HISTORICAL BACKGROUND FROM THE 11TH TO THE 15TH C. LINGUISTIC SITUATION. WRITTEN RECORDS

Economic and Social Conditions in the 11th-12th c.

The OE period in the history of the language corresponds to the transitional stage from the slaveowning and tribal system to the feudal system in the history of Britain. In the 11th c. feudalism was already well established. According to a survey made in the late 11th c. slaves and freemen were declining classes. The majority of the agricultural population (and also of the total population, which amounted to about 2,000,000 people) were bound to their lord and land. Under natural economv, characteristic of feudalism, most of the things needed for the life of the lord and the villain were produced on the estate. Feudal manors were separated from their neighbours by tolls, local feuds, and various restrictions concerning settlement, travelling and employment. These historical conditions produced a certain influence on the development of the language.

In Early ME the differences between the regional dialects grew. Never in history, before or after, was the historical background more favourable for dialectal differentiation. The main dialectal division in England, which survived in later ages with some slight modification of boundaries and considerable dialect mixture, goes back to the feudal stage of British history.

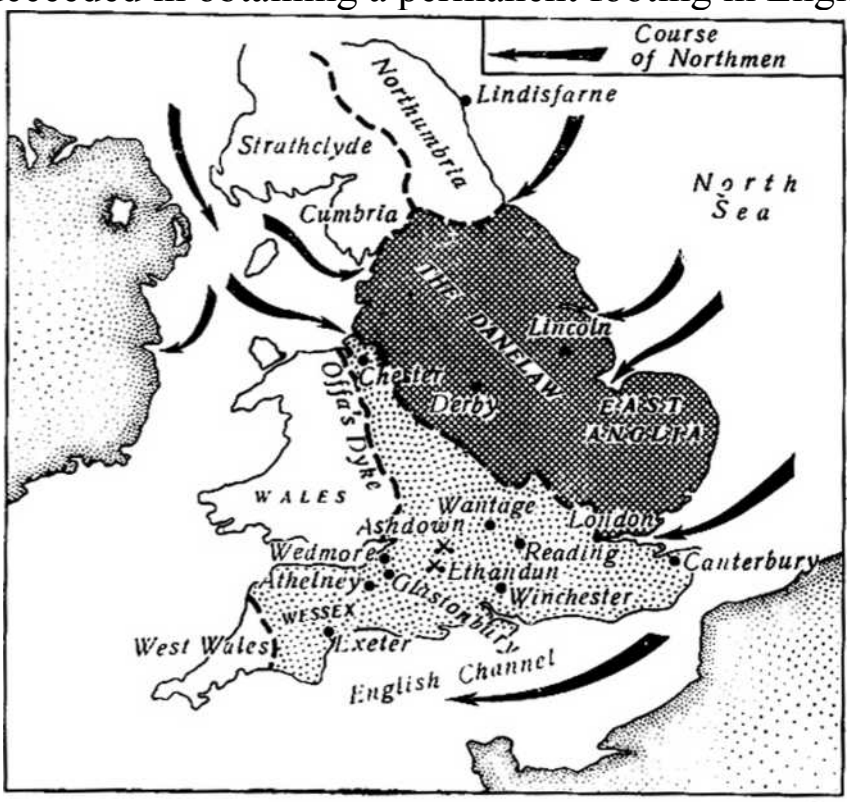
In the age of poor communication dialect boundaries often coincided with geographical barriers such as rivers, marshes, forests and mountains, as these barriers would hinder the diffusion of linguistic features.

In addition to economic, geographical and social conditions, dialectal differences in Early ME were accentuated by some historical events, namely the Scandinavian invasions and the Norman Conquest.

Effect of the Scandinavian Invasions

Though the Scandinavian invasions of England are dated in the OE period, their effect on the language is particularly apparent in ME.

We may recall that since the 8th c. the British Isles were ravaged by sea rovers from Scandinavia, first by Danes, later – by Norwegians. By the end of the 9th c. the Danes had succeeded in obtaining a permanent footing in England;



The Scandinavian invasions

more than half of England was yielded to the invaders and recognised as Danish territory – "Danelaw". While some of the Scandinavians came to England merely to plunder and return to their homeland, others made their permanent home in North East England.

