



The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles are manuscripts recording early English history and legend, dating from the end of the 9th Century. They are written in English - but not a language that would be recognised today.

ENGLISH LITERATURE

The Early Days

English Literature, i.e. works written in the English Language, is generally said to begin with the works of Geoffrey Chaucer and his contemporaries. This is true. But it is also not true. There were poets writing as many as 600 years before Chaucer was born. However, today's students looking at those early works might find them impossible to understand - and might well think they are not written in English at all, but written in some kind of foreign language.

The early days of English language were very different from today's English language. English as a language had three main stages:

Early English (sometimes called Anglo-Saxon)

Early English has left behind very little in a written form, but luckily towards the end of this period, a number of monks preserved some of the old works in manuscript form. Some were translated from Latin, but some were created directly in the language of the time. The most important of these is a poem called

Beowulf.

Middle English

Middle English has several important written poems and stories. These include the

Piers Plowman

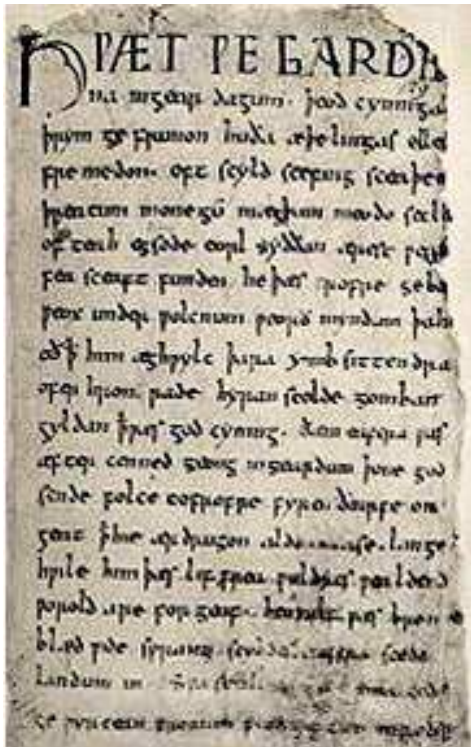
Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

The Pearl Poet

Geoffrey Chaucer : The Canterbury Tales

Modern English

Modern English started around Shakespeare's time.



BEOWULF

(Unknown author - 8th-11th Century)

Beowulf is an heroic epic poem with just over 3000 lines of alliterative verse (*) written in Early English. The author is unknown, and it was written somewhere after the 8th century, though the earliest surviving manuscript copy is from the early 11th Century. In the poem, Beowulf is a hero of the “Geats” (part of present-day Scandinavia) and he has to fight three great enemies: Grendel, whose army has been attacking the King of the Danes; and then Grendel’s mother, and finally a large and fierce dragon. Beowulf survives to become King of the Geats, but in his final battle he is fatally wounded, and is buried in a ceremonial funeral pyre in Geatland.

(* For an explanation of “Alliterative verse” see later notes on “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight”)

Left: The first page of the “Beowulf” manuscript - not written in anything like modern English!

PIERS PLOWMAN

Possibly by William Langland (1330?-1400?) Written between 1360 and 1399?

It is now generally accepted that *Piers Plowman* was written by William Langland, about whom little is known. It exists in several different versions, all in alliterative verse. One version is 2,500 lines and another 7,300 lines long, and there is a lot of scholarly argument about the true author and the true version. The poem is partly a religious allegory, and partly a social satire.

The poem begins in the Malvern Hills in the middle of England, where a man called Will falls asleep and dreams about a tower high on a hill and a dungeon deep in a valley. These are symbols of Heaven and Hell. He dreams of a "fair field full of folk" (a symbol of mankind) and of a humble ploughman called Piers. Piers is seeking a true Christian life, and on his journey and in his dream visions he meets three allegorical characters—Dowel (Do Well), Dobet (Do Better) and Dobest (Do Best).

