

1 Medieval English, 500–1500

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What should we call this period of ‘medieval literature’ that straddles nearly a millennium and two languages? The ‘Dark’ and ‘Middle Ages’ (of which ‘medieval’ is simply the Latinate form), were terms applied retrospectively and pejoratively by writers in the seventeenth century to describe the period between classical and Renaissance learning; the ‘medievales’ generally perceived themselves as modern, sometimes even corruptly sophisticated in comparison to earlier, simpler days. ‘Literature’ is equally problematic, not existing as a word in English until the fourteenth century. For most of the period, that body of writing containing what we now call ‘literature’ encompassed without division texts that today we categorise as religious, historical, legal and medical. Poets were certainly popular figures, but their business was often primarily to commemorate historical events. Their poems, even if they contained marvels, had little to do with ‘fiction’ as we understand it; and even if they were well crafted, had little to do with any abstract notion of the aesthetic. ‘Medieval’ ‘literary’ art had no theory of itself but rather entailed verbal skill used in the service of a person (queen, bishop, overlord, patron), institution (monastery, the Church, the Crown) or for an occasion (coronation, feast, holy day, battle). Such art did not exist for its own sake but to serve the purpose in hand and to fill a belly.

Furthermore, how do we name a period that so lacks internal coherence? It moves from a Germanic tribal economy to late Old English feudalism, to the ‘high’ feudalism of the Normans, to the emergence of the state bureaucracy, centralisation of power, and urban economy that brought England to the eve of its precociously early capitalism. It starts at a moment when the essentially urbanised experience of theatre is inconceivable, and ends at a time when Old English heroic poetry is largely unintelligible both culturally and linguistically. We can indeed explain each historically formative event in terms of the conditions created by previous events, and thereby construct the past as a linear sequence of cause and effect that stretches both before the medieval era and after it. Yet taking this medieval period as a discrete historical epoch in its own right, we must ask what its literature distinctively meant. History and literature are divided in modern disciplinary parlance and then united in an artificial synthesis imposed on a body of medieval writing that recognised no such distinction in the first place. Literature is not some constant that