



# Chapter 6: Middle English

c. 1100—c. 1500 C.E.

Part I: The History

# This part of the lecture

- Major historical and cultural influences on Middle English
- Impact of Norman Conquest on Middle English lexis
- Introduction of class, politics, and gender as factors in language use and choice
- Changes in technology and beginnings of language standardization

# Before the Norman Conquest

- Æðelræd had a Norman queen
- His son Edward the Confessor was fostered & educated in Normandy
- William of Normandy was his 2<sup>nd</sup> cousin
- Nobles elected Harald, who was English, over William, who was Norman, to succeed Edward
- William wins Battle of Hastings (1066 & all that)



# Norman Conquest



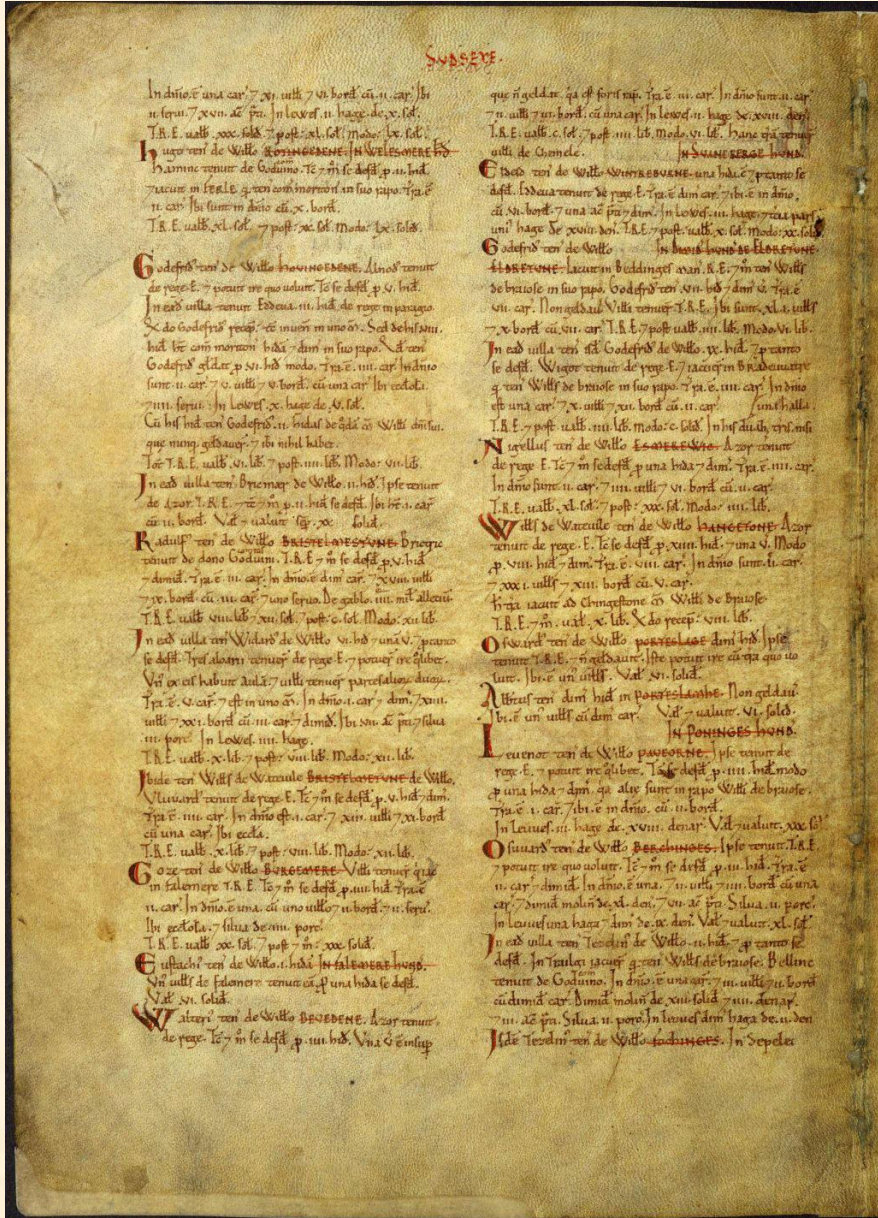
- William speaks Norman French, lives in France
- Took 4 years to consolidate his claim to English throne
- Imposed Norman society top-to-bottom over Anglo-Saxon society