An example of the poem (in modern English): Piers is complaining about his miserable diet, and dreams of the Harvest time when there will be plenty of food

"I have no penny," quoth (*) Piers, "Pullets for to buy
No neither geese nor piglets, but two green [new] cheeses,
A few curds and cream and an oaten cake
And two loaves of beans and bran to bake for my little ones.
.But I have parsley and leeks and many cabbages,
And besides a cow and a calf and a cart mare
To draw afield my dung the while the drought lasteth.
And by this livelihood we must live till Lammas time
[August].
And by that I hope to have harvest in my croft.
And then may I prepare the dinner as I dearly like.

(*“quoth” is an old-fashioned word meaning “said” - it is from the same word-root as “quotation” - something someone said.)



The story of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (Unknown author—14th Century)

The is an alliterative (*) poem of some 2,500 lines.

(*) An “Alliterative” Poem is one where each line of verse uses lots of words beginning with the same letter. For example: “**H**e **H**eld the **H**ead in **H**is **H**and (The letter “H” is used for alliteration)

Sir Gawain was one of King Arthur’s Knights. King Arthur’s Royal Court was at a place called Camelot. It is New Year’s Eve and the King and the Knights are celebrating. Suddenly a mysterious man appears. He is very big – a giant – and completely green. He is riding a green horse. This Green Knight offers a challenge. He will allow any man to strike him in the neck with an axe, if that man will promise to take the same sort of blow from him in one year's time.

Sir Gawain accepts the challenge, and hits the Green Knight’s neck with an axe. The giant’s head falls off. But then they all get a nasty surprise when the Green Knight picks up his own head and rides away, reminding Gawain that on New Year’s Day in one year’s time, the Green Knight will be back and will use his axe on Gawain’s neck.

THE ORIGINAL MIDDLE ENGLISH

For the hede in his honde he haldez vp euen,
Toward the derrest on the dece he dressez the face,
And hit lyfte vp the yyghe-lyddez and loked ful brode,
And meled thus much with his muthe, as yghe may now here:
"Loke, Gawain, thou be graythe to go as thou hettez,
And layte as lelly til thou me, lude, fynde,
As thou hatz hette in this halle, herande thise knyghtes;
To the grene chapel thou chose, I charge the, to fotte
Such a dunt as thou hatz dalt--disserued thou habbez
To be yghederly ygholden on Nw Ygheres morn.
The knyght of the grene chapel men knowen me mony;
Forthi me for to fynde if thou fraystez, faylez thou neuer.
Therefore com, other recreaunt be calde the behoues."

(Don't worry! Today's English students cannot understand these "Middle English" words either! - See the next page for a kind of translation!)

A MODERN ENGLISH VERSION

For he held the head up evenly in his hand,
turned the face toward the top of the high table,
and the eyelids lifted and looked on them all
while the mouth moved, making these words:
"Gawain, get ready to go as you have promised,
Seek me out, sir; search till you find me
as sworn here in this hall where all these knights heard.
I charge you, come as you chose to the Green Chapel to get
as good as you gave -- you've got it coming
and will be paid promptly when another year has passed.
Many men know me as the Knight of the Green Chapel,
so search faithfully and you'll not fail to find me.
Come, or be called a faithless coward!"



The first page of the “Gawain” manuscript - again unrecognisable as modern English!

LINE BY LINE

The first line is the original Middle English;
the second line is a word-by-word version using modern English words;
and the third line is a modern translation

For the hede in his honde he haldez vp euen,
For the head in his hand he held up even
For he held the head up evenly in his hand,

Toward the derrest on the dece he dressez the face,
Towards the dearest (the most important) on the dais (the raised table) he dressed (turned) the face
turned the face toward the top of the high table,

And hit lyfte vp the yyghe-lyddez and loked ful brode,
And it lifted up the eye-lids and looked full broad (around)
and the eyelids lifted and looked on them all

And meled thus much with his muthe, as yghe may now here:
And said this much with his mouth, as you may now hear:
while the mouth moved, making these words:

"Loke, Gawan, thou be graythe to go as thou hettez,
See, Gawain, (that) you are ready to go as you swore (promised)

"Gawain, get ready to go as you have promised,

And layte as lelly til thou me, lude, fynde,
And look as long till you me, lord, find
Seek me out, sir; search till you find me

As thou hatz hette in this halle, herande thise knyghtes;
As you have sworn (promised) in this Hall (room) in the hearing of these knights
as sworn here in this hall where all these knights heard.