In the early years of the occupation the Danish settlements were little more than armed camps. But gradually the conditions stabilised and the Danes began to bring their families. The new settlers and the English intermarried and intermixed; they lived close together and did not differ either in social rank or in the level of culture and customs; they intermingled the more easily as there was no linguistic barrier between them. (OE and O Scand belonged to the Germanic group of languages and at that time were much closer than their descendants are today.) The colonisation and the intermixture of the newcomers with their former foes continued from the 9th c. on, during two hundred years, which witnessed diverse political events: the reconquest of Danelaw under Alfred's successors, the renewal of Scandinavian onslaughts in the late 10th c. under Sweyne, and the political annexation of England by Denmark under Canute.

In the areas of the heaviest settlement the Scandinavians outnumbered the Anglo-Saxon population, which is attested by geographical names. In Yorkshire, Lincolnshire, Northumberland, Cumberland – up to 75 per cent of the place-names are Danish or Norwegian. Altogether more than 1,400 English villages and towns bear names of Scandinavian origin. Probably, in many districts people became bilingual, with either Old Norse or English prevailing.

Eventually the Scandinavians were absorbed into the local population both ethnically and linguistically. They merged with the society around them, but the impact on the linguistic situation and on the further development of the English language was quite profound.

The increased regional differences of English in the 11th and 12th c. must partly be attributed to the Scandinavian influence. Due to the contacts and mixture with O Scand, the Northern dialects (to use OE terms, chiefly Northumbrian and East Mercian) had acquired lasting and sometimes indelible Scandinavian features. We find a large admixture of Scandinavian words in Early ME records coming from the North East whereas contemporary texts from other regions are practically devoid of Scandinavian borrowings.

In later ages the Scandinavian element passed into other regions. The incorporation of the Scandinavian element in the London dialect and Standard English was brought about by the changing linguistic situation in England: the mixture of the dialects and the growing linguistic unification. Yet neither in the South nor in Standard English did the Scandinavian element ever assume such proportions as in the North-Eastern ME dialects.

The Norman Conquest

Soon after Canute's death (1042) and the collapse of his empire the old Anglo-Saxon line was restored but their reign was short-lived. The new English king, Edward the Confessor (1042-1066), who had been reared in France, brought over many Norman advisors and favourites; he distributed among them English lands and wealth to the considerable resentment of the Anglo-Saxon nobility and appointed them to important positions in the government and church hierarchy. He not only spoke French himself but insisted on it being spoken by the nobles at his court. William, Duke of Normandy, visited his court and it was rumoured that Edward appointed him his successor. In many respects Edward paved the way for Norman infiltration long before the Norman Conquest. However, the government of the country was still in the hands of Anglo-Saxon feudal lords, headed by the powerful Earl Godwin of Wessex.

In 1066, upon Edward's death, the Elders of England (OE Witan) proclaimed Harold Godwin king of England. As soon as the news reached William of Normandy, he mustered a big army by promise of land and plunder (one third of his soldiers were Normans, others, mercenaries from all over Europe) and, with the

support of the Pope, landed in Britain.

In the battle of Hastings, fought in October 1066, Harold was killed and the English were defeated. This date is commonly known as the date of the Norman Conquest, though the military occupation of the country was not completed until a few years later. After the victory at Hastings, William by-passed London cutting it off from the North and made the Witan of London and the bishops at Westminster Abbey crown him king. William and his barons laid waste many lands in England, burning down villages and estates. They conducted a relentless campaign of subjugation, devastated and almost depopulated Northumbria and Mercia, which tried to rise against the conquerors. Scores of earthen forts and wooden stockades, built during the campaign, were soon replaced by huge stone Norman castles. Most of the lands of the Anglo-Saxon lords passed into the hands of the Norman barons, William's own possessions comprising about one third of the country. The Normans occupied all the important posts in the church, in the government, and in the army.

