



Oral traditions to written expressions: The evolution of English literature before the anglo-saxon invasion

R Dewangan

Guest Teaching Assistant, Department of English, Naveen Government College, Rampur, Korba, Chhattisgarh, India

Abstract

Since ancient times, the English language has been open to incorporating new words and expressions, and this process is now ongoing. Perhaps as a result of its adaptability to these lexical invasions, English has adopted the moniker "Lingua Franca." Geoffrey Chaucer is one of the numerous thinkers who have attempted to alter the English language since the Norman Conquest. Geographical and intellectual advancements as well as an increase in the number of foreign terms incorporated into the English language throughout the sixteenth century marked Britain's transition to a uniquely modern language by the time of Shakespeare. This study aims to concentrate on the elements of new word additions, writing style modifications, and the search for the terms' origins. The essay will also provide a brief explanation of further developments that occurred in England throughout the Elizabethan era.

Keywords: English literature, geoffrey chaucer, elizabethan era, war of roses, edmund spenser, philip sidney, william shakespeare, francis bacon, english language

Introduction

Up to the Anglo-Saxon invasion, practically all of England's literature, which had a lengthy history, was oral in character. As the country's cultural and linguistic identity was shaped over several centuries, English as a language started to evolve. Iceland and the Vikings, Latin and French, German and Celtic, as well as other regional linguistic, cultural, and social influences, all contributed to the development of the language that became English ^[1]. But the English of the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes is not the same as the English of today. The language had experienced several changes throughout the years, and its style eventually came to resemble the present one. Geoffrey Chaucer was the first person to live before the Elizabethan period, and he is regarded as the first modern English poet before Shakespeare and the first person to discover the English language (1350-1400). He made a substantial contribution to English because, according to many historians and critics of succeeding generations, his writings included the first complete articulation of the English meaning. English was not the only language used in Chaucer's day in England; the courtiers and clergy also continued to speak French and Latin, respectively. Before the Statute of Pleading (1362) entirely supplanted English with French, French was also employed in some legal proceedings. The majority of philosophers and historians believe that the Statute of 1362 represents the influence of the English language on French, just as the year 1066 is regarded as the start of the French language's enormous influence on England ^[2]. Chaucer's works, among which Canterbury Tales is regarded as his masterpiece, and his role in the evolution of the English language earned the century the moniker "Age of Chaucer." Following Geoffrey Chaucer's death and before to the Tudor dynasty, England was once more in a dark period. However, with the beginning of the Elizabethan era, which came to be regarded as the golden age, England reclaimed its position as the most powerful country of that era.

Background

The War of Roses, a series of civil conflicts waged for the crown, began in England following the Hundred Years War (1337–1457). The 30-year conflict caused political unrest throughout the nation. The War of the Roses ended in the year 1485. Some significant events that took place during the last stages of the War of the Roses altered not only the perception of England but also that of the entire world:

1. Johann Gutenberg invented the printing press in 1456;
2. Caxton's printing press was founded in Westminster in 1476;
3. Henry VIII's reign in 1485 established the Tudor dynasty;
4. Christopher Columbus discovered America in 1492;
5. Vasco da Gama discovered the sea route to India in 1498; and
6. Queen Elizabeth I took power in 1558.

In 1558, Mary I's twenty-five-year-old step-sister Elizabeth took the crown upon her death. She was able to restore Crown power over the Church and establish a Protestant-style basis throughout the land thanks to a mix of talent and good fortune. Because of Queen Elizabeth I's long life and the existence of her political and ecclesiastical settlements, 1558 is seen as a turning point in English history ^[3]. In addition to political stability, the era saw a decline in the protracted conflict between Catholics and Protestants since Elizabeth's court was secular in character, unlike that of previous queens. These other factors also contributed to the period's internal harmony in the nation. However, she punished certain Catholics and favored Protestants throughout Elizabeth I's reign owing to political necessity and council recommendations. In actuality, many Protestants moved to London in search of a safer and better living. A global mindset brought about by England's overall wealth caused a shift in society, culture, individualism, intellectualism, travel, and other areas. In addition, there has been a noticeable shift in language and literature.

