and they invite him to join them at a feast. Robin pays for the meal, thus giving the impression that he is easily taken advantage of. Among the banqueters is the Sheriff of Nottingham.



<p>“Hast thou² any horn-beasts,” the sheriff repli’d. <i>With hey down, down, an a down,</i> “Good fellow, to sell unto me?” “Yes, that I have, good Master Sheriff, I have hundreds two or three.</p>	26	<p>“I tell thee, good fellow, I would I were gone, For I like not thy company.”</p>
<p>“And a hundred aker³ of good free land, If you please it to see; And I’ll make you as good assurance of it As ever my father made me.”</p>	27	<p>Then Robin set his horn⁹ to his mouth And blew but blasts three; Then quickly anon¹⁰ there came Little John, And all his company.</p>
<p>The sheriff he saddled a good palfrey,⁴ With three hundred pound in gold, And away he went with bold⁵ Robin Hood, His horned beasts to behold.⁶</p>	28	<p>“What is your will?” then said Little John, “Good master come tell it to me;” “I have brought hither¹¹ the sheriff of Nottingham, This day to dine with thee.”</p>
<p>Away then the sheriff and Robin did ride, To the forest of merry Sherwood; Then the sheriff did say, “God bless us this day From a man they call Robin Hood!”</p>	29	<p>“He is welcome to me,” then said Little John, “I hope he will honestly pay; I know he has gold, if it be but well told,¹² Will serve us to drink a whole day.”</p>
<p>But when that a little further they came, Bold Robin he chanced to spy A hundred head of good red deer,⁷ Come tripping the sheriff full nigh.⁸</p>	30	<p>Then Robin took his mantle from his back, And laid it upon the ground, And out of the sheriff’s portmantle¹³ He told three hundred pound.</p>
<p>“How like you my horned beasts, good Master Sheriff? They be fat and fair for to see;”</p>		<p>The Robin he brought him thorow¹⁴ the wood, And set him on his dapple gray:¹⁵ “O have me commended¹⁶ to your wife at home;” So Robin went laughing away.</p>

Questions on Robin Hood:

1. What does the sheriff mean by “horn beasts” in the first stanza?
2. What does Robin Hood mean by the phrase? (see fifth stanza)
3. What is meant by “good free land” in the second stanza?
4. In which stanza is it made clear that the sheriff does not realise who he is dealing with?
5. Indicate the lines in which it is made clear that the sheriff feels cheated.
6. How does Robin Hood alert his followers to the fact they should reveal themselves?
7. How does Little John react in the last two lines of stanza 28?
8. Which words in the final stanza make it clear that Robin Hood has the situation firmly under control?
9. What might the moral of this story be?



Geoffrey Chaucer

1343-1400

Geoffrey Chaucer was probably born in 1343 and died in 1400. Almost his whole life was spent in the service of the English court. At the age of just sixteen, he travelled to France to fight in the Hundred Years' War. In about 1366, he married a lady-in-waiting, Philippa Roet, about whom little else is known; the couple were to have two sons, Lewis and Thomas. A year later, Chaucer entered the service of the English king, Edward III, for whom he undertook a number of diplomatic missions to destinations such as Navarra (Spain) and Italy, where he probably met the famous writers Petrarcha and Boccaccio.

Economically, Chaucer did very well for himself. Between 1374 and 1385, he worked in London as a tax inspector, making sure that export taxes were paid on wool, fleeces and leather. Despite these responsibilities, he was able to find time to write and to travel extensively. In this period, he wrote his less well-known works *The Parliament of Fowls*, *The House of Fame* and *Troilus and Criseyde*.