Following the conquest hundreds of people from France crossed the Channel to make their home in Britain. Immigration was easy, since the Norman kings of Britain were also dukes of Normandy and, about a hundred years later, took possession of the whole western half of France, thus bringing England into still closer contact with the continent. French monks, tradesmen and craftsmen flooded the south-western towns, so that not only the higher nobility but also much of the middle class Was French.

Effect of the Norman Conquest on the Linguistic Situation

The Norman Conquest was not only a great event in British political history but also the greatest single event in the| history of the English language. Its earliest effect was a drastic change in the linguistic situation.

The Norman conquerors of England had originally come from Scandinavia (compare *Norman* and *Northman).* About one hundred and fifty years before they had seized the valley of the Seine and settled in what was henceforth known as Normandy. They were swiftly assimilated by the French and in the 11th c. came to Britain as French speakers and bearers of French culture. They spoke the Northern dialect of French, which differed in some points from Central, Parisian French. Their tongue in Britain is often referred to as "Anglo-French" or "Anglo- Norman", but may just as well be called French, since we are less concerned here with the distinction of French dialects than with the continuous French influence upon English, both in the Norman period of history and a long while after the Anglo-Norman language had ceased to exist.

In the early 13th c., as a result of lengthy and inefficient wars with France John Lackland lost the French provinces, including the dukedom of Normandy. Among

other consequences the loss of the lands in France cut off the Normans in Britain from France, which speeded up the decline of the Anglo-French language.

The most immediate consequence of the Norman domination in Britain is to be seen in the wide use of the French language in many spheres of life. For almost three hundred years French was the official language of administration: it was the language of the king's court, the law courts, the church, the army and the castle. It was also the everyday language of many nobles, of the higher clergy and of many townspeople in the South. The intellectual life, literature and education were in the hands of French-speaking people; French, alongside Latin, was the language of writing. Teaching was largely conducted in French and boys at school were taught to translate their Latin into French instead of English.

For all that, England never stopped being an English-speaking country. The bulk of the population held fast to their own tongue: the lower classes in the towns, and especially in the country-side, those who lived in the Midlands and up north, continued to speak English and looked upon French as foreign and hostile. Since most of the people were illiterate, the English language was almost exclusively used for spoken communication.

At first the two languages existed side by side without mingling. Then, slowly and quietly, they began to permeate each other. The Norman barons and the French town-dwellers had to pick up English words to make themselves understood, while the English began to use French Words in current speech. A good knowledge of French would mark a person of higher standing giving him a certain social prestige. Probably many people became bilingual and had a fair command of both languages.

These peculiar linguistic conditions could not remain static. The struggle between French and English was bound to end in the complete victory of English, for English was the living language of the entire people, while French was restricted to certain social spheres and to writing. Yet the final victory was still a long way off. In the 13th c. only a few steps were made in that direction. The earliest sign of the official recognition of English by the Norman kings was the famous PROCLAMATION issued by Henry III in 1258 to the councillors in Parliament. It was written in three languages: French, Latin and English.

The three hundred years of the domination of French affected English more than any other foreign influence before or after. The early French borrowings reflect accurately the spheres of Norman influence upon English life; later borrowings can be attributed to the continued cultural, economic and political contacts between the countries. The French influence added new features to the regional and social differentiation of the language. New words, coming from French, could not be adopted simultaneously by all the speakers of English; they were first used in some varieties of the language, namely in the regional dialects of Southern England and in the speech of the upper classes, but were unknown in the other varieties. This led to growing dialectal differences, regional and social. Later the new features adopted from French extended to other varieties of the language.

The use of a foreign tongue as the state language, the diversity of the dialects and the decline of the written form of English created a situation extremely favourable for increased variation and for more intensive linguistic change.

Early Middle English Dialects. Extension of English Territory

The regional ME dialects had developed from respective OE dialects. A precise map of all the dialects will probably never be made, for available sources are scarce and unreliable: localised and dated documents are few in number. Early ME dialects and their approximate boundaries have been determined largely by inference; for later ME the difficulty lies in the growing dialect mixture.

