

Middle English and The Medieval Romance

The Norman Conquest: William the Conqueror 1066

- Norman French became the language of the English court until the middle of 14th cent.
- **French** was the language of literature and of the upper classes: the King and the Norman aristocracy, who rule the country.
- **Latin** was the language of the Church and of cultural studies (treatises, essays)
- **English** was relegated to the lower classes. The emergence of French as the courtly language did not provide a “standard form” of English.
- English developed many dialectical variations.
- Old English poetry died out

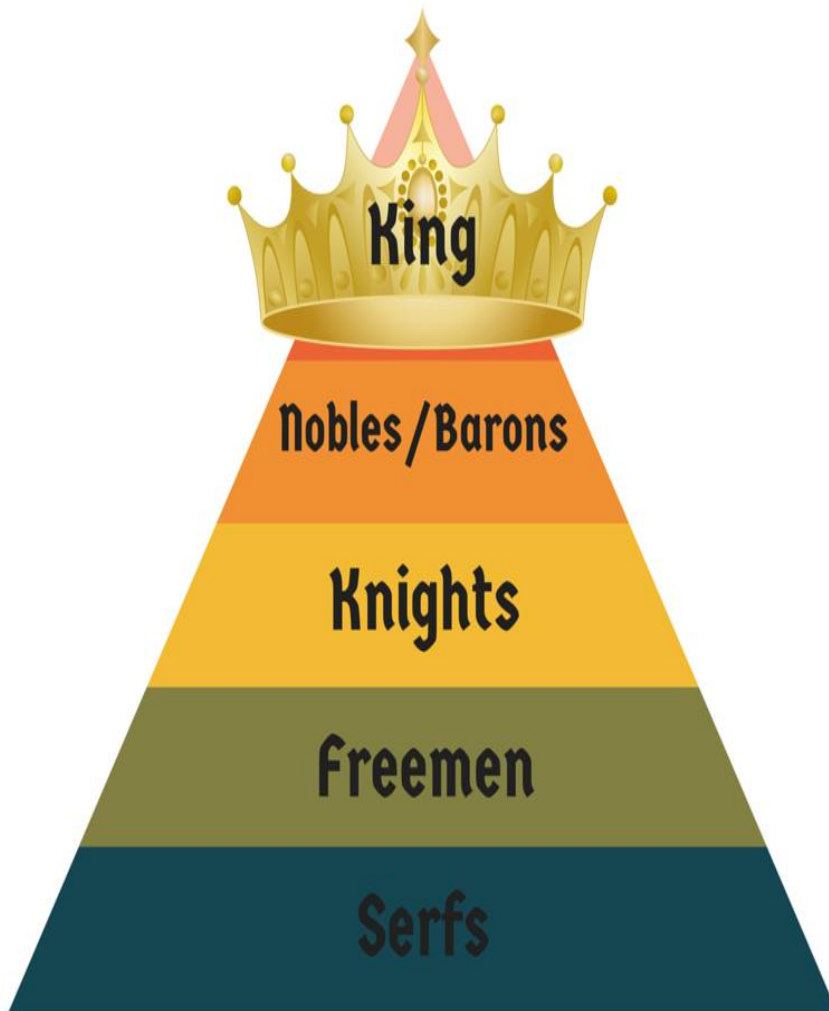
Middle English

- English, which remained the language of the vast majority of people, eventually won out over French, but it was a different language: Middle English.
- It had lost the Anglo-Saxon inflections and had been enriched with thousands of French words.
- By the end of the Middle English period, the dialect of London, now the dominant city of England, reigned supreme.
- Old English: 700-1110
- Middle English: 1100-1450
- Modern English: 1450 – present day