Several Notable Authors from the Elizabethan Period Include

Some of the greatest literary names in the world may be found in the literature of the English Renaissance. Shakespeare, Marlowe, Webster, and Jonson were among the dramatists of the era; Spenser, Milton, Sidney, and Donne were among the poets; Bacon, Nashe, Hooker, and Browne were among the prose writers; and most importantly, the Bible was published in 1611 in its official form ^[1]. Among the notable authors of the Elizabethan period are:

Edmund Spenser (1552–99): One of the greatest poets of the Elizabethan era, Edmund Spenser, is well-known for his lengthy allegorical poem, *The Faerie Queen*. We don't know much about Spenser's early years other than that he was born in East Smithfield. He attended London's Merchant Tailor's School for his early schooling before continuing his studies at Cambridge. In addition to writing several poems of his own, he read the classics and was friends with notable Italian poets. Following his departure from Cambridge, Spenser traveled to the north of England in an attempt to find love and document his sorrow at the death of Rosalind in the *Shepherd's Calendar*. He returned to London with his poetry in hand, as advised by his buddy. He finished *Shepherd's Calendar* while at Leicester House, where he also met Sidney and all of the queen's favorite people. He was appointed secretary to Lord Grey, the representative for the queen in Ireland, in 1580. He received a large estate including Kilcolman Castle when the Irish uprising was put down. In 1596, Spenser authored *View of the State of Ireland* following his sixteen years in Ireland. He completed three *Faerie Queen* books in Kilcolman as well. After Ralieggh showed Queen Elizabeth his poem in 1589, the queen granted him a fifty-pound monthly stipend based on the popularity of the first three volumes of *Faerie Queen*. After a few years, the Irish rebellions stormed the Kilcolman stronghold, where Spenser narrowly avoided death. After his return to England, he passed away in a Westminster inn in 1599 ^[4].

Philip Sidney (1554-1586): Sidney, Sir Philip was born in Kent, England, in 1554. His uncle, the Earl of Leicester, was a friend and counselor to Queen Elizabeth, and his father served as the lord president of Wales. In 1568, Philip Sidney enrolled at Christ Church College, but he dropped out to see Europe. After his return to England in 1575, he was named Queen Elizabeth's cupbearer. Indeed, this was a distinguished role. He was appointed ambassador to Germany in 1577. After that, he developed a fondness for Spenser. He remained active in politics and was named governor of Flushing, a municipality in the Netherlands. In 1586, he fought a fight against Spain and died a few days later from excruciating wounds ^[5].

William Shakespeare (1564–1616): Often referred to as the English national poet, William Shakespeare was a poet, playwright, and actor who is regarded by many as the greatest dramatist of all time. It is impossible to overlook Shakespeare's special place in the world. Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire, England, is where he was born, according to the facts. Shakespeare's creativity was shaped by two external factors: the city of London, which served as the centre of English politics, and his hamlet, which was surrounded by breathtaking landscapes. Shakespeare was

christened on April 26, 1564, according to the parish record of Holy Trinity Church in Stratford, but April 23 is his birthdate. John Shakespeare, his father, was a borough burgess who was elected as an alderman and, in 1568, as bailiff ^[6]. Shakespeare passed away on April 23, 1616, which is likely to have been his birth anniversary. There were twenty-one plays in manuscript in different theatres at the time of his death. A few of the texts were already published in quarto format. Heming and Condell, the two players in his theatre, proposed the first printed compilation of his plays. They claim to have obtained the poet's papers and created an edition based on them.

Francis Bacon (1561–1626): Bacon was born on January 2, 1561, in London. He was the family's youngest son. Nicholas Bacon, his father, was the Lord Keeper of the Great Seal, a post of great authority. Up to the age of twelve, Bacon received his schooling at home. He subsequently enrolled in the University of Cambridge, where, because he came from a wealthy family, he received private tutoring. He studied grammar, geometry, astronomy, and mathematics. Queen Elizabeth was struck by Bacon's thoughts and intelligence when he first met her here at Cambridge. He was then referred to as "The young Lord Keeper" by the queen ^[8]. He claimed to have occupied himself with the practical study of statistics and diplomacy while in France with an English diplomat. After his father passed away, he went to London and, as he was poor, asked his uncle for a job, but was turned down. After studying law, he became a member of the bar in 1582. Throughout his life, Bacon relished his political roles until he was ultimately found guilty of accepting bribes. After being exiled from politics, he went back to studying science. He came up with the idea to use snow as a preservative in place of salt during a chilly, snowy night in 1626. He died after being chilled by the experiment ^[4].