# Cultural impositions of the Normans



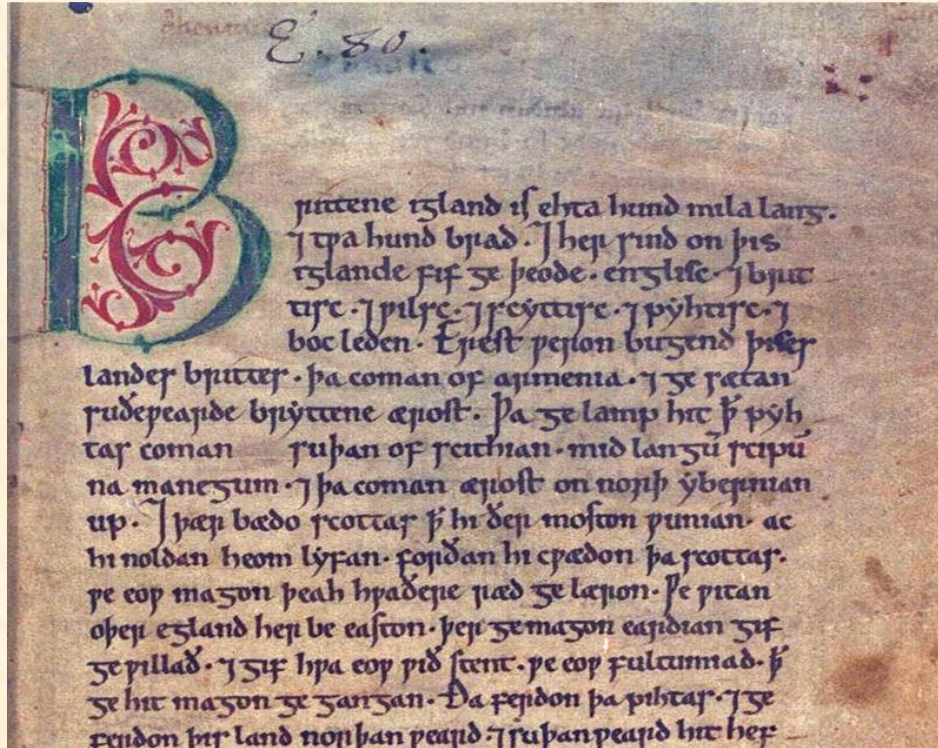
- By 1076, all 12 Earls in England are Norman
- Most lesser noble estates also given to Normans
- Archbishops of Canterbury & York are Norman
- In 1075, 13/21 abbots are English; in 1087, 3/21 abbots are English

# Domesday Boke



- Completed in 1086
- First public record of who owns what land & property in England
- In Latin but many OE place names—fixes names in history
- Shows both Anglo-Norman and Anglo-Saxon landowners

# When does Middle English 'start'?



- Imposition of Norman government after 1066 marks an important point, but Peterborough MS of *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (left) continues to add entries in Old English thru 1154 C.E.
- Algeo's 1100 is a convenience date.

# Trilingual language situation

- The church, the royal court, and all legal documents used Latin as “official” language
- Courtiers and those who wished to reach that status spoke & wrote Norman French in society
- Merchants learned to do business in both languages
- They all spoke English to their servants
- Average folk spoke English to each other



# *Chronicle of Robert of Gloucester, ~1300*

þus com, lo, Engelond  
in-to Normandies hond:  
And þe Normans ne couþe speke  
þo bote hor owe speche,  
And speke French as hii dude atom, and  
hor children dude also teche,  
So þat heiemen of þis lond,  
þat of ho blod come,  
Holdeþ alle þulke speche  
þat hii of hom nom:  
Vor bote a man conne Frenss  
men telþ of him lute.  
Ac lowe men holdeþ to Engliss,  
and to hor owe speche-ute.  
Ich wene þer ne beþ  
in al the world contreyes none  
þat ne holdeþ to hor owen speche, bote  
Engelond one.  
Ac wel me wote  
uor to conne boþe wel it is,  
Vor þe more þat a mon can,  
þe more wurþe he is.

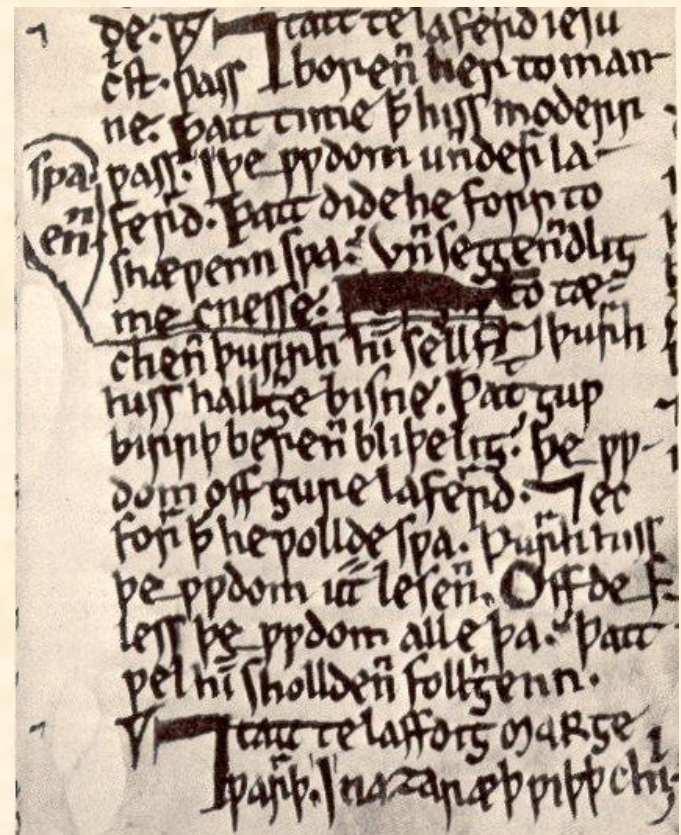
Thus came, lo, England into Normandy's hand: and the Normans then knew how to speak only their own language, and spoke French as they did at home, and also had their children taught it, so that noblemen of this land, that come of their stock, all keep to the same speech that they received from them; for unless a man knows French, people make little account of him. But low men keep to English, and to their own language still. I think that in the whole world there are no countries that do not keep their own language, except England alone. But people know well that it is good to master both, because the more a man knows the more honoured he is.

