IV
Anglo-Norman Literature

In an age when the song and recitation of the minstrel were the almost universal entertainment of the upper classes at meals and in the evening and indeed at all times when they could not find their recreation out of doors, literature was well-nigh indispensable. Since, as we have already seen, the language of the higher classes for more than two hundred years after the Norman Conquest was either wholly or mainly French, any literature that would be intelligible to them would have to be in that language. Naturally the whole body of French literature was at their disposal, but a nation seldom remains for any length of time solely dependent upon foreign sources even for its pleasure. It is not surprising, therefore, to find early in the twelfth century French poets in England, attracted no doubt by an aristocracy freely spending its newly acquired wealth. During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries much that is important in Old French literature was written in England. The dialect in which it was written is known as Anglo-Norman, and this body of writings as Anglo-Norman literature.

Patronage is the life blood of court poets. Where there is generous patronage there is sure to be literature. The Conqueror himself is said to have been indifferent to poets; he may well have been completely occupied with the practical matters of conquest and administration. His successor, William Rufus, was without soul or intellect. But with the accession in the year 1100 of Henry I, the Conqueror’s youngest son, literary activity at the court makes its appearance. It is probably not so much the result of his own encouragement—the nickname Beauclerc, which he enjoyed, seems not to have been wholly deserved—as of the fact that he was twice married, both times to women of literary tastes. His first wife Matilda (Queen Maud), though English born, seems to have cultivated French poetry with enthusiasm. The poet Guy of Amiens was her almoner. “Her generosity becoming universally known,” says William of Malmesbury, “crowds of scholars, equally famed for verse and for singing, came over.”

1 For a readable and admirably clear survey of the more important writings in Anglo-Norman see E. Walberg, Quelques aspects de la littérature anglo-normande (Paris, 1936); for a comprehensive list of Anglo-Norman texts, with bibliographical annotations, J. Vising, Anglo-Norman Language & Literature (London, 1923); and for a suggestive analysis of the Norman character, Gaston Paris, La Littérature normande avant l’annexion (Paris, 1899). Those who wish to savor the more important Anglo-Norman texts mentioned in this chapter will often find selections in Paget Toynbee, Specimens of Old French (Oxford, 1892), P. Studer and E. Waters, Historical French Reader (Oxford, 1924), and in the Chrestomathies of Bartsch, Constans, etc. The publications of the Anglo-Norman Text Society (since 1939) are making available a number of longer texts.
of Louvain, Henry’s second wife, whom he married in 1121, is even better known as a patron. She had a poet named David who composed a rimed history of her husband’s achievements, which is lost. We know of it through Gaimar, who boasts that he knew more tales than David ever knew or than Adelaide had in books. For her Philippe de Thaün wrote his Bestiaire (infra) and Benedeit his Voyage de St. Brendan (p. 139). Nor were Henry’s queens the only patrons of letters at his court. Gaimar’s Estorie des Engles is dedicated to “Custance la gentil,” wife of Ralph Fitz Gilbert, while Samson de Nanteuil translated the Proverbs of Solomon into French verse for Adelaide de Condé. During the troubled years of Stephen’s reign and his contest with Matilda poetry seems to have suffered a decline, although during this period Robert, Earl of Gloucester, the natural son of Henry I and one of the greatest patrons of letters in England, was generous in his encouragement of scholars and literary men. With the accession of Henry II and his queen, the famous Eleanor of Aquitaine, the English court became a veritable center of scholarly and literary activity. Henry II’s own amazing energy was not confined to judicial reform and administrative reorganization, for which history remembers him, but extended over a wide range of intellectual interests. More than a score of books bear dedications to him, from Adelard of Bath’s treatise On the Astrolabe to the Lais of Marie de France. Eleanor is frequently mentioned in the verses of the troubadours and it was to her that Wace presented his Roman de Brut. It was under such auspices that Anglo-Norman literature had its beginnings. Its continuation in the century that follows was made possible by similar encouragement and support from the aristocratic classes.

