MIDDLE ENGLISH

1066 - 1500
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… basically, a whole four and a half centuries full of chaotic social and political upheaval …
HISTORY

- ...
  which ends around 1500 after the **printing press** is introduced to London in 1470.

- A dialect called Chancery Standard gained dominance for most official purposes.
Significant literature from this time included chivalric romances, allegorical poems, religious plays, and more secular literature such as folk ballads.
LITERATURE

Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* introduced iambic pentameter, the rhyming couplet, and other Italian conventions to English.
Other notable works include: Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (Anonymous), Piers Plowman (Langland), and Le Morte d'Arthur (Malory).
MEDIEVAL THEMES

- courtly love
- chivalry
- devotion to God
- virtues and sins
ARCHAIC LETTERS

- Æ æ Ash
- Ð ð Eth
- ȝ ȝogh
- þ þ Thorn
- þ þynn
GAWAIN READING

The grene kny3t vpon grounde gray3pely hym dresses
A lised blut with þe hed, þe lere he discouere3
His nswþelych lokke3 he layd ouer his croun
Let þe fayn þe speak to þe nate scheue.
Gawaine his son hy3t
Þe bitt of Pat þe bitt of þe blod bray
Nawp3er falter
Bot stybly he start
L33t to his luþly hed & re3t
Kynn
Early Modern English and The Elizabethan Era

1500 - 1650
Early Modern English
Early Modern English

- The advent of the printing press in London in 1470 established the Chancery Standard dialect of English as the national standard.
Modern readers of English are generally able to understand Early Modern English, though with some difficulties arising from changes in grammar, word meaning, and spelling.
Early Modern English

- English spelling was finally (mostly) standardized in this time period, but it did not happen overnight.
- Unfortunately, since this era was filled with political and social upheaval, mass migrations after the Black Death …
Early Modern English

... and an exaggerated attempt to further distinguish the "English accent" from that of the French, many peculiarities (i.e. contradictions) in English spelling and pronunciation were standardized into record at this time.
Closing off the era of the Tudors, Elizabeth was crowned queen in 1558. Her reign is considered the start of the golden age of English history typified by national pride, classical ideals, international expansion, military might, and a much-welcomed renaissance of the arts.
In this peaceful era, the arts flourished and culture bloomed.

Significant writers of this time include William Shakespeare, Francis Bacon, Ben Jonson, Christopher Marlowe, Sir Philip Sidney, and Edmund Spencer.
Under King James, the golden age of Elizabethan literature and drama continued.

The Authorised King James Version of the Bible (1611) and Shakespeare's collected works (published posthumously in 1623) are the best examples of the English language from this era and remain the top 2 bestsellers to this day.
The translators of the King James Version of the Bible intentionally preserved archaic pronouns and verb endings that had already begun to fall out of spoken use. This enabled the English translators to convey the distinction between the 1st, 2nd and 3rd person singular and plural verb forms of the original Hebrew and Greek sources.
Informal singular:  
thou, thee, thy, thine

Formal singular and plural:  
ye, you, your, yours
Common Themes of Elizabethan Drama

- Revenge
- Sensationalism
- Melodrama
- Vengeance
- the Human Condition
William Shakespeare

... stands out in this period as a poet and playwright as yet unsurpassed due to sheer giftedness and versatility.

Though most of his plays met with great success, it is in his later years that he wrote what have been considered his greatest works: Romeo and Juliet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth, Antony and Cleopatra, The Tempest, and of course Hamlet.
Shakespeare wrote *The Tragical History of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* between 1599 and 1601.
Hamlet

- It was first performed in 1602 and first released in print in 1603.
- The story itself is set in Denmark during the 14th or 15th century, but culturally it has a very 17th century vibe.
HAMLET

• What is the play about? …

• In a way, that’s been debated for centuries.
HAMLET

• It’s a good play for anyone who is having trouble figuring things out.
• It’s also a good play for anyone who isn’t having trouble figuring things out – yet.
HAMLET

It’s about a young man called on to exact revenge for the murder of his father. Unfortunately …

• The murderer is the king.
• The source of the information is a ghost.
• The revenge must be honorable.
• There are spies everywhere.
• The title character might be insane.
HAMLET

• It is Shakespeare's most famous play about Shakespeare's most famous character, and it contains Shakespeare's most famous lines.

• There exists more literary criticism and analysis on Hamlet than any other single piece of English Literature, so there’s no shortage of educated opinion on the play.
Hamlet depicts a conflict over what to do when an orderly state is actually internally corrupt and there seems to be no civilized answer.
If you remove the actual action of *Hamlet* (when the body count starts to skyrocket in Act V), the rest of the play is really just made up of soliloquies, asides, conversations, and mullings-over, which – far from being boring – are the real meat of the play.

They're also the real meat of human beings. *Hamlet* is significant mostly because it was the first play to really pull that off successfully.
BIG IDEAS IN HAMLET

- Madness
- Revenge
- Mortality
- Corruption
- Certainty
- Deceit
- Sexuality
- Gender
- Family
- Religion
- Art / Theater