# Multilingual Composition

Marie de France, c. 1170



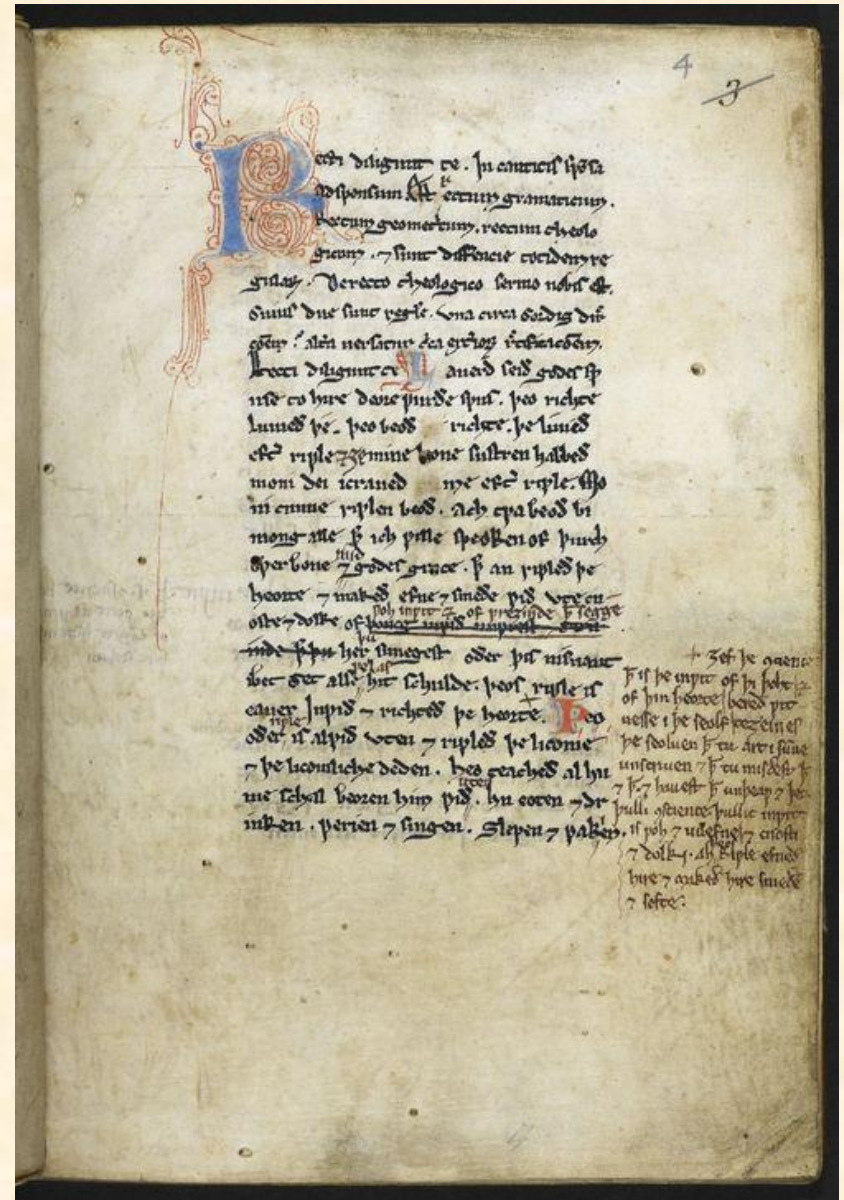
Orm, *The Ormulum*, c. 1200



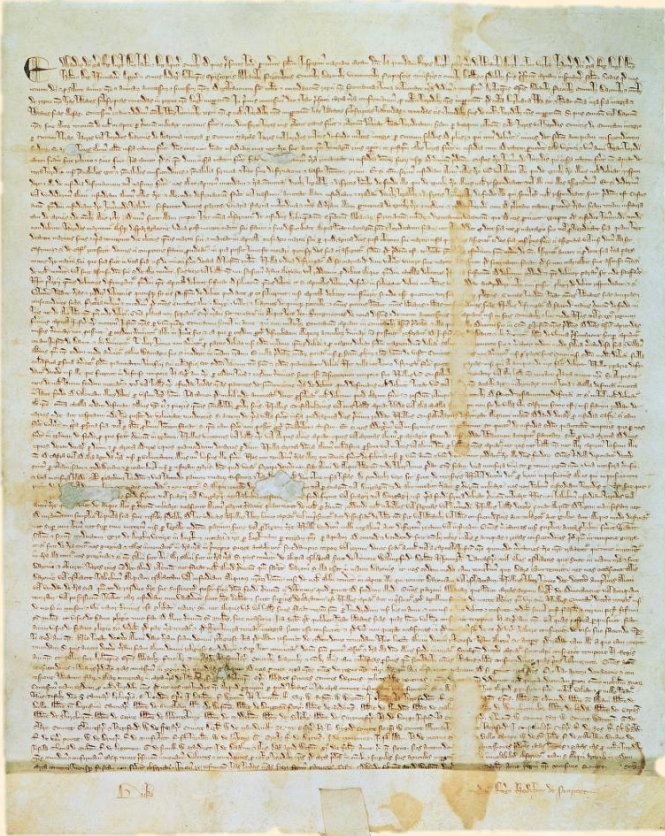
# Pastoral Care & Spiritual Instruction in English

A number of didactic works were written in English to explain religion and to provide spiritual guidance to both lay and religious people. *Ancrene Wisse*, c. 1220, was written for three sisters who had chosen to live a reclused life; it's written in a very distinctive Worcestershire dialect. Shortly thereafter it was translated into Anglo Norman and Latin as well, but it started in Middle English.