In 1385, Chaucer was appointed as a judge in the

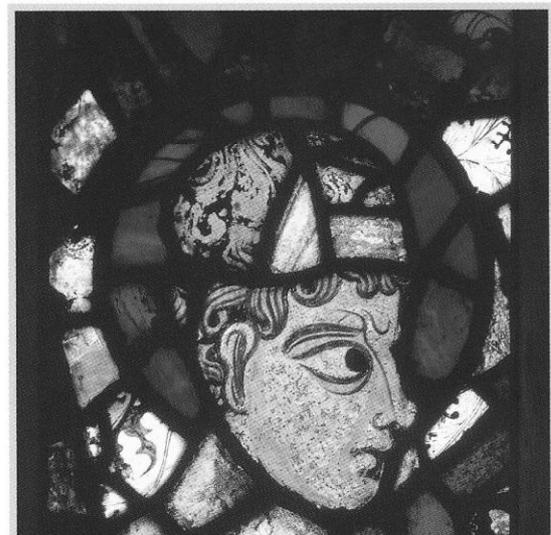
county of Kent and released from his job as a tax inspector. Not long afterwards, his wife Philippa died. Then, in 1389, King Richard II gave Chaucer the well-paid office of Clerk of the King's Works, which meant he was responsible for looking after important buildings, such as the Tower of London. He also managed the king's hunting lodges, parks and mills. A year later he became custodian of one of the royal forests – a job that came with a handsome pension of £20 a year, then a very large sum.

Late in 1399, he moved to a house in London, close to Westminster Abbey. Despite hiring a fifty-three-year lease Chaucer was to live there only briefly. After an eventful life, he died at the end of 1400. He lies buried in Westminster Abbey, in the area now known as 'Poets' Corner'.

The Canterbury Tales

Chaucer's most famous work, *The Canterbury Tales*, was written between 1386 and his death in 1400. It tells the story of a pilgrimage to the grave of Saint Thomas Becket, a bishop who was murdered in 1170 by the king's fol-

lowers. The *Prologue* describes how a group of pilgrims meet in London and set out together to Canterbury. To pass the time, they agree to tell each other stories as they travel. The innkeeper, who came up with the idea, promises a free meal to the teller of the best story on his return. Unfortunately, Chaucer died before he could complete *The Canterbury Tales*, which thus comprise twenty-two stories, although there should have been about 120: two told by each pilgrim on the outward journey and another



Frame story

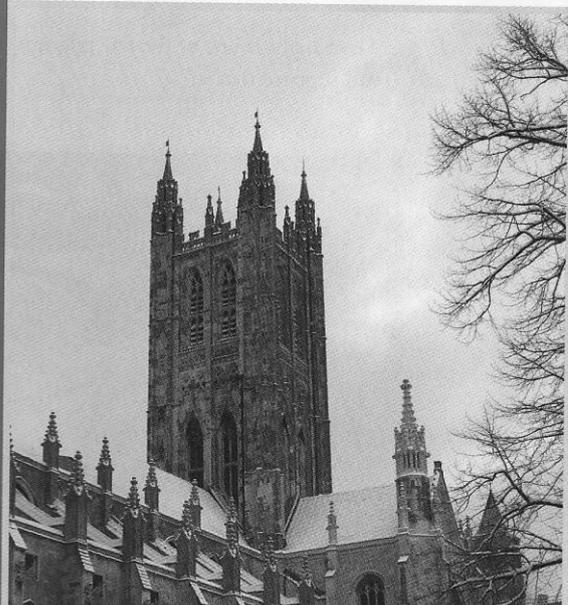


The *Canterbury Tales* is a frame story: the story about the pilgrimage to Canterbury simply links a lot of essentially separate tales. Chaucer probably encountered the frame story concept while in Italy. There he will have been introduced to the work of the Italian author Boccaccio, who used the same technique in his *Decamerone* (circa 1350), in which ten young people try to amuse each other during a forced stay in the country by telling each other stories.

two on the way home.