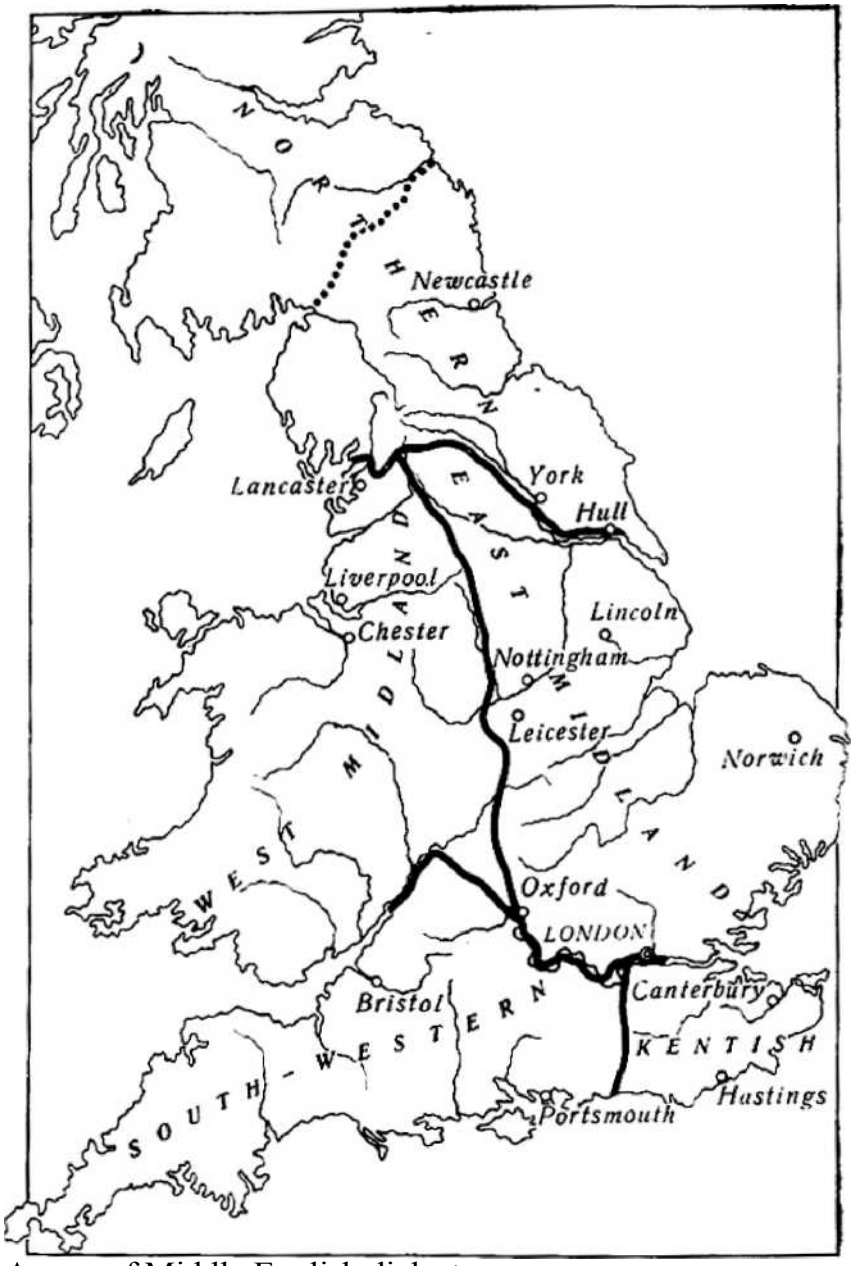
With these reservations the following dialect groups can be distinguished in Early ME.

The *Southern* group included the *Kentish* and the *South-Western* dialects. Kentish was a direct descendant of the OE dialect known by the same name, though it had somewhat extended its area. The South-Western group was a continuation of the OE Saxon dialects, – not only West Saxon, but also East Saxon. The East Saxon dialect was not prominent in OE but became more important in Early ME, since it made the basis of the dialect of London in the 12th and 13th c. Among the dialects of this group we may mention the Gloucester dialect and the London dialect, which must have been an influential form of speech at all times.