Collections of sermons, saints' lives, and homilies are prevalent from this period, and from about 1250 we see the beginnings of literature in English—romances, debate poems, and versified histories and Biblical paraphrases. It seems clear that the laity, at least, expected its instruction in Middle English, even though “official” scriptures were still in Latin.



# Beginnings of the Political/Linguistic Shift



- England loses control of Normandy in 1204
- John Lackland forced to sign Magna Carta in 1215
- Rise of Parisian French; Norman dialects lose prestige
- By 1250, manuals in Latin & English for teaching French
- Oxford undergrads still required to converse in French and Latin at dinner table

# Political Impetuses Change

- Hundred Years' War (1337-1453) sets England at political odds with France
- Edward III addresses Parliament in English for first time in 1361
- England becomes a merchant power in its own right—wool exports
- England no longer a province of France but a recognized international player

þis ilk bok es translate  
Into Inglis tong to rede  
For the love of Inglis lede,<sup>1</sup>  
Inglis lede of Ingland,  
For the comun at<sup>2</sup> understand.  
Frankis rimes here I redd  
Comunlik in ilka sted;<sup>3</sup>  
Mast<sup>4</sup> es it wrought for Frankis man,  
Quat<sup>5</sup> is for him na Frankis can?  
In Ingland the nacion,  
Es Inglis man þar in comun;  
þe speche þat man wit mast may spede;  
Mast þarwit to speke war nede.  
Selden was for ani chance  
Praised Inglis tong in France;  
Give we ilkan<sup>6</sup> þare langage,  
Me think we do þam non outrage.  
To laud<sup>7</sup> and Inglis man I spell  
þat understandes þat I tell . . .

(*Cursor Mundi*, Prologue, ll. 232–50)

our acompt, & les compeller de faire pleine distribution.

Item, p' ce q̄ monstre est soventfoitz au Roi, p' Prelatz, Ducs Counts Barons & tout la cōe, les g'ntz meschiefs q̄ sont advenuz as plusours du realme de e q̄ les leyes custumes & estatutz du dit realme ne ont pas conuz cōement en mesme le realme, p' cause q̄ ils sont pledez monstrez & jugez en la lange Francois, qest tropp desconue en dit realme; issint q̄ les gentz q̄ plēdent ou sont empledez en les Courtz le Roi & les Courtz dautres, nont entendement ne conissance le ce qest dit p' eulx ne contre eulx p' leur Serjeantz & auts pledeurs; et q̄ resonablement les dites leyes & custumes s'ront le plus tost apries & conuz le mieultz entenduz en la lange usee en dit realme, & p' tant chescun du dit realme se p'roit mieultz govner sanz faire offense a la leye, & le mieultz garder sauver & defendre ses heritages & possessions; & en divers regions & pais, ou le Roi les nobles & auts du dit realme ont este, est bon govnement & plein droit fait a chescun p' cause q̄ leur leyes & custumes sont apries & usez en la lange du pais: Le Roi lesirant le bon govnement & t'ngillite de son poeple, & de ouster & eschurer les maux & meschiefs q̄ sont advenuz, & purront avener en ceste partie, ad p' les causes ausdites ordeigne & establi del assent avantdit q̄ toutes choses q̄ s'ront a pleder en ses Courtz queconques, devant ses Justices queconques ou en ses autres places ou devant ses auts Ministres q̄conques ou en les Courtz

ITEM, Because it is often shewed to the King by the Prelates, Dukes, Earls, Barons, and all the Commonalty, of the great Mischiefs which have happened to divers of the Realm, because the Laws, Customs, and Statutes of this Realm be not commonly [holden and kept<sup>1</sup>] in the same Realm, for that they be pleaded, shewed, and judged in the French Tongue, which is much unknown in the said Realm; so that the People which do implead, or be impleaded, in the King's Court, and in the Courts of other, have no Knowledge nor Understanding of that which is said for them or against them by their Serjeants and other Pleaders; and that reasonably the said Laws and Customs [the rather shall be perceived<sup>2</sup>] and known, and better understood in the Tongue used in the said Realm, and by so much every Man of the said Realm may the better govern himself without offending of the Law, and the better keep, save, and defend his Heritage and Possessions; and in divers Regions and Countries, where the King, the Nobles, and other of the said Realm have been, good Governance and full Right is done to every Person, because that their Laws and Customs be learned and used in the Tongue of the Country: The King, desiring the good Governance and Tranquillity of his People, and to put out and eschew the Harms and Mischiefs which do or may happen in this Behalf by the Occasions aforesaid, hath ordained and stablished by the Assent aforesaid, that all Pleas which shall be pleaded in [any<sup>3</sup>] Courts whatsoever, before any of his Justices whatsoever, or in his other Places, or before any of His other Ministers whatsoever, or in the Courts

<sup>1</sup> upon such shewing

<sup>2</sup> and other profits MS. Tr. 2.

<sup>3</sup> anywhere

<sup>4</sup> shall be the more soon learned, MS. Tr. 2.