To the grene chapel thou chose, I charge the, to fotte
To the Green Chapel you agreed. I order you to get
I charge you, come as you chose to the Green Chapel to get

Such a dunt as thou hatz dalt--disserued thou habbez
such a return (reward) as you have dealt (given)- deserved
you have
as good as you gave -- you've got it coming

To be yghederly ygholden on Nw Ygheres morn.
to be properly returned on New Year's morning
and will be paid promptly when another year has passed.

The knyght of the grene chapel men knowen me mony;
The Knight of the Green Chapel men know me many
Many men know me as the Knight of the Green Chapel,

Forthi me for to fynde if thou fraystez, faylez thou neuer.
Go forth to find me, if you look honestly, you will never fail
so search faithfully and you'll not fail to find me.

Therefore com, other recreaunt be calde the behoues."
Therefore come, otherwise a coward be called by all
Come, or be called a faithless coward!"



*Illustration from the original
"Gawain" manuscript*



Illustration from the original



THE REST OF THE GAWAIN STORY

Near the end of the year, Gawain goes to find the Green Chapel. He finds a castle in the wilderness. The lord of the castle asks Gawain to stay until New Year's Day, because the Green Chapel is nearby. The lord proposes an agreement: he will go out hunting while Gawain stays at the castle, and the two men will exchange whatever they have gained at the end of the day.

The exchange of winnings takes place over three days. Each day, the lord goes out hunting, while the lady of the castle tries to get Gawain to come into her bed. Gawain politely refuses her advances, although he does give her some kisses. Finally, she offers him a magic belt that will protect the life of any man who wears it. Gawain repays

the lord his lady's kisses, but he does not mention the belt.

On New Year's morning Gawain goes to the Green Chapel. The Green Knight raises his axe to cut off Gawain's head, but twice he draws back. The third time, the Green Knight barely cuts Gawain on the neck. The Green Knight reveals that he was really the lord at the castle. His appearance as the Knight was made possible by the spirit, Morgan le Fay. He tells Gawain that the first two blows were for the first two days of their agreement, when Gawain fairly repaid him his wife's kisses. The small cut was for accepting the belt and concealing it.

Overcome with shame, Gawain acknowledges his fault and wears the belt to remind him of his fault. When he returns to Camelot, the entire court wears green sashes in fellowship with Gawain.

THE PEARL POET

The "Gawain" story was included in a manuscript with three other poems: "Pearl", "Cleanliness" and "Patience". It is now believed they were all written by the same person. The author is a poet of great range and feeling. He describes with great effect a little pearl, enclosed in gold, which is beyond compare to any other in the world:

So round, so radiant in each array,
So small, so smooth her sides were,
Wheresoever I judged gems gay,
I set her singly above them all.
Alas! I lost her in a garden,
Through grass to ground she fell away.
Wounded by love, by love forsaken,
I mourn that pearl without a flaw.

(Modernised version)

And only when you read the next verses do you realize that he is not talking about a real pearl, but about his two year old daughter, Marguerite, who has suddenly died. She is the one who has fallen "through grass to ground". As he mourns her, he writes of his terrible grief, and questions his belief in the comfort of Christ. He has a dream-vision of his daughter, across a river, where she is a Queen in Heaven. Her words teach him, through faith, to accept her death. As he tries to reach across the river and touch her, he wakes to find he is stretched on her grave.

This would be, at any time, an exceptional piece of poetry, and illustrates the range, skill and beauty of the "pre-Chaucer" writers of English Literature.





This is said to be a portrait of Chaucer from an early 15th Century manuscript version of the "Canterbury Tales".

GEOFFREY CHAUCER (1345 – 1400)

Early in his life he became a page-boy working in the Palace of King Edward III. Gradually he was given more and more important work to do for the King – serving in the army, and then travelling to Europe several times on official business for the King. He was given important jobs and the special title of “Sir Geoffrey Chaucer”.