The group of *Midland* ("Central") dialects – corresponding to the OE Mercian dialect – is divided into West Midland and East Midland as two main areas, with further subdivisions within: South-East Midland and North-East Midland, South-West Midland and North-West Midland. In ME the Midland area became more diversified linguistically than the OE Mercian kingdom occupying approximately the same territory: from the Thames in the South, to the Welsh-speaking area in the West and up north to the river Humber.

The *Northern* dialects had developed from OE Northumbrian. In Early ME the Northern dialects included several provincial dialects, e.g. the Yorkshire and the Lancashire dialects and also what later became known as Scottish.

In the course of Early ME the area of the English language in the British Isles grew. Following the Norman Conquest the former Celtic kingdoms fell under Norman rule. Wales was subjugated in the late 13th c., its eastern half became part of England, while the North



A map of Middle English dialects

and West of Wales was a principality governed separately. In the late 12th c. the English made their first attempts to conquer Ireland. The invaders settled among the Irish and were soon assimilated, a large proportion of the invaders being Welshmen. Though part of Ireland was ruled from England, the country remained divided and had little contact with England. The English language was used there alongside Celtic languages – Irish and Welsh – and was influenced by Celtic.

The Early ME dialectal division was preserved in the succeeding centuries, though even in Late ME the linguistic situation changed. In Early ME, while the state language and the main language of literature was French, the local dialects were relatively equal. In Late ME, when English had been reestablished as the main language of administration and writing, one of the regional dialects, the London dialect, prevailed over the others.

Early Middle English Written Records

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.

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 cycles 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 composed by Layamon in the early 13th. It is a free rendering of the BRUT D'ANGLETERRE by Wace, an Anglo-Norman writer of the 12th c., which tells the story of the legendary foundation of Britain by Brutus, the alleged great grandson of Aeneas of Troy; the last third of the poem is devoted to Brut's most famous descendant, the mythical British king Arthur 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.

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.

As seen from this survey Early ME written records represent different local dialects. The dialects were relatively equal as forms of the written language, beneath the twofold oppression of Anglo-Norman and Latin writing. They retained a certain

literary authority until it was overshadowed in the 14th c. by the prestige of the London written language.

Late Middle English. 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 predetermined and prepared 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 if 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.

It may be interesting to mention some facts showing how the transition came about. In 1362 Edward III gave his consent to an act of Parliament ordaining that English should be used in the law courts, since “French, has become much unknown in the realm”. This reform, however, was not carried out for years to come: French, as well as Latin, continued to be used by lawyers alongside English until the 16th c. Yet many legal documents which have survived from the late 14th and 15th c. are written in English: wills, municipal acts, petitions. In 1363, for the first time in history, Parliament was opened by the king’s chancellor with an address in English. In 1399 King Henry IV used English in his official speech when accepting the throne. In 1404 English diplomats refused to conduct negotiations with France in French, claiming that the language was unknown to them. All these events testify to the recognition of English as the state language.

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”.

One might have expected that the triumph of English would lead to a weakening of the French influence upon English. In reality, however, the impact of French became more apparent. As seen from the surviving written texts, French loan-words multiplied at the very time when English became a medium of general communication. The large-scale influx of French loans can be attributed to several causes. It is probable that many French words had been in current use for quite a long time before they were first recorded. We should recall that records in Early ME were scarce and came mostly from the Northern and Western regions, which were least affected by French influence. Later ME texts were produced in London and in the neighbouring areas, with a mixed and largely bilingual population. In numerous translations from French – which became necessary when the French language was going out of use – many loan-words were employed for the sake of greater precision, for want of a suitable native equivalent or due to the translator's inefficiency. It is also important that in the course of the 14th c. the local dialects were brought into closer contact; they intermixed and influenced one another: therefore the infiltration of French borrowings into all the local and social varieties of English progressed more rapidly.