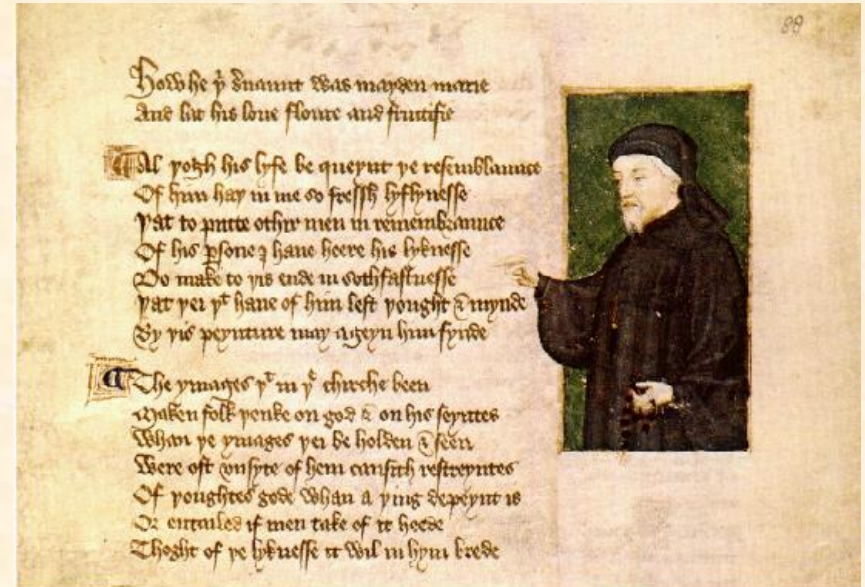
<sup>5</sup> his MS. Tr. 2.

## The Statute of Pleading, 1362

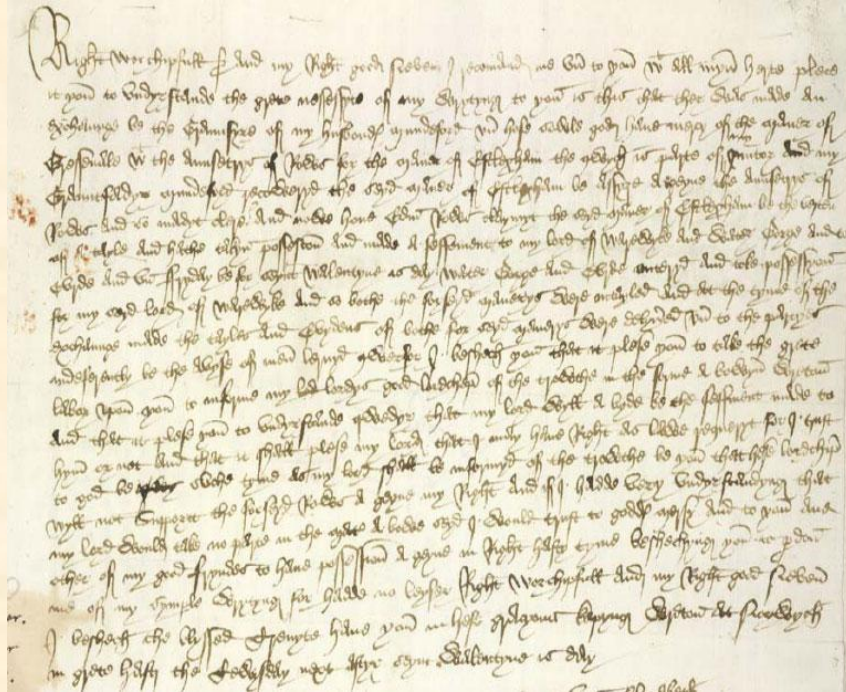
It becomes law in England that courts and Parliament must conduct business in “la langue engleise”—English—because so few people understand French. Records were still to be “enrouliez en latin”—written in Latin.

# The vernacular explosion

- “Alliterative revival” of the 1350s-1400:
  - *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*
  - *Piers Plowman*
- John Wyclif & followers translate the Bible, 1380s
- Geoffrey Chaucer (c. 1365-1400) develops English as a literary language



# Rise of Personal Literacy



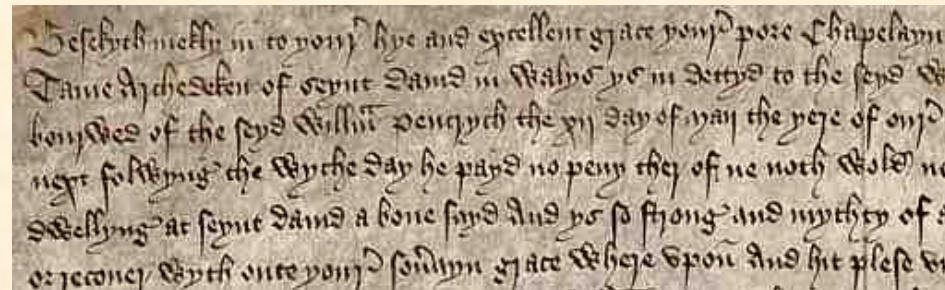
The image shows a page of handwritten text in a Gothic script, likely a medieval manuscript or letter. The text is written in a dense, cursive hand with some red ink used for initials or headings. The paper appears aged and slightly yellowed. The text is arranged in several lines, with some words written in a larger, more decorative font. The overall appearance is that of a historical document.