The text begins with a *General Prologue* (introduction), which explains to the reader who the people in the group are and how they come to be together. The overall narrator is Chaucer himself, who passes on to the reader the tales that the pilgrims tell each other. In the *General Prologue*, a compelling description of the pilgrims is presented, before the book moves on to the *Tales* themselves. Several of the storytellers preface their tales with personal *Prologues*, in which they say something about themselves and perhaps respond to the previous tale.

One of the great charms of *The Canterbury Tales* is the individuality of the characters: they come from all levels and sections of medieval society and are not at all alike. This individuality is already apparent from the *General Prologue* and elaborated in the personal *Prologues* and the tales. Although essentially self-contained, the individual tales are linked in certain ways. We see this in, for example, the first two tales, told by the Knight and the Miller.



Text 2: The Wife of Bath

One of the best-known of the Canterbury Tales is the Wife of Bath's Tale. In her case, it is not only the tale she tells that is important, but also her own life story. Some of the ideas that are introduced in her Prologue recur in her tale, which concerns a knight who has problems with women. Compare what the Wife of Bath has to say about her fifth marriage (to a younger man) with the conclusion of her tale:

Original text:

685	And every night and day was his custom (When he had leisure and vacation From other worldly occupation) To readen in this book of wicked wives. He knew of them more legends and lives Than be of good• wiv's in the Bible.	
790	And when I saw that he would never fine To readen on this curs'd book all night, All suddenly three leaves have I plight Out of his book, right as he read, and eke I with my fist so took him on the cheek That in our fire he fell backward adown. And up he starts as does a wood lion,	<i>finish</i> <i>plucked</i> <i>and also</i> <i>punched</i> <i>jumped / angry</i>
795	And with his fist he smote me on the head That on the floor I lay as I were dead. And when he saw how still that I lay, He was aghast, and would have fled his way, Till at the last out of my swoon I braid:	<i>so that</i> <i>I woke</i>
800	`Oh, hast thou slain me, fals thief ?' I said, `And for my land thus hast thou murdered me? Ere I be dead, yet will I kissen thee.' And near he came, and kneel'd fair adown,	<i>Before I die</i>
805	And said• : `Dear• sister Alison, As help me God I shall thee never smite; What I have done it is thyself to wite, Forgive it me, and that I thee beseech.' And yet eftsoons I hit him on the cheek,	<i>strike</i> <i>blame</i> <i>promptly</i>
810	And said• : `Thief! thus much am I wreak. Now will I die, I may no longer speak.'	<i>avenged</i>
815	But at the last, with much• care and woe We fell accorded by ourselv's two. He gave me all the bridle in my hand To have the governance of house and land, And of his tongue, and of his hand also, And made him burn his book anon right tho.	<i>were reconciled</i> <i>promptly right there</i>
820	And when that I had gotten unto me By mastery all the sovereignty, And that he said: `Mine own• tru• wife, Do as thee list the term of all thy life,	<i>control</i> <i>as you please, the length</i>

Keep thine honour, and keep eke mine estate'
 After that day we never had debate. *argument*
 God help me so, I was to him as kind
 As any wife from Denmark unto Inde, *India*
 825 And also true, and so was he to me.
 I pray to God that sits in majesty
 So bless his soul• , for His mercy dear.
 Now will I say my tale, if you will hear.

Modern English:

<p>682 And day and night he used to take a look At what it said, when he had time and leisure Or had no occupation but his pleasure. 685 It was a book that dealt with wicked wives; He knew more legends of them and their lives Than there are good ones mentioned in the Bible. And when I saw that he would never stop Reading this cursed book, all night no doubt, 790 I suddenly grabbed and tore three pages out Where he was reading, at the very place, And fisted such a buffer³⁸ in his face That backwards down into our fire he fell. Then like a maddened³⁹ lion, with a yell 795 He started up and smote⁴⁰ me on the head, And down I fell upon the floor for dead. And when he saw how motionless I lay He was aghast⁴¹ and would have fled away, But in the end I started to come to.⁴² 800 "O have you murdered me, you robber, you, To get my land?" I said. "Was that the game? Before I'm dead I'll kiss you all the same." He came up close and kneeling gently down He said, "My love, my dearest Alison, 805 So help me God, I never again will hit</p>	<p> You, love; and if I did, you asked for it. Forgive me!" But for all he was so meek⁴³ I up at once and smote him on the cheek And said, "Take that to level up the score! 810 Now let me die, I can't speak any more." We had a mort⁴⁴ of trouble and heavy weather But in the end we made it up together. He gave the bridle⁴⁵ over to my hand, Gave me the government of house and land, 815 Of tongue and fist, indeed of all he'd got. I made him burn that book upon the spot. And when I'd mastered him, and out of deadlock⁴⁶ Secured myself the sovereignty in wedlock,⁴⁷ And when he said, "My own and truest wife, 820 Do as you please for all the rest of life, But guard your honour and my good estate," From that day forward there was no debate. So help me God I was as kind to him As any wife from Denmark to the rim⁴⁸ 825 Of India, and as true. And he to me. And I pray God that sits in majesty To bless his soul and fill it with his glory. Now, if you'll listen, I will tell my story. </p>
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The tale of the Wife of Bath is about a knight of King Arthur's court, who rapes a pretty girl. As punishment, the Queen orders him to find out what women really want most of all. He has to establish the answer, but as he travels around the country he is given different answers by everyone. Eventually, he promises an old ugly woman that he will give her whatever she wishes, if she will help him. She tells him what women really want is control over their own lives (and preferably over their husbands' as well). When the knight appears before the Queen to deliver his answer, the old woman suddenly appears and demands that the knight marries her. He is obliged to consent, but to his great joy she is transformed on their wedding night into a beautiful young woman. She then asks him to make a difficult decision:

“You have two choices; which one will you try?
 1220 To have me old and ugly till I die,
 But still a loyal, true and humble wife
 That never will displease you all her life,
 Or would you rather I were young and pretty
 And chance your arm what happens in a city
 1225 Where friends will visit you because of me,
 Yes, and in other places too, maybe.
 Which would you have? The choice is all your
 own.”
 The knight thought long, and with a piteous
 groan⁴⁹

At last he said, with all the care in life,
 1230 ‘My lady and my love, my dearest wife,
 I leave the matter to your wise decision.
 You make the choice yourself, for the provision⁵⁰
 Of what may be agreeable and rich
 In honour to us both, I don’t care which;
 1235 Whatever pleases you suffices me.’⁵¹
 ‘And have I won the mastery?’ said she,
 ‘Since I’m to choose and rule as I think fit?’
 ‘Certainly, wife,’ he answered her, ‘that’s it.’

Questions:

1. What is the book about, which the Wife of Bath’s husband is reading to her?
2. Why does it annoy her that her husband is reading this book to her?
3. How does the Wife of Bath get her own way?
4. What is the outcome?
5. In Chaucer’s time, society was extremely dynamic; people were not confined to the class into which they were born. Are there signs of this in the tale? The Wife of Bath was married off to an older man when she was very young (12), while her fourth and fifth husbands were significantly younger, and poorer.
6. How do the Wife of Bath’s own ideas about marriage and the relationship between man and wife resurface in the last part of her tale?
7. Why does the knight eventually leave the choice up to his wife?
8. In the Middle Ages, women were often portrayed as wilful, sensual and a bad influence on men. Is this kind of thinking reflected in the passages above? If so, how?

Final assignment

Choose ONE of the following assignments:

1. Imagine you are travelling with the Wife of Bath. React to her tale, in which you state your opinions. Remember, you are one of her contemporaries and you should react according to the time you live in. Write NO MORE than 300 words.
2. Discuss why you think the ballad of Robin Hood was so popular in the Middle Ages, and why it is still popular today. Write between 300 and 500 words.

In both cases, you should create a bibliography at the end of your work and clearly state any sources you have used to help you.