As with other foreign influences, the impact of French is to be found, first and foremost, in the vocabulary. The layers and the semantic spheres of the French borrowings reflect the relations between the Norman rulers and the English population, the dominance of the French language in literature and the contacts with French culture. The prevalence of French as the language of writing led to numerous changes in English spelling.

Dialects in Late Middle English. The London Dialect

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The dialect division which evolved in Early ME was on the whole preserved in later periods. In the 14th and 15th c. we find the same grouping of local dialects: the Southern group, including Kentish and the South-Western dialects, the Midland group with its minute subdivisions and the Northern group. And yet the relations among them were changing. The extension of trade beyond the confines of local boundaries, the growth of towns with a mixed population favoured the intermixture and amalgamation of the regional dialects. More intensive inter-influence of the dialects, among other facts is attested by the penetration of Scandinavian loan-words into the West Midland and Southern dialects from the North and by the spread of French borrowings in the reverse direction. The most important event in the changing linguistic situation was the rise of the London dialect as the prevalent written form of language.

The history of the London dialect reveals the sources of the literary language in

Late ME and also the main source and basis of the Literary Standard, both in its written and spoken forms.

The history of London extends back to the Roman period. Even in OE times London was by far the biggest town in Britain, although the capital of Wessex – the main OE kingdom – was Winchester. The capital was transferred to London a few years before the Norman conquest.

The Early ME records made in London – beginning with the PROCLAMATION of 1258 – show that the dialect of London was fundamentally East Saxon; in terms of the ME division, it belonged to the South-Western dialect group. Later records indicate that the speech of London was becoming more mixed, with East Midland features gradually prevailing over the Southern features. The most likely explanation for the change of the dialect type and for the mixed character of London English lies in the history of the London population.

In the 12th and 13th c. the inhabitants of London came from the south-western districts. In the middle of the 14th c. London was practically depopulated during the "Black Death" (1348) and later outbreaks of bubonic plague. It has been estimated that about one third of the population of Britain died in the epidemics, the highest proportion of deaths occurring in London. The depopulation was speedily made good and in 1377 London had over 35,000 inhabitants.

Most of the new arrivals came from the East Midlands: Norfolk, Suffolk, and other populous and wealthy counties of Medieval England, although not bordering immediately on the capital. As a result the speech of Londoners was brought much closer to the East Midland dialect. The official and literary papers produced in London in the late 14th c. display obvious East Midland features. The London dialect became more Anglian than Saxon in character.

The mixed dialect of London, which had extended to the two universities (in Oxford and Cambridge) ousted French from official spheres and from the sphere of writing.

Written Records in Late Middle English. The Age of Chaucer

The flourishing of literature, which marks the second half of the 14th c., apart from its cultural significance, testifies to the complete reestablishment of English as the language of writing. Some authors wrote in their local dialect from outside London, but most of them used the London dialect, or forms of the language combining London and provincial traits. Towards the end of the century the London dialect had become the principal type of language used in literature, a sort of literary "pattern" to be imitated by provincial authors.

The literary texts of the late 14th c. preserved in numerous manuscripts, belong to a variety of genres. Translation continued, but original compositions were produced in abundance; poetry was more prolific than prose. This period of literary florescence is known as the "age of Chaucer", the greatest name in English literature before Shakespeare. Other writers are referred to as Chaucer's contemporaries.

One of the prominent authors of the time was John de Trevisa of Cornwall. In 1387 he completed the translation of seven books on world history – POLYCHRONICON by R. Higden – from Latin into the South-Western dialect of English.

Of greatest linguistic consequence was the activity of John Wyclif (1324 – 1384), the forerunner of the English Reformation. His most important contribution to English prose was his (and his pupils') translation of the BIBLE completed in 1384. He also wrote pamphlete protesting against the corruption of the Church. Wyclif's BIBLE was copied in manuscript and read by many people all over the country. Written in the London dialect, it played an important role in spreading this form of English.

The chief poets of the time, besides Chaucer, were John Gower, William Langland.