- After Black Death, less control of literacy by the clergy
- Guild and parish schools
- Rise of mercantile class
- Literacy meant reading, not necessarily writing
- Demand for books and reading



# Chancery Standard

- Was developing in Chaucer's time
- Promoted especially by Henry V (reigned 1413-1422)
- Developed as a standard *written* language by clerks in the court of the royal chancery (federal government)
- Privileged the dialects of London & the East Midlands but used some Northern forms, especially pronouns, to avoid confusion
- Developed a fairly standardized sense of grammar, word order, and spelling that were then picked up by the book sellers & scribes around Westminster
- Therefore very influential when the printing presses start around Westminster



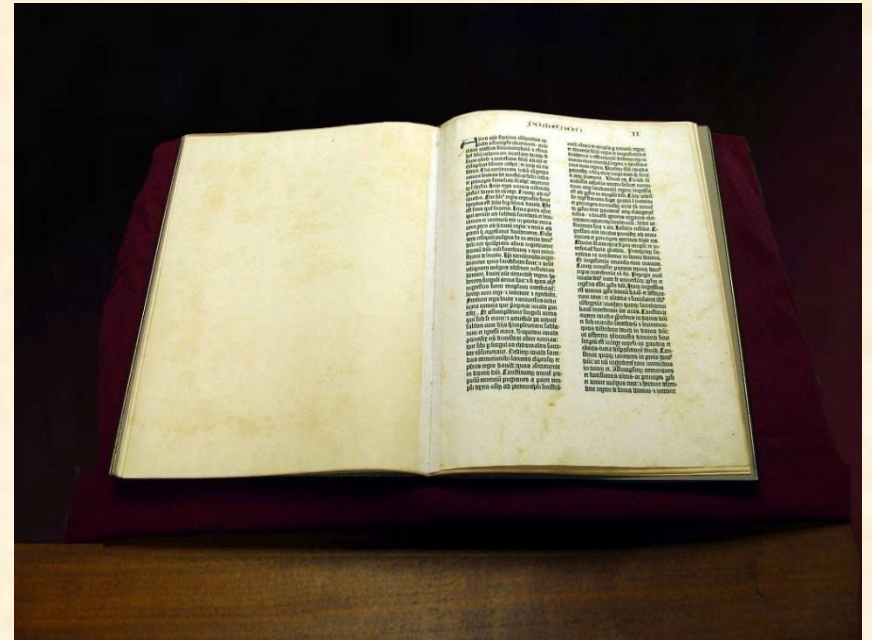
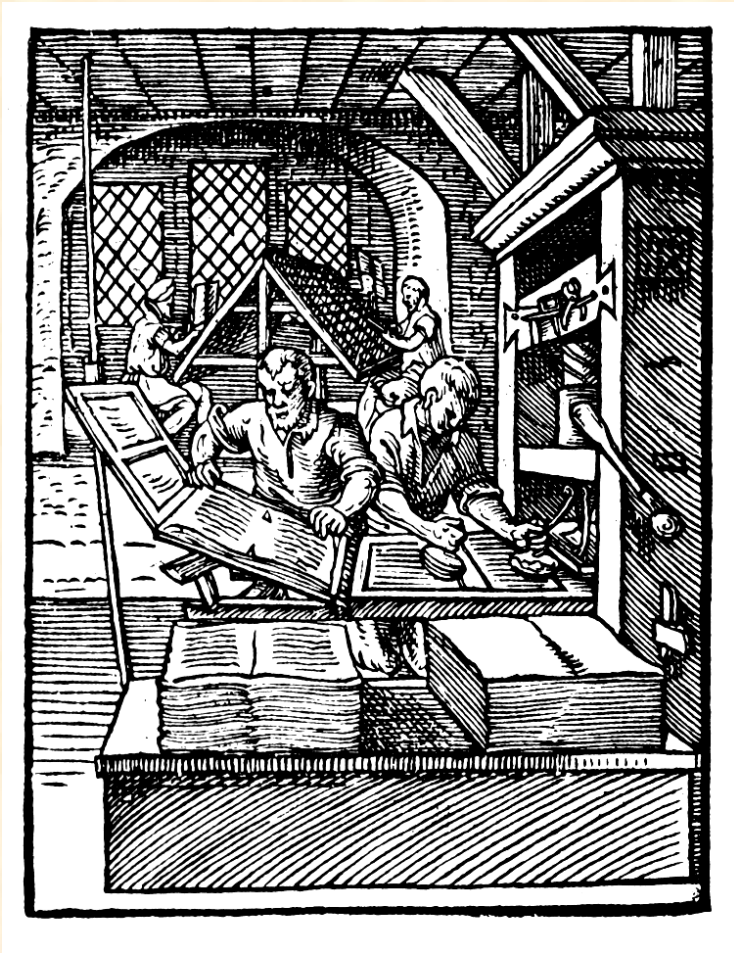
# The Printing Press



