

The Evolution of the English Language (from Chaucer to Shakespeare)

1. Geoffrey Chaucer

Geoffrey Chaucer (approx. 1340 – 1400) was an English poet and author. He has been called the "father of English literature" and the "father of English poetry". He was the first writer to be buried in "Poets' Corner", in Westminster Abbey. Chaucer was also a philosopher and astronomer. He had a career as a civil servant, working as a bureaucrat, courtier, diplomat, and member of parliament.

He is seen as crucial in legitimising the literary use of "Middle English" (spoken in England from about 1100 to 1400) when the dominant literary languages in England were still Anglo-Saxon, Norman French and Latin. Almost two thousand English words are first attested to Chaucer.



Here is a snippet from his poem "The Wife of Bath's Tale":

THE WIFE OF BATH'S TALE

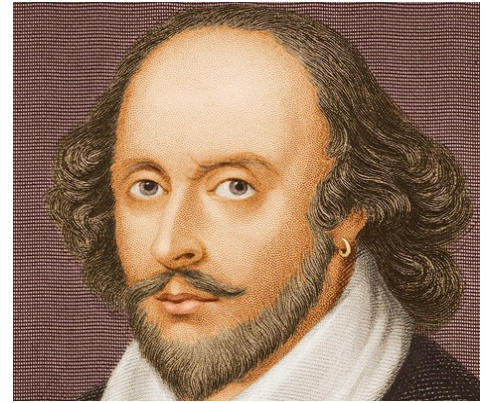
In th'olde dayes of the King Arthour,
Of which that Britons speken greet honour,
Al was this land fulfild of faerie.
The elf-queene, with hir joly compaignie,
Daunced ful ofte in many a grene mede.
This was the olde opinion, as I rede;
I speke of manie hundred yeres ago.
But now kan no man se none elves mo,
For now the grete charitee and prayeres
Of limitours and othere hooly freres,
That serchen every lond and every strem,
As thikke as motes in the sonne-beem,
Blessinge halles, chambres, kichenes, boures,
Citees, burghes, castels, hye toures,
Thropes, bernes, shipnes, daieries—
This maketh that ther ben no faeries.
For ther as wont to walken was an elf,
Ther walketh now the limitour himself,
In undermeles and in morweninges,
And seyth his matins and his hooly thinges
As he gooth in his limitacioun.
Wommen may go now sauffy up and down.
In every bussh or, under every tree
Ther is noon oother incubus but he,
And he ne wol doon hem but dishonour.

Here is a “translation” of another part of the poem:

Middle English	Modern English
I woot wel Abraham was an holy man,	I know well that Abraham was a holy man,
And Iacob eek, as ferforth as I can;	and Jacob as well, as far as I know,
And ech of hem hadde wyves mo than two;	and each of them had more than two wives;
And many another holy man also.	and many other holy men also.
Whan saugh ye ever, in any maner age,	When have you seen that in any time,
That hye God defended mariage	That great God forbade marriage
By expres word? I pray you, telleth me;	explicitly? Tell me, I pray you;
Or wher comanded he virginitee?	Or where did he order people to be virgins?

2) William Shakespeare

William Shakespeare (1564 – 1616) was an English playwright, poet and actor. He is regarded as the greatest writer in the English language. His works consist of 39 plays, 154 sonnets and 3 long poems. His plays have been translated into every major language and are performed more often than those of any other playwright. He remains the most influential writer in the English language.



Shakespeare was born and raised in Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire. At the age of 18, he married Anne Hathaway, and they had three children: Susanna, Hamnet and Judith. As a young man, he had a successful career in London as an actor and writer. At the age of 49, he retired and returned to Stratford, where he died three years later. There is little information about his private life, and this has stimulated considerable speculation about his physical appearance, his sexuality and his religious beliefs.

Shakespeare's comedies and histories are regarded as some of the best works produced in these genres. He also wrote some tragedies, including "Hamlet", "Romeo and Juliet" and "Macbeth", all considered to be among the finest works in the English language. The language spoken in Shakespeare's time is known as "Early Modern English" and was spoken in England from about 1400 to 1600. Here is a snippet from his play "Macbeth":

Macbeth. Bring them before us.
To be thus is nothing, but° to be safely thus—
Our fears in° Banquo stick deep,
And in his royalty of nature reigns that
Which would° be feared. 'Tis much he dares;
And, to° that dauntless temper° of his mind,
He hath a wisdom that doth guide his valor
To act in safety. There is none but he
Whose being I do fear: and under him
My genius is rebuked,° as it is said
Mark Antony's was by Cæsar. He chid the sisters,
When first they put the name of King upon me,
And bade them speak to him; then prophetlike
They hailed him father to a line of kings.
Upon my head they placed a fruitless crown
And put a barren scepter in my gripe,°
Thence to be wrenched with an unlineal hand,
No son of mine succeeding. If 't be so,
For Banquo's issue have I filed° my mind;
For them the gracious Duncan have I murdered;
Put rancors° in the vessel of my peace
Only for them, and mine eternal jewel°
Given to the common enemy of man,°
To make them kings, the seeds of Banquo kings!