He started writing around the year 1369, and was soon recognised as an important poet as well as an important officer

of the King. His most famous work is “The Canterbury Tales”, written about 1387. The Prologue (*) to the Canterbury Tales is regarded as one of the first great pieces of literature in the English language.

(*) “Prologue” (sounds like “pro-log”- rhymes with “dog”) is a series of spoken or written words to introduce the main story – a kind of Introduction.)

The Canterbury Tales

Canterbury:

is a city in the south-east of England, near the English Channel. It is most famous for its magnificent cathedral – the most important church in England. The Archbishop of Canterbury is the leading churchman in the UK. Canterbury Cathedral is especially famous as the shrine (*) of Saint Thomas à Beckett

(*) “shrine” = a holy place, especially a place where a holy person has been killed.

Thomas à Beckett (1118-1170)

became Archbishop of Canterbury in 1162. He soon quarrelled with King Henry II over what powers should belong to the Church and what powers should belong to the King. The King saw Beckett as a dangerous enemy. The ordinary people saw Beckett as a protector of their rights. One night at a dinner in the year 1170, the King was heard to say “Will no one rid me of this turbulent (*) priest”. Four Knights decided to serve their King by going to Canterbury and murdering the Archbishop. He was killed inside the cathedral.

(*) “turbulent” = noisy, annoying, angry

Just three years later the Pope made Thomas à Beckett a Saint. Many people began to make pilgrimages to Canterbury to pray at the place where Saint Thomas à Beckett was murdered. The ordinary people were so angry with the King, that even the King himself went to Canterbury to pray at the shrine of Thomas à Beckett.

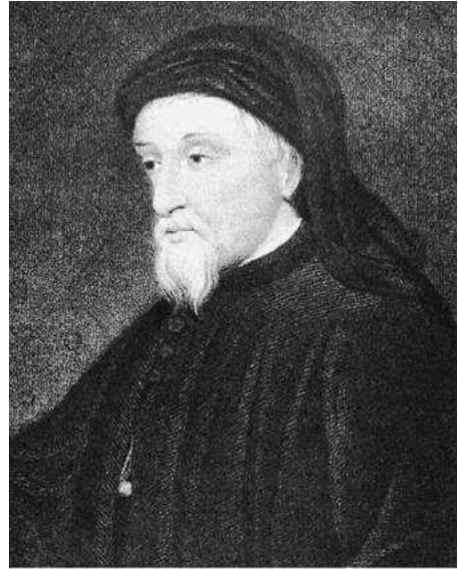
The Canterbury Tales

The Canterbury Tales begin in April, as the story-teller (Chaucer himself) begins a pilgrimage from the Tabard Inn at Southwark (*) to the famous Canterbury Cathedral, where Sir Thomas à Becket, a martyr for Christianity, is buried.

(*) *The Tabard Inn at Southwark was a famous pub or tavern on the south side of the River Thames. It was in a part of London called "Southwark" which is pronounced*

"Suth-ork" (no "w" sound!).

Southwark had its own cathedral – so there was a holy place very close to the drinking place. The Tabard Inn was still there in Shakespeare's day, and Shakespeare and his fellow actors are supposed to have drunk there.



The Prologue

(i.e. the introduction to the whole thing) tells us something about each one of the twenty-nine people who are the pilgrims on the journey to Canterbury. It also explains how each one will tell a story on the journey out, and another story on the return journey. When they get back to London, the Host of the Tabard Inn will decide who has told the best story – who is the winner

The description of each one of the 29 people is both funny and important (since we learn a lot about the kind of people who lived in the year 1387). Some of the stories are funny, and some are sad, and each story matches the person who tells it. Some of the stories have their own "Prologues" which tell us about little quarrels and other problems that happen on the journey.

The Canterbury Tales are not complete. Originally there should have been 58 stories! Two of the stories are started but stop suddenly – with no ending. Some of the pilgrims do not tell even one story. It is not known if this is because the work was never finished – or perhaps some of it was lost.