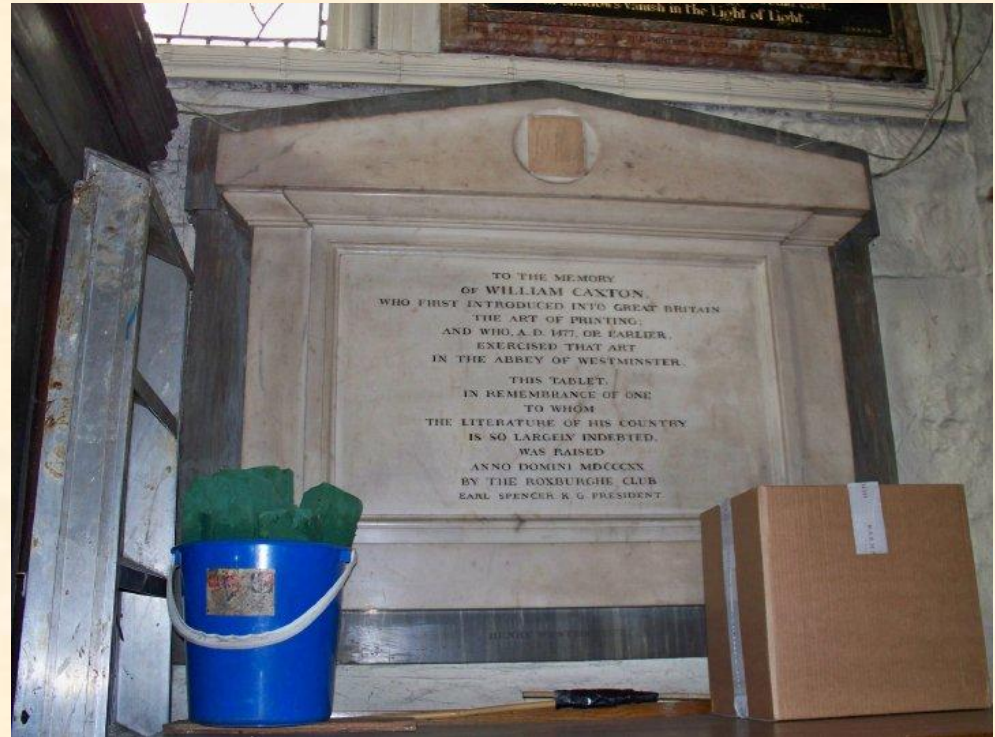
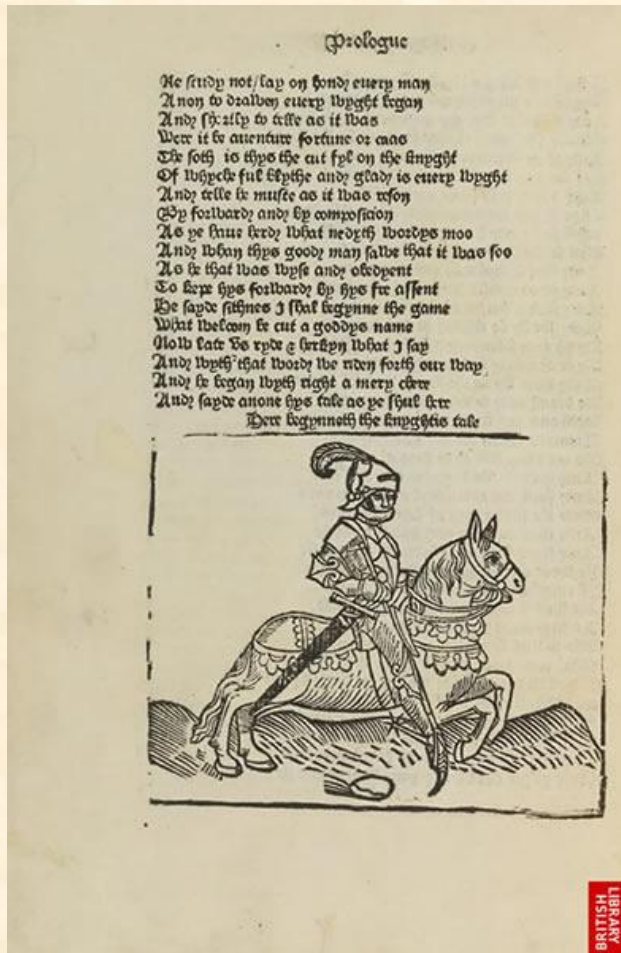
**Maria magdalene der penitentie**  
 Dit voergerade capittel hebben wi gehoert  
 toe die daniel gijn beoerde. volghende laet  
 ons hoer hoe pps maria magdalene van hoert  
 dat heeft geyreichte. In begintel syner  
 dieghe so herft hi die geluge van geyraet. doet  
 penitentie dat eue der hemel sel v genadich. bid  
 penitentie so herft hi gepredie die opringe der  
 eijle der hemel. Dat schijnt in moer magdale  
 ne der sonderste die vol was van seuf dunnel  
 dat is dootfont die mit beconne en penitentie  
 de wat haer gewoont sin. En mits der vreyghe  
 hand ontfemsticheit gods. Doer om en sel  
 geen wanhope van ontfemsticheit gods sijn  
 want god is hi alle die penitentie tot haer son  
 den toetvint. Doer meer so roept hi alle die  
 penitentie dat dat eijle der hemel dat voer hi  
 toeromst niemant penitentie vorte gesien en  
 mocht. Dat is wilen eer geygureet bi den  
 conne manassen die god bi penitentie van v  
 genaden tot sijn geyroep herft. Manasse  
 hadde god mits vele sonde droent sijn  
 aphet. doer sijn die he voer niet houde. also veel  
 aphet die he wed spake herft hi gedoet. dat  
 dat hi die smet van hemel mits der aphet  
 bloet. wat verweet. hi liet den aphet  
 vlyghen.