The Norman temperament was essentially practical. Neither romantic sentiment, nor mysticism, nor lyric cry have much part in the literature of Normandy or Norman England. But curiosity, it would seem, needed constantly to be gratified, and themes of a religious or moral nature are very numerous and imply a wide appeal. Viewed as a whole, Anglo-Norman literature is prevailingly moral and edifying, and relatively poor in works frankly romantic and fictional. This is well illustrated in the poems of the earliest Anglo-Norman poet known to us, Philippe de Thaün. His first work was a Comput (before 1120), a verse treatise on the calendar and the ways of determining the movable festivals of the Church, to which he added certain symbolical interpretations. His Bestiary is a type of poem about which we shall have more to say later, in which highly fanciful characteristics of animals are made the basis of a rather forced moral. He

Composed also a *Lapidary*, if not several, dealing with the characteristics and virtues of precious stones.\(^3\) There are numerous other lapidaries in Anglo-Norman,\(^4\) all of which go back to an eleventh-century Latin poem called *De Gemmis*, by Marbode, Bishop of Rennes, which enjoyed an immense vogue throughout the Middle Ages. Of similar didactic aim are the *Distichs of Cato*, translated into Anglo-Norman no less than three times, and a rather uninspired poem of 3000 lines called *La Petite Philosophie*,\(^5\) a compendium of geography and cosmography.

There is a grain of truth in the statement that an uninteresting biography has never been written, and the English court seems early to have been attracted by this type of narrative. The lost poem of David on the achievements of Henry I has already been mentioned. Although Henry II at times initiated literary work, we may be quite sure he did not order the *Vie de Saint Thomas le Martyr*,\(^6\) which was written shortly after the murder, by Garnier (more properly Guernes), a clerk of Pont-Sainte-Maxence, who came to England in 1174 expressly to collect his material on the spot and finish his poem. About 1170 Denis Piramus composed *La Vie Seint Edmund le Rei* in more than 4000 lines of eight-syllable verse.\(^7\) At the time he was probably a monk of Bury St. Edmunds, though his earlier life had been spent, as he tells us, amidst the follies of the court, where he had written “serventeis, chanceunettes, rimes, saluz entre les drues e les drus.” In the thirteenth century, at a date now generally thought to be about 1250 or shortly thereafter a life of the famous archbishop was written, apparently by no less a person than the celebrated chronicler Matthew Paris.\(^8\) At approximately the same time (c. 1245) Henry of Avranches wrote *La Estorie de Seint Aedward le Rei* in 4680 lines and dedicated it to the Queen, for which (and a life of St. George) he received £10 from the Exchequer.\(^9\) The most remarkable of Anglo-Norman biographies is the anonymous *Histoire de Guillaume le Maréchal*,\(^10\) the celebrated Earl of Pembroke, running to some 19,000 lines. It was written at the command of the Earl’s son and is not only important for its historical accuracy but is remarkable for its life-like picture and vivid narrative.

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\(^3\) Philippe de Thaun’s poems may be read in E.Mall, *Li Campoz Philipe de Thaun* (Strassburg, 1873), E.Walberg, *Le Bestiaire de Philippe de Thaun* (Lund, 1900), and Studer and Evans (as below), pp. 201–259.


\(^6\) Ed. E.Walberg (Lund, 1922; and again, 1936, in CFMA, 77). For another Anglo-Norman life of Becket see *La Vie de Thomas Becket par Beneit, poème anglo-normand du XIIe siècle*, ed. Börje Schlyter (Lund, 1941; *Études Romanes de Lund*, IV).

\(^7\) The best edition is that of Hilding Kjellman (Göteborg, 1935).

\(^8\) A.T.Baker, “La Vie de Saint Edmond...”, *Romania*, LV (1929). 332–381. It was dedicated to Isabelle of Arundel. The MS in which the life is found, the property of the Duke of Portland at Walbeck Abbey, contains thirteen Anglo-French saints’ lives. For list, with the places where they have been printed, see A.T.Baker in *Romania*, LXVI (1940). 49n.


It was in works of history that Anglo-Norman writers scored their greatest success, surpassing in both Latin and French the productions on the Continent at the same period. It is not difficult to understand the popularity of historical subjects at the English court. The conquerors had secured control of a new country, and pride in their achievement stimulated a natural desire to know more about the land over which they had become the rulers. Perhaps they also enjoyed the feeling that this land had had as illustrious a past as that of the kings of France and that their own record was worthy of regard. At any rate it is the history of England and of Normandy, not of Europe or antiquity, that they were interested in. About 1150 Geoffrey Gaimar, attached in some way to Ralph Fitz Gilbert of Lincolnshire, wrote for “dame Custance,” his wife, a verse chronicle in two parts. The first was an *Histoire des Bretons*, that is, of the Celts in Britain, and was a working over in French of Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia Regum Britanniae* (see below, p. 168). It is now lost and we know about it only from the opening lines of the second part. This was the *Estorie des Engles*. It consists of some 6500 lines and except for about 800 lines at the beginning, which tell the story of Havelok, later to be made the subject of an admirable English romance, it is a history of the English based on the *Old English Annals* with a few added episodes. Gaimar is not a gifted writer. His narrative, except on rather rare occasions, does not rise above the factual and commonplace. When he can escape from the impediments of fact and tell a story, as in the Havelok and one or two other episodes, interest is better sustained. But he betrays no marks of individuality, shows no prejudices, enthusiasms, or opinions. He treats conqueror and conquered alike, so that we cannot tell whether he was of Norman or Saxon descent. Most serious of all, he lacks the imaginative eye for vivid detail which his contemporary Wace has, and his work was valued only when it presented material not otherwise available in French. This is doubtless the reason that in all manuscripts Gaimar’s first part is replaced by Wace’s *Roman de Brut*, which covered the same ground. There were several other adaptations of Geoffrey