The opening lines are: (with a modern "translation" underneath)

Whan that Aprille with his shoures soote
 When in April with its showers sweet
 The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,
 The drought of March has pierced to the roots
 And bathed every veyne in swich licour
 And watered every plant with such liquid
 Of which vertu engendred is the flour;
 From whose virtue grows the flowers;
 Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth
 When Zephyrus also with his sweet breath
 Inspired hath in every holt and heeth
 Has breathed life into every field and heath
 The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne
 Of the tender crops, and the young Sun
 Hath in the Ram his halve cours yronne,
 Is halfway through its course in Aries
 Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages
 That's the time when people decide to go on a pilgrimage.

Some of the better known stories include:

The Miller's Tale

An old carpenter named John was married to a young, pretty girl called Alison. Living in their house was a young student called Nicholas. Nicholas wanted to have sex with Alison. She was quite willing, but afraid that her jealous husband would find out. They would have to plan something that would trick Old John so that he would not know. But Nicholas wasn't the only one who wanted to go to bed with Alison. Living in the town was another young man, Absolon, a musician who earned money by singing and playing his guitar. He, too, wanted to have sex with Alison.

Nicholas and Alison played their trick on John. They told him that terrible rains were coming – perhaps that very night. It would be like Noah's Flood. The houses would be washed away and everyone would drown. But they could save themselves by buying three large wooden barrels and hanging them from the top of the house. When the floods came, they could cut the ropes holding the barrels. The barrels would then become boats and would float on the water. They would all be saved.

That night the three went up to the roof and climbed into their barrels. John eventually fell asleep and Nicholas climbed into Alison's barrel to have sex. Early in the morning, Absolon came with his guitar and started singing beneath the barrels, asking for a kiss. Alison said she would let him kiss her just once, but he must close his eyes. He closes his eyes, and she pulls down her pants and sticks out her buttocks. (*) He kisses them. He opens his eyes and sees what has happened. Alison and Nicholas laugh at him and he goes away, angry and embarrassed .

Absolon goes to a blacksmith (*) and borrows a hot forging iron (*) . He returns to Alison and Nicholas and asks for another kiss. Nicholas removes his clothing and intends to trick Absolon yet again, and fart in his face. Instead, Absolon burns his buttocks with the hot iron. In pain, Nicholas cries out for water. This wakes up old John who thinks that the massive flood has arrived. John instantly cuts the ropes and they all fall to the ground. Everyone in the town hears the noise and comes to laugh.

(*) "buttocks" = arse. ("Arse is a bit too rude for polite use, so "Buttocks" is a better.)

(*) "Blacksmith" = a man who works with iron, making shoes for horses

(*) "forging iron" = an iron pole made red hot in the fire for marking iron

The Wife of Bath's Prologue (*)

(* Bath is a large town in the West of England)

The Prologue to the Wife of Bath's tale is very important. It lasts longer than her actual story. It is a very early kind of "Women's Lib" statement. She refuses to be a humble housewife, obeying her husband. (Because this statement of female equality comes from as early as the year 1387, this Prologue is a very important piece of literature and social history.)

She talks proudly and openly about her five marriages and uses lots of phrases from the Bible to justify what she has done. The Bible tells women to "be fruitful and multiply".

She says she is looking for a sixth husband and says that King Solomon had many wives. She says that sex is a good thing, She also mentions that Jesus never explicitly stated any laws about virginity, and goes on to mention that people



have body parts for sex and should use them accordingly.

"I pray you, telleth me,
Or where comanded he virginitee?"

Some of her husbands were good men, some of them were bad. One was violent and hit her so hard on the head that she became deaf in one ear. This husband said a woman must always be a servant to her husband, and told stories from the Bible which say that woman is not equal to men. The Wife of Bath says this is rubbish! These old Bible stories were written by monks who never had any relationships with women. The Wife of Bath laughs a lot, drinks like a man, enjoys sex, and claims women are equal to men.

The Wife of Bath's Tale

is a story from the days of King Arthur, the age of the Round Table and fairy queens and spirits. One day, one of King Arthur's knights found a maiden walking alone, and raped her. The crime of rape usually was punishable with death. However, the Queen agreed to save the Knight's life if he could answer one question: "What do women most desire? "

The Queen gave the knight one year to find the answer to her question before he lost his life. The knight searches high and low but cannot find anyone to give him the answer. The year is nearly over and he is facing death. On his final journey to the Queen he meets an ugly old woman. She says she can tell him the answer, but only if he agrees to marry her. He says he will marry her in return for the answer.