The remarkable poem of William Langland THE VISION CONCERNING PIERS THE PLOWMAN was written in a dialect combining West Midland and London features; it has survived in three versions, from 1362 to 1390; it is an allegory and a satire attacking the vices and weaknesses of various social classes and sympathising with the wretchedness of the poor. It is presented as a series of visions appearing to the poet in his dreams. He sees diverse people and personifications of vices and virtues and explains the way to salvation, which is to serve Truth by work and love. The poem is written in the old alliterative verse and shows no touch of Anglo-Norman influence.

John Gower, Chaucer's friend and an outstanding poet of the time, was born in Kent, but there are not many Kentisms in his London dialect. His first poems were written in Anglo-Norman and in Latin. His longest poem VOX CLAMANTIS ("The Voice of the Crying in the Wilderness") is in Latin; it deals with Wat Tyler's rebellion and condemns all ranks of society for the sins which brought about the terrible revolt. His last long poem is in English: CONFESSIO AMANTIS ("The Lover's Confession"), a composition of 40,000 octo-syllabic lines. It contains a vast collection of stories drawn from various sources and arranged to illustrate the seven deadly sins. John Gower told his tales easily and vividly and for long was almost as popular as Chaucer.

Geoffrey Chaucer (1340 – 1400) was by far the most outstanding figure of the time. Hundred years later William Caxton, the first English printer, called him "the worshipful father and first founder and embellisher of ornate eloquence in our language." In many books on the history of English literature and the history of English Chaucer is described as the founder of the literary language.

Chaucer was born in London about the year 1340 and had the most varied

experience as student, courtier, official, and member of Parliament.

His early works were more or less imitative of other authors – Latin, French or Italian – though they bear abundant evidence of his skill. He never wrote in any other language than English. The culmination of Chaucer's work as a poet is his great unfinished collection of stories THE CANTERBURY TALES.

The Prologue of this poem, the masterpiece of English poetry, describes how the poet found himself at the Tabard Inn, in Southwark, bound on a pilgrimage to the shrine of St. Thomas Becket at Canterbury. There he met twenty-nine other pilgrims, who, at the suggestion of the host, agreed to liven up the journey by story-telling. Chaucer lived to write only twenty-four stories out of the intended sixty, but in the Prologue he managed to give a most vivid picture of contemporary England: he presented in the pilgrims a gallery of life-like portraits taken from all walks of life. In social position they range from knight and prioress to drunken cook and humble plowman – a doctor, a lawyer, a monk, a sailor, a carpenter, an Oxford scholar and many others. These people are shown as they appear on the road, with their distinctive dress and features, and with a bit of their personal history. Even in their choice of tales they unconsciously reveal themselves, the stories being in harmony with the character of the narrators (e. g. the knight relates a story of chivalry).

Chaucer wrote in a dialect which in the main coincided with that used in documents produced in London shortly before his time and for a long time after. Although he did not really create the literary language, as a poet of outstanding talent he made better use of it than his contemporaries and set up a pattern to be followed in the 15th c. His poems were copied so many times that over sixty manuscripts of THE CANTERBURY TALES have survived to this day. His books were among the first to be printed, a hundred years after their composition.

Chaucer's literary language, based on the mixed {largely East Midland) London dialect is known as classical ME; in the 15th and 16th c. it became the basis of the national literary English language.

The 15th c. could produce nothing worthy to rank with Chaucer. The two prominent poets, Thomas Hoccleve and John Lydgate, were chiefly translators and imitators. The style of Chaucer's successors is believed to have drawn farther away from everyday speech; it was highly affected in character, abounding in abstract words and strongly influenced by Latin rhetoric (it is termed "aureate language").

Whereas in English literature the decline after Chaucer is apparent, the literature of Scotland forms a happy contrast. The Scottish language, which grew from a Northern dialect of English flourished from the 13th until the 16th c. THE BRUCE, written by John Barbour between 1373 and 1378 is a national epic, which describes the real history of Robert Bruce, a hero and military chief who defeated the army of Edward II at Bannockburn in 1314 and secured the independence of Scotland. This poem was followed by others, composed by prominent 15th c. poets; e. g. WALLACE attributed to Henry the Minstrel; KING'S QUHAIR ("King's Book") by King James I of Scotland.