12 The *Roman de Brut*, since it occupies a place in the development of the Arthurian legend, will be touched on in chapter VIII, below. Wace was a Norman, who spent his early life at Caen and his last years as a prebendary of Bayeux; he does not belong, strictly speaking, to Anglo-Norman literature. But his *Roman de Brut*, on the testimony of Layamon, was presented to Queen Eleanor, and his second long poem, the *Roman de Rou*, a history of the dukes of Normandy, was begun about 1160 under the patronage of Henry II. Unfortunately he was not allowed to finish this undertaking; for some reason Henry replaced him, after he had written more than 11,000 lines, by a Maistre Beneeit, whom some identify with Benoît de Sainte-More. In addition to the two long poems just mentioned he wrote lives in verse of St. Nicholas, St. George, and St. Margaret, and a poem of 1804 lines on *La Conception Nostre Dame*. The last named enjoyed considerable popularity and found its way eventually into the *Cursor Mundi*. Wace is thought to have died shortly after 1174, at the age of seventy or more. The *Roman de Rou* is edited by H. Andresen (2V, Heilbronn, 1877–79). The latest edition of the *Vie de saint Nicholas* is that of E. Ronsjö (Lund, 1942; *Etudes romanes de Lunds, V*). For the *Sainte Marguerite* see the edition of Eliz. A. Francis (Paris, 1932; G.FMA, 71). The *Saint George* and the *Conception* are in V. Luzarche, *La Vie de la Vierge Marie* (Tours, 1859).
of Monmouth in Anglo-Norman which need not be mentioned. Of more importance is the fact that recent events were recorded in the same manner as the older history. In 1173 Henry’s sons, supported by the Scottish king, revolted against their father. The following year Henry’s forces took the Scottish king prisoner in Northumberland and put an end to the revolt. The events of this campaign were witnessed by Jordan Fantosme, who had been a pupil in Paris of the celebrated Gilbert de la Porée and was later secretary to Henry of Blois, Bishop of Winchester. His *Chronicle* of 2000 lines gives an account, full of picturesque detail, of the events of this campaign. Slightly later (c. 1225) we have an anonymous account, written in retrospect, of Henry II’s conquest of Ireland. As late as the fourteenth century verse history is still occasionally written in French, although such matter is now more commonly in prose. Peter Langtoft’s *Chronicle*\(^{13}\) covers the period from the destruction of Troy to 1307 in 10,000 lines, and was early translated into English by Robert of Brunne (cf. p. 204).

The body of Anglo-Norman religious literature of every sort is very large. Mention has been made above of Samson de Nanteuil’s translation into nearly 12,000 lines of verse of the *Proverbs of Solomon* (c. 1140). Early in the twelfth century the Psalter was twice turned into French, as were other parts of the Bible later in the century. At the end of the century a poet named Chardry versified the legends of *Barlaam and Josaphat* and the *Seven Sleepers*, and debated various moral questions in the *Petit Plet*, the three making a total of more than 6500 lines.\(^{14}\) A great number of saints’ lives appeared throughout the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. We have mentioned for their biographical interest those of Edward the Confessor, Thomas à Becket, and Edmund, Archbishop of Canterbury. Similar in character but of special interest is the *Voyage of St. Brendan*\(^{15}\) (1121) by an unknown Benedeit, mentioned above as one of the works dedicated to Queen Adelaide. It tells the story, first found in the Latin *Navigatio Sancti Brendani*, of an Irish abbot named Brendan and some monks who accompany him on a quest in search of the other world. In the course of their seven-year journey they witness many marvels and are eventually rewarded by a vision of paradise. It is notable as the first introduction into popular literature in England of the Celtic spirit of the marvelous.\(^{16}\) In the first half of the thirteenth century, the celebrated Bishop of Lincoln, Robert Grosseteste (d. 1253), wrote an allegorical poem which he called *Le Château d’Amour*\(^{17}\) It ranges all

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\(^{13}\) Edited by Thomas Wright (1866–68) for the Rolls Series.