She said that women desire control and sovereignty over their husbands. The knight returned to the queen and gave that answer. It was the correct one. Now he is very unhappy because he has to marry the ugly old woman, When he kisses her, however, she immediately turns into a beautiful young lady. And they live happily ever after.



The Nun's Priest's Tale

An old woman kept a small farm with many animals, including a prized cockerel named Chanticleer. Chanticleer crowed (*) incessantly and had seven hens, including his favourite "wife", the beloved Pertelote (*). During his sleep, Chanticleer groaned and dreamed that a large yellow dog chased after him.

Pertelote made fun of Chanticleer's cowardly behavior and said that dreams mean nothing. They are caused by eating the wrong food or feeling ill. Chanticleer said he believed dreams to be prophetic (*) and tells the story of a traveler who predicted his own death. Then he tells of another man who dreamed that his friend had drowned and that those exact events actually came true.

Chanticleer and Pertelote talk of many famous sayings and proverbs until they realize that men and women are perfect for one another. Chanticleer then goes in the morning to search for herbs, where a fox grabs him. Pertelote squawks loudly. This warns the old woman who chases the fox away. Therefore Chanticleer is safe. His dream came true, but it had a happy ending. The tale ends with everyone alive and safe.

(*) "to crow" = to make a noise like a cockerel "Cock-a-doodle-doo!"

(*) "Pertelote" – an old fashioned name, pronounced "purty-loat" to rhyme with "coat"

(*) "Prophetic": a "Prophecy" (Pronounced "Proff-essy") is when you say something is going to happen in the future. The weatherman will say "I prophesy it will rain tomorrow – I predict it will rain tomorrow" The adjective "prophetic" means it has the quality of a prophecy

The Cook's Tale

In the cook's town, there lived a young apprentice (*) nicknamed (*) Perkin Reveller. He was short and fat, and he spent all his free time drinking in taverns. Although he was very clever at his work, and had all the skills and abilities to become a very good cook, he played around too much with girls and gambling. One day his master found out about his drinking and bad behaviour.

The master knew this behaviour was breaking the rules, so he was fired.(*) The apprentice left the master's house on his own and went to a friend's house for company. That house was none other than a whorehouse (*) with thieves - his proper home.

(*) *“apprentice” - a young person who signs a contract for several years to work for very little money in order to learn a skilled job.*

(*) *“nickname” – not your proper name, but a name people call you – sometimes in fun, sometimes a nasty name. “Reveller” means a party-goer, someone who drinks all the time, and is nearly always drunk.*

(*) *“fired” – This means to lose your job. Your employer “fires” you – in other words tells you to go. Another expression is “to give someone the sack”, or “to get the sack”. This was when your boss took your tools – your hammer and screwdrivers, etc. – put them in a sack and gave them to you to take away*

(*) *“whorehouse” – a brothel. A house of prostitutes.*

Other Works by Chaucer



The Parliament of Fowls

In a prologue to “The Parliament of Fowls” the poet (Chaucer) says he is unhappy because he does not have the things he wants, and the things he does have, he doesn't want. (*) He then falls asleep and has a dream.

It is St Valentine's Day – the day on which all the birds have a meeting to choose their mates (*their partners for producing baby birds!*) for the coming year. The meeting is controlled by the goddess, Nature. There are three mighty eagles, and all three of them want to have the same “beautiful formel” (*female*) as their love. They have a long debate about what love is, and what love should be, and how the male should honour the female.

They say that if a man really does love a woman, but she does not love him in return, then the man should go away and never look for another woman. If his first love was really true, then he will never marry and will remain alone for the rest of his life.

An ordinary duck says all this noble Eagle talk is nonsense. If the woman doesn't love you, then go and find another woman who does. All the birds cannot agree on whether the Eagle or the duck is right. So the Goddess Nature makes them all go away (without their mates) and tells them to come back one year later and try again.

