



ME Written Records



- For a long time after the Norman Conquest there were two written languages in England, both of them foreign: Latin and French. English was held in disdain as a tongue used only by common illiterate people and not fit for writing. In some dialects the gap in the written tradition spanned almost two hundred years.
- The earliest samples of Early ME prose are the new entries made in the ANGLO-SAXON CHRONICLES from the year 1122 to the year 1154, known as the PETERBOROUGH CHRONICLE.



- The works in the vernacular, which began to appear towards the end of the 12th c., were mostly of a religious nature. The great mass of these works are homilies, sermons in prose and verse, paraphrases from the Bible, psalms and prayers. The earliest of these religious works, the POEMA MORALE (“Moral Ode”) represents the Kentish dialect of the late 12th or the early 13th c.



- Of particular interest for the history of the language is ORMULUM, a poem composed by the monk Orm in about 1200 in the North-East Midland dialect (Lincolnshire). It consists of unrhymed metrical paraphrases of the Gospels. The text abounds in Scandinavianisms and lacks French borrowings. Its most outstanding feature is the spelling system devised by the author. He doubled the consonants after short vowels in closed syllables and used special semicircular marks over short vowels in open syllables.



- Among other works of religious nature we may mention ANCRENE RIWLE (“The Rule of Anchorites”), a prose treatise in the South-Western dialect of the early 13th c. and two later poems in the Northern dialect: CURSOR MUNDI, an amplified version of the Gospels, and the PRICKE OF CONSCIENCE, a translation attributed to Richard Rolle of Hampole.



- Alongside these religious works there sprang up a new kind of secular literature inspired by the French romances of chivalry. Romances were long compositions in verse or prose, describing the life and adventures of knights. The great majority of romances fell into groups or cycle concerned with a limited number of matters. Those relating to the “matter of Britain” were probably the most popular and original works of English poets, though many of them were paraphrased from French.



- One of the earliest poems of this type was BRUT in the early 13th c. It is a free rendering of the TERRE by Wace, an Anglo-Norman writer of the 12th C., the story of the legendary foundation of Britain by Brutus, great grandson of Aeneas of Troy; the last third of the poem
- To Brut's most famous descendant, the mythical British king and his "Knights of the Round Table", who became the favourite subject of English knightly romances. The poem is written in alliterative verse with a considerable number of rhymes. It is noteworthy that the West Midland dialect of BRUT, though nearly a century and a half after the Norman Conquest, -contains very few French words; evidently the West Midlands were as yet little affected by French influence.



- Some romances deal with more recent events and distinctly English: episodes of the Crusades or Scandinavian invasions. HAVELOK THE DANE (East Midland dialect of the late 13th c.) narrates the adventures of a Danish prince who was saved by a fisher man, Grim (the founder of Grimsby). Another poem in the same dialect and century, KING HORN, is more of a love story. Both poems make use of characters and plots found in French sources but are nevertheless original English productions.



- Among the Early ME texts in the South-Western dialects we should mention THE LONDON PROCLAMATION of the year 1258 and the political poems of the early 14th c. which voiced the complaint of the poor against their oppressors. In the poem EVIL TIMES OF EDWARD II the unknown author described the vices of the clergy and the nobility as the causes of the wretched condition of the people. Those were the earliest ME texts in the London dialect.

Reestablishment of English as the Language of the State and Literature

- The domination of the French language in England came to an end in the course of the 14th c. The victory of English was pre determined and prepared for by previous events and historical conditions.
- Little by little the Normans and the English drew together and intermingled. In the 14th c. Anglo-Norman was a dead language; it appeared as corrupt French to those who had access to the French of Paris through books, education or direct contacts. The number of people who knew French had fallen; Anglo-Norman and French literary compositions had lost their audience and had to be translated into English.





- Towards the end of the 14th c. the English language had taken the place of French as the language of literature and administration. English was once more the dominant speech of all social classes in all regions. It had ousted French since it had always remained the mother tongue and the only spoken language of the bulk of the population.



- Slowly and inevitably English regained supremacy in the field of education. As early as 1349 it was ruled that English should be used at schools in teaching Latin. but it was not until 1385 that the practice became general, and even the universities began to conduct their curricula in English. By the 15th c. the ability to speak French had come to be regarded as a special accomplishment, and French, like Latin, was learnt as a foreign language. At the end of the 15th c. William Caxton, the first English printer, observed: “the most quantity of the people understand not Latin nor French here in this noble realm of England”.