\(^{14}\) All three were edited by John Koch in the *Allfranzösische Bibliothek*, Vol. I (Heilbronn, 1879). Josophat, the son of a Hindu king, is converted to Christianity by the hermit Barlaam. The *Seven Sleepers* is the story of seven youths who slept for 362 years and awoke in the reign of Theodosius.


\(^{16}\) Cf. Walberg, *Quelques aspects*, p. 90.

the way from a debate of the Four Daughters of God, after which Christ descends from Heaven into a castle which is the body of the Virgin Mary, to a discussion of the attributes of Christ and His final judgment of the world, distributing to each according to his deserts the joys of Heaven and the pains of Hell.

Several works of great length and encyclopedic character, dating from the middle of the thirteenth century, are still unedited. Robert of Gretham’s *Miroir* or *Les Évangiles des Domnées* (more than 20,000 lines) translates the Sunday gospels with explanations of their meaning. The same author seems to have written a second long poem called the *Corset*, a compendium of popular theology. The poems are dedicated to an unidentified Alain and his wife, to whom Robert served as chaplain. Of similar scope is the *Lumière as Lais* (14,000 lines) of Peter of Peckham, adapted in part from the *Elucidarium* of Honorius of Autun (or Augustodunensis), and the *Manual des Péchés* (11,000 lines) by William of Wadington (?), which was translated into English in Robert of Brunne’s *Handlyng Synne* (cf. p. 204). Around the turn of the fourteenth century Nicole Bozon, a Franciscan, composed a miscellaneous collection of *Contes Moralisés*, and wrote a number of other works in both prose and verse, not all of which have been identified.

Although religious literature and works intended to convey useful knowledge constitute the largest part of Anglo-Norman literature, there is also a fair number of pieces in which no other end is contemplated than entertainment. These are, as is to be expected, mostly romances, although some

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20 This has not been printed; in one MS it is dated 1267. For an account of the author, MSS, sources, etc., see M.Dominica Legge, “Pierre de Peckham and His *Lumière as Lais*,” *MLR*, XXIV (1929). 37–47; 153–171. Peckham (the name occurs also as Pecchame and Feccham) is the author also of a *Vie de Saint Richard*, written c. 1270 for the Countess of Arundel (ed. A.T.Baker, *Revue des langues romanes*, LIII (1910). 243–396), and *Le Secré de Secrez* (2383 lines), written sometime after the *Lumière as Lais*. It is edited by Oliver A.Beckerlegge (Oxford, 1944; *Anglo-Norman Text Soc.*, No. 5). The latter is a version of the *Secreta Secretorum*, of which there were three in Anglo-Norman and several in Continental French. For English versions see below, pp. 296 and 302 (*Dicts and Sayings of the Philosophers*).