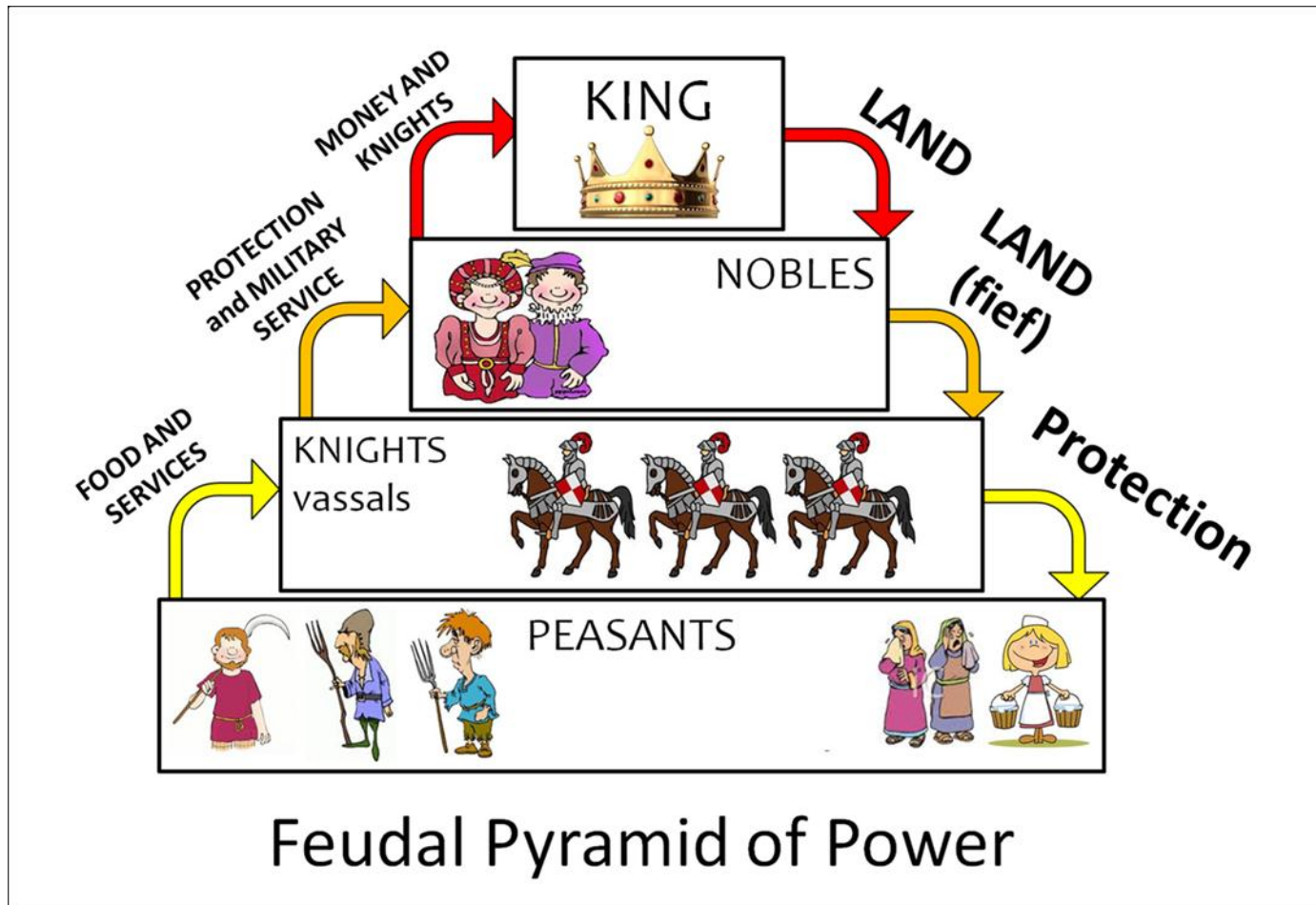
The Feudal System

- A system of mutual obligations and rights.
- The mutual obligations of the feudal system refer to the agreement between a lord and a vassal. A lord, who is a landowner, permits a vassal to essentially lease a portion of his or her land (fief) in exchange for an obligation of loyalty and military service if called upon.

From a clan-based system to a feudal society



FeudalSystem



From Epic to Romance

- A significant change of sensibility and taste: replacement of the old heroic (epic) poetry (Anglo-Saxon literature) by the verse romance (Middle English literature)
- “Romance” comes from the Old French word «*romanz*», which means vernacular and became attached to these works (romances) because they were written in the vernacular rather than in Latin.
- - The *romance* flourished in France from 9th to 12th cent. and spread to England with the Normans
- *Chivalry* is a system of values which operates in the context of the feudal world.

Heroic poetry versus Romance

Heroic (epic):

- More realistic in treatment, sterner in mood.
- Claims to deal with characters that have had a place in the origins of a country or population (Beowulf, Aeneas, the Trojans and the Greeks)
- Fighting is for a specific purpose, a necessity.