(*) *This is called the **Boethius Philosophy** – named after a Roman philosopher who said no one will ever have true happiness on earth. A rather sad and miserable way of looking at things??*

It is said that Chaucer was comparing the old-fashioned tradition of “courtly love” of knights and

noblemen, with the modern “bourgeois” ideas of the middle-classes and ordinary people. It is also said he wrote the poem in 1382 to celebrate the marriage of the English king, King Richard II and Anne of Bohemia.

Troilus and Cressida

Chaucer wrote this epic poem filled with romance, betrayal, and battles around the year 1385. In Book I, the Trojan prince, Troilus, falls completely in love with Cressida. By Book V, the end of the story, he goes into battle filled with jealousy--only to be killed by Achilles. The poem is elegant and of high moral values, and very different from some other works by Chaucer, who often wrote stories that were rude, naughty and sexual. The same story of Troilus and Cressida was turned into a play by Shakespeare over 200 years later - but Shakespeare’s characters are very different.

In Chaucer’s version, Troilus is noble, sensitive, generous, and manly. He lives for his lady, Cressida, and he dies in a noble manner because she is false to him. Cressida is a noble, virtuous woman, who loves with all her heart, but is driven to being unfaithful by certain circumstances. Cressida’s Uncle, Pandarus, is a gentleman with a flaw in him: he places friendship higher than honour.

(This is very different from Shakespeare’s version, where Pandarus is a very unpleasant and nasty man)

Chaucer’s “**Troilus and Cressida**” is divided into five books. The story takes place in Troy. There is a war going on, and the Greeks have surrounded the city.

The First Book tells how Calchas the Priest has run away from Troy, leaving behind his only daughter, Cressida. Prince Troilus, the son of King Priam, sees her and falls in love. Her uncle, Pandarus, is also Troilus’s friend, and Pandarus says he will help them to meet.

In the Second Book, Pandarus tells Cressida that Troilus is handsome, brave and noble, and is deeply in love with her.

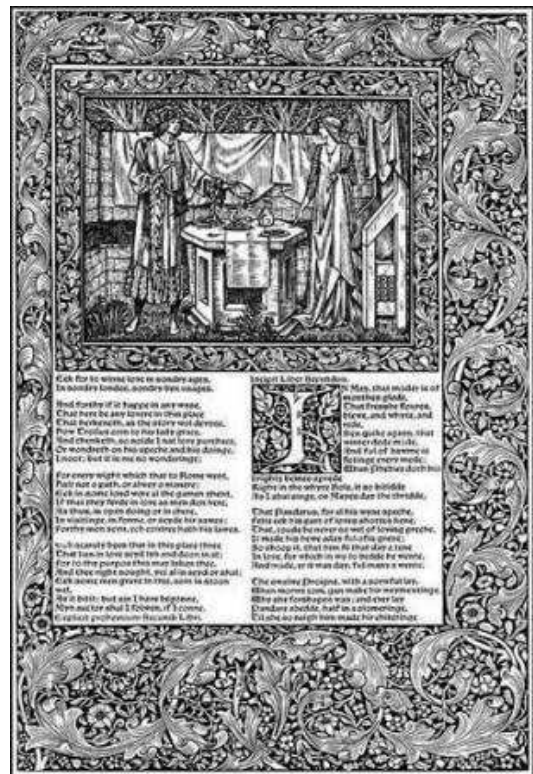
In the Third Book Troilus and Cressida meet, and Pandarus arranges that the meeting ends with them being completely in love with each other.

In the Fourth Book it all goes wrong. The Greeks win a battle and capture Cressida. They take her away from Troy as ransom.(*). She promises she will escape from the Greeks and return to Troy and Troilus within ten days.

The Fifth Book

On the journey to the Greek camp she is guarded by a soldier called Diomedes. He falls deeply in love with her, and is so passionate in his love that she ends up allowing him to make love to her. Troilus hears this news and is heart-broken. Life is not worth living without the love of Cressida. He goes on the battlefield and allows himself to be killed by the Greek soldier, Achilles.

(*) *Ransom* - . The money paid for the return of a prisoner, or of property captured by an enemy.



A Page from the famous Kelmscott Chaucer Edition, designed by the artist