23 It should be mentioned here, that the religious drama is represented by the twelfth-century Anglo-Norman *Adam* (see p. 276), a *Resurrection* of the early thirteenth century (ed Jean G.Wright for *CFMA* in 1931), and a recently discovered text (see T.A.Jenkins and J.M.Manly, “La Seinte Resureccion,” Oxford, 1943; *Anglo-Norman Text Soc.*, IV).
fabliaux and an occasional satirical piece like Le Jongleur d’Ely give us a welcome glimpse of the English court in its lighter moments. Mention has been made above of the nearly 800 lines devoted to the story of Havelok the Dane at the beginning of Gaimar’s Estorie des Engles. The same story in slightly longer form is told separately as a lay by an anonymous poet writing about 1130–40. It shows us the interest which the ruling class took in whatever was thought to concern the earlier history of the island, whether English, Danish, or Celtic. Among several other Anglo-Norman lays, Amis and Amiloun enjoyed perhaps the greatest popularity in the Middle Ages as a story of friendship put to a very great test. It should be remembered that the supreme author of such short romantic poems, Marie de France, lived at the English court and translated another of her works, a collection of fables, from English, as she herself tells us. The earliest and most famous and in some ways the best of the longer French romances written in England is the Tristan of Thomas, composed about 1170. It is one of the two earliest representatives of the lost French romance from which all subsequent treatments of the Tristan and Iseult story in literature descend. Sometime before the end of the century another Anglo-Frenchman, Robert de Boron, wrote at least two romances on Arthurian themes, Joseph d’Arimathie or the Estoire du Graal, which in the four thousand lines that are preserved tells the story of the origin of the Holy Grail, and Merlin, of which only 400 lines have come down to us. About 1180 another poet named Thomas, who cannot be identified with the author of the Tristan, told the story of Horn, better known to modern readers in the English romance King Horn (cf. p. 175). Two long romances on pseudo-classical themes are the work of Hugh of Rutland. One, Ipomedon (c. 1185), resembles the story of Guy of Warwick in the hero’s efforts to prove himself worthy of the lady he loves. The other, Protheselaus (c. 1190), relates the quarrel of two brothers, sons of Ipomedon, and their subsequent reconciliation. Each of these romances is more than 10,000 lines long. Of similar length and approximately the same date is Thomas of Kent’s Roman de Toute Chevalerie, a story of Alexander the Great, while the longest of all the Anglo-Norman romances, the anonymous Waldef (22,000 lines) of the end of the twelfth century, relates the tragic struggle of an English king to regain his throne, and the avenging of his death by his sons. Both the Roman de Toute Chevalerie and the Waldef still remain in manuscript. A romance of Fouke Fitz Warin in verse exists only in a later prose redaction. It would seem that the writing of romances in French died out in England with the spread of English to the upper classes in the thirteenth century. Two, however, were produced in the first half of the century on subjects which were destined to enjoy

24 There are those who believe that he was not an Englishman. See the discussion of W.A. Nitze in the Manly Anniversary Studies (Chicago, 1923), pp. 300–314. For a more acceptable position see the same author’s “The Home of Robert de Boron,” MP, XL (1942).113–116.

25 The Latin Waldef has been edited by R. Imelmann, Johannes Brami’s Historia Regis Waldei (Bonn, 1912; Banner Studien, IV).

26 The prose version is edited by Louis Brandin (Paris, 1930; CFMA, 63).
the greatest popularity when they were later treated in English—Gui de Warewic and Boeve de Haumtone. Some others probably once existed but are now lost, such as a Richard Cœur de Lion which is several times referred to in the English romance of that name.\textsuperscript{27}

Anglo-Norman literature had passed its crest by about 1250,\textsuperscript{28} although in diminishing amounts works in French continued to be written in England until the end of the fourteenth century. Even John Gower, who holds a modest but respectable place in English poetry, could write as late as 1376 one of his long poems, the Mirour de l’Ommme (30,000 lines), in French.\textsuperscript{29} Slightly more than four hundred texts, ranging from short lyrics to pieces of staggering length, are known today and testify to the place which French once held in the culture of the English upper classes.

\textsuperscript{27} The romances mentioned in this paragraph will be found in the following editions: E. Kölbing, Amis and Amiloun (Heilbronn, 1884); J. Bédier, Le Roman de Tristan par Thomas (2v, Paris, 1903–5; SATF); for an English translation see R. S. Loomis, The Romance of Tristram and Ysolt by Thomas of Britain (1931); W. A. Nitze, Robert de Boron: Le Roman de l’Estoire dou Graal (Paris, 1927; CFMA, 57), containing also the fragment of the Merlin; earlier edition by F. Michel (Bordeaux, 1841); R. Brede and E. M. Stengel, Das anglonormannische Lied vom wackern Ritter Horn (Marburg, 1883; Ausgaben und Abhandlungen, VIII); E. Kölbing and E. Koschwitz, Ipomedon (Breslau, 1889); F. Kluckow, Hue de Rotelande: Protheselaus (Göttingen, 1924); A. Ewert, Guide Warewic (2v, Paris, 1932–3; CFMA, 74–75); A. Summing, Der anglonormannische Boeve de Haumont (Halle, 1899).

\textsuperscript{28} Walter of Bibbesworth, the author of two whimsical poems, is the author of a famous Traité (1240–50) written to teach French to the children of Dionysia de Munchensy. On the poems (now BM Add. MS 46919, formerly Phillipps MS 8336) see Miss Legge’s Anglo-Norman Literature, pp. 348–9, on the Traité Alexander Bell, “Notes on Walter de Bibbesworth’s Treatise,” PQ, XLI (1962). 361–372, and Albert C. Baugh, “The Date of Walter of Bibbesworth’s Traité,” Festschrift für Walther Fischer (Heidelberg, 1959), pp. 21–33.