Romance:

- More escapist, the marvellous is introduced for its own sake (Astolfo rides the hippogriff to the moon to get Orlando's sanity back)
- fighting on principle or as a matter of fashion: a stylised sport (as in medieval tournaments)
- Chivalry from *chevalerie*
- The Knight is a paragon of bravery, honour and courtesy
 - It includes courtly or chivalric love.

A Medieval Tournament



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A TOURNAMENT IN THE MIDDLE AGES.

3 Major fields in Medieval Romances

- **The Matter of France** (Charlemagne and his paladins, the crusades)
- **The Matter of Britain** (King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, Lancelot and Guinevere, Merlin, Camelot)
- **The Matter of Rome** (episodes and events from the Aeneid and the classical world)

Chansons de Gestes or Songs of Deeds: transition from heroic to romance

- Deeds= brave or exemplary actions of a character or a lineage in feudal warfare
- Matter of France
- *Chanson de Roland*, a poem in 4,000 decasyllables, which told the adventures of a paladin against the Saracens.
- Values: Loyalty to one's king and one's faith, love for one's country, exaltation of disinterested heroism.

Closer to Romance

- Matter of Britain
- *Roman de Brut*, by Norman poet **Robert Wace** (1155), draws on Geoffrey of Monmouth's Latin chronicle *Historia Regum Britanniae*. It is in French. Poetry.
- It tells in 15,000 lines the adventures of Brutus, reputed descendant of Aeneas and conqueror of the Island of Albion (named Britain after his name) and of his successors, in particular King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table.
- *Brut* by English priest **Layamon** (ca. 1200, version of Wace's work in Middle English) accentuates the romance. Poetry
- *Le Morte Darthur*, by **Thomas Malory** (1470). Prose version of the Arthurian legend, drawing on the French and English versions, printed in 1485 (it established itself as the canonical version of King Arthur's stories). Middle English

A Romance: Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

- A **verse romance** of 2,500 alliterative lines, copied in 1400 (ca.).
- Gawain is Arthur's nephew (Galvano in Italian) and a Knight of the Round Table.
- A compendium of the chivalric vision proper to romance.
- A challenge issued by a mysterious Green Knight who presents itself at King Arthur's court on Christmas day and is accepted by Sir Gawain, who achieves it after 1,001 adventures.

Dream Poems: Pearl and Piers Plowman

- **Dream Poems** = the most important medieval literary genre with romance. Dream is a form of knowledge for the Medieval mind.
- **Pearl** is a poem of 1,212 lines, preserved in the same manuscript as Sir Gawain. It is **allegorical**.
- The narrator(a jeweller) is looking for a lost jewel in a garden. But he falls asleep. A beautiful woman appears to him, whom he identifies with Pearl, his daughter who died when she was two years old. She has become a Queen and Christ's bride. She is a symbol of grace and purity, and reveals him the Heavenly City, the New Jerusalem. He would like to join her and surges forward, so he wakes up. The dream is inspirational for his own salvation.

Allegory

- A story, poem, or picture that can be interpreted to reveal a hidden meaning, typically a moral or political one.
- A representation of an abstract or spiritual meaning through concrete or material forms; figurative treatment of one subject under the guise of another.
- *Pearl* and dream poems in general are allegorical
- John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678-84) is a prose allegory of a spiritual journey of a character called Christian
- Dante's *Divine Comedy* (ca 1304-7) is an allegorical poem describing a dream of a journey
- From the Oxford Dictionary online
- <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/allegory>
- <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/allegory>

Dream Poem: *Piers Plowman*

- Dream Poem by **William Langland** (1330-86) in alliterative verse, not rhyme.
- Represents the journey of Will , the dreamer, in his quest for the true Christian life and salvation. Will meets Piers (Piero), a plowman (aratore), who becomes his spiritual guide.
- The government, the society and the Church are presented as profoundly corrupt. Denunciation of the Church's corruption. It contains the first known reference to a literary tradition of Robin Hood tales.
- Partly social satire, partly theological **allegory**.
- Will encounters abstract personifications - Dowell, Dobet, Dobest - representing three stages of good behaviour: «do well», «do better» and «do best».