**Manasse der penitentie vordernisse**  
 mits boert sagh rind midel doe sijn die he  
 van sijn sonde beoerde. mer. nu veel sonde  
 hi van sijn viondi geuoncht in ellent viont  
 en tot der herder geyraet. En doe hi sijn her  
 der was begonst hi penitentie te hebben en  
 bekeert sijn geduen sonde en adere te her  
 mit bittere en vortgherichte. En sijn die  
 hebbe gesondicht bouent ghelal der sante  
 die en en bin alle hante wie waerdich af v  
 sonnen die hoericht der hunte om die  
 nichvondicheit mijner mensche. Also ontfem  
 sticheit god is hebbe dinc voren deere  
 en quet voer v geduen ende ombehoelike di  
 ghen. Duse hore sijn ontfemsticheit sijn ge  
 derderheit beoerde en herft ontfemsticheit  
 sijn penitentie ontfanghe. Wie hi he vionde  
 her vlost herft en vort om sijn eijle van v  
 salt geyroep. bi. alle manasse so vort  
 quade sijn beoerde die sonde ang sondich  
 want geyroep dat hi god niet en achte. v  
 want die aphet teherft die he beoerde so  
 vort hi die vionde en die vort vionde v  
 hoer. En also laughe alle so dan. he sijn  
 vort die sijn die sijn so laughe van hi geyroep  
 v des dunnel vortghenisse v vort. En sijn tot  
 die sante vortghenisse geyraet.


# Gutenberg gets the credit...



# In 1475 William Caxton brings printing to England



# The New World

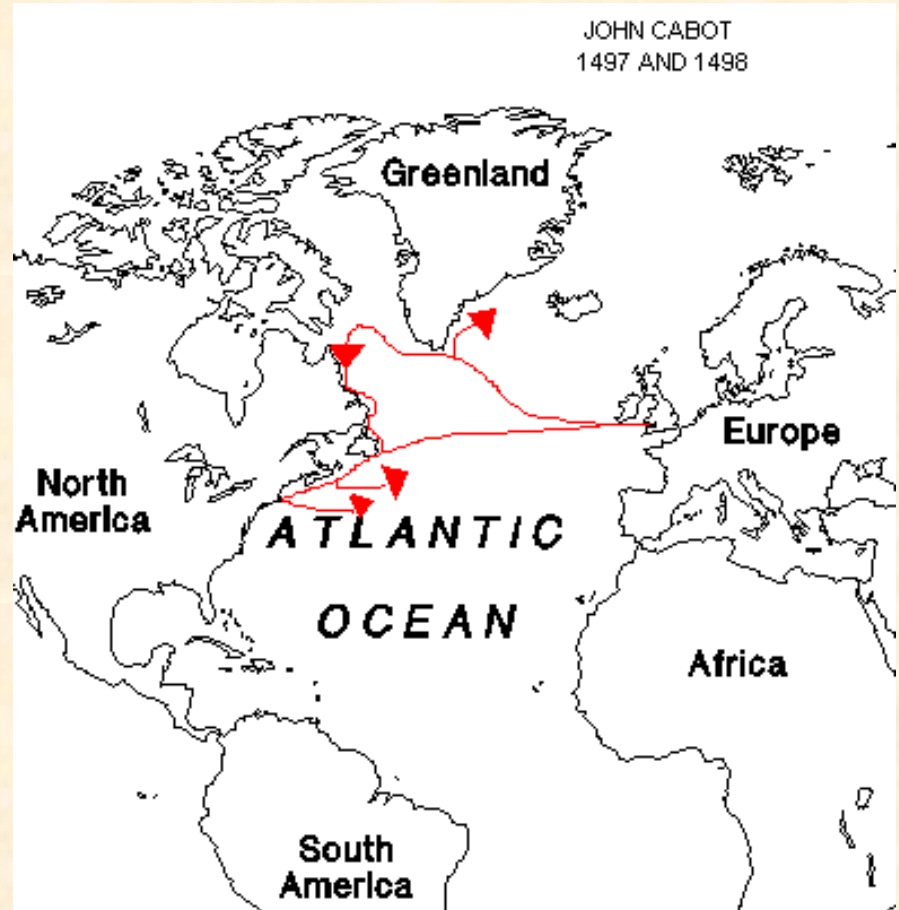
**CABOT'S LANDFALL  
IN THE NEW WORLD  
L'ARRIVÉE DE CABOT  
AU NOUVEAU-MONDE**

In early May, 1497, John Cabot, (Giovanni Caboto), a Venetian citizen bearing letters patent from Henry VII sailed from Bristol in the MATTHEW to seek a western passage to Asia. On June 24, he made land somewhere on the east coast of Canada. Although the sources do not allow unequivocal identification of the site, local tradition records Cape North as the landfall. From this, the first official English voyage of exploration in the Western Ocean, derived Britain's subsequent claims in the New World and the beginnings of her overseas empire.

Au début de mai 1497, le Vénitien Jean Cabot, (Giovanni Caboto), à qui le roi Henry VII avait accordé des lettres patentes, partit de Bristol sur le MATTHEW en quête d'une route maritime vers l'Asie. Le 24 juin, il aborda la côte atlantique du Canada. Les sources historiques ne permettent pas de préciser le point exact de son arrivée, mais la tradition prétend qu'il s'agit du Cap du Nord. Ce premier voyage officiel d'exploration donna lieu à des revendications anglaises en Amérique et marqua le début de l'Empire britannique outremer.

Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada.  
Commission des lieux et monuments historiques du Canada

Government of Canada - Gouvernement du Canada



# Does Middle English “end”?

- Diachronically, no...nothing severe like the Norman Conquest as a historical event
- Grammatically, sort of...after Chancery Standard and printing
- Phonologically, yes... the Great Vowel Shift