

Topic Page: [Middle English](#)

Definition: **Middle English** from *Collins English Dictionary*

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1 the English language from about 1100 to about 1450: main dialects are Kentish, Southwestern (West Saxon), East Midland (which replaced West Saxon as the chief literary form and developed into Modern English), West Midland, and Northern (from which the Scots of Lowland Scotland and other modern dialects developed). Abbreviation: **ME** Compare Old English Modern English

Summary Article: **Middle English**

from *The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide*

Period of the English language from about 1050 to 1550. The language and literature of the period is marked by increasing influence from Europe, particularly from France, due to the arrival of the Norman ruling class at the end of the 11th century; Norman-French culture suppressed the native English one, until the 13th century. See also English literature.

As well as influence from Norman France, Italian culture and literature was also important for the development of English literature, which can be seen as being slower to develop than that of continental Europe. Italian poets Dante Alighieri wrote ‘Divina Commedia’/‘The Divine Comedy’ between 1307 and 1321 and Boccaccio the ‘Decameron’ between 1350 and 1352, both of which were influential for Middle English poets. Major writers in English during this period include Geoffrey Chaucer and William Langland, but much of the poetry, prose, and drama of the period was anonymous. The Middle English literary culture was mostly an oral one, and literacy levels were still low at this time. Middle English poetry is a particularly oral genre, and is often structured so as to make it easy to remember, either through rhyme or through alliteration (whereas the poetry of Old English literature is mainly alliterative).

Poetry Early poetic verse emerged in the form of romances based on the stories of King of the Franks Charlemagne, the legends of British King Arthur, and the classical episodes of the ancient city of Troy. Long verse chronicles, such as ‘Brut’ by Layamon (late 12th century), were also popular. There was also some excellent, if unsophisticated, love poetry, which often took the form of the lyric poem. The anonymous lyrics, songs, carols, and ballads were very popular and often formed a complete cycle or story.

In 1362, the English replaced the French in parliament and the law courts, and from this time, English vernacular (in dialect commonly spoken) poetry reached its strongest since Saxon times. The major poet of the period was **Geoffrey Chaucer** (1343–1400), who was inspired by both the predominant French and Italian influence, notably the work of the Italian philosopher Boethius, as well as his European contemporaries. The religious poem ‘The Vision of Piers Plowman’ by **William Langland** (c.1330–1386), was more English in its inspiration, written in the old alliterative verse style, and has some likeness to Anglo-Saxon poetry in its themes. Other surviving works include the anonymous religious poems ‘Pearl’ and ‘Patience’, and the chivalric ‘Sir Gawayne and the Grene Knight’. Also important is ‘Fall of Princes’ and ‘Troy Book’ by John Lydgate (c. 1370–1450), which went on to inspire the genre of dramatic tragedy popular in Elizabethan literature.

Drama Drama developed, in the Middle English period, from short religious tableaux (still, dramatic scenes), performed in churches during religious festivals and designed to instruct an illiterate congregation, into large-scale cycles (or groups) of mystery plays (or miracle plays). These were drawn through cities on wagons and performed by local trade guilds. Shorter morality plays (such as *Everyman*) were given on improvised stages in public places and in rich homes. Entertainment was often free and in the open; these were extremely popular and frequently obscene, and were often combined with fire-eating and juggling.

Prose English prose was chiefly religious in this period. Although still awkward in the translation of the Bible (c.1380) by John Wyclif, vernacular prose became more complex in the late 15th century with *Le Morte D'Arthur* by Thomas Malory. The first book was printed in England in 1474.

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