Transitions in the era of Elizabeth: Elizabeth's reign did not bring about a complete change in English literature or language; rather, the transitional period is regarded as the Tudor dynasty, of which Elizabeth was the fourth successor. The renaissance is the name given to the time between 1485 and 1660. However, during Elizabeth's reign, all uncertainties appeared to be resolved and all issues in England were eliminated. A bold and honest sovereign's demand was granted by the queen throughout the reigns of Edward and Mary, despite the defeat, humiliation, and internal unrest. According to Milton, England was "a noble and powerful nation, rousing herself, like a strong man after sleep and shaking her invisible locks" ^[4]. Below are a few of the changes that took place throughout that time:

1. One of the primary elements that contributed to the Elizabethan era's popularity was religious tolerance. When Elizabeth became queen, she discovered that the entire realm was split apart. Scotland had its own interpretation of the Reformation, with the southern portion of the country being Protestant and the northern part being Catholic. Both parties were working as the trusted advisors, and the queen preferred them both. However, it is impossible to overlook the fact that Queen also persecuted several Catholics as previously said owing to certain pressures.
2. During the Elizabethan era, trade greatly increased the nation's riches. As income increased, living standards

- improved, job options increased, and eventually, new literary endeavours emerged. Consolidation and expansion of causality occurred in international trade and relations. In 1560, the Hanseatic League, which had previously benefited from preferential trade with England, was forced to accept a deal that totally abolished special positions. Additionally, England had unrestricted access to the Baltic Sea and its essential naval material supply [3].
3. During this time, British people began sailing and discovering other lands, and the colonization process also began. Many merchants began sailing to India in 1588, and numerous prosperous ships were berthed on Indian shores. After receiving a charter from the Queen, it changed its name to the East India Company.

Literary Changes: In addition to social, political, and economic transformations, the Elizabethan period saw a change in literary style. The epitome of the ideal Renaissance gentleman is Philip Sidney. Through *Astrophel and Stella* and *Arcadia*, he introduced the ideas of prose romances, as well as the author's qualities and convictions. Spenser created a brand-new poetic writing form known as the "Spenserian stanza." Many famous poets utilized it because of its special beauty. Ariosto's *ottava rima* was enhanced in the new stanza. People were shifting to a new type of theatrical performance by the time Christopher Marlowe was writing. The mystery and morality plays had been performed virtually everywhere earlier in the century by pulling a cart from one location to another. These organizations banded together to create theatres for the staging of novel dramas in the last years of Elizabeth's reign. Shakespeare was the maestro of the dramas that made the era famous. The uniformity of grammar was greatly aided by Shakespeare ^[6].

Francis Bacon, who refined the English essay form based on Montaigne's French model, utilized his works to spark debate and pose queries. He raised important concerns of the day in several of his works. Thus, this was the change in writing style that began during the Elizabethan period and gave the country absolute control.

Conclusion

The era of Queen Elizabeth, also known as the Age of Shakespeare, the Golden Age, the Renaissance, and the start of the British Empire. Prior to the Renaissance, literature provided ideal lifestyle models that were governed by church doctrine. However, during this time, people were looking for their own unique expression and purpose, and reason was encouraged rather than religion. In addition to intellectual and geographic progress, the century saw an increase in foreign terms that were incorporated into English. Words like "nonsense," "laughable," and "French women" made their way into English. Although the Bible is credited with greatly influencing the English language, there has been debate over the two. The translation of Vulgate's Bible infuriated individuals because they believed English was unworthy of expressing the Bible's feelings. As time passed, other English-language copies of the book were made available to the public. Above all, England and its literature were given fresh life by the authors of the time, including Sidney, Spenser, and the greatest of them, William Shakespeare, on whom the century was called.

References

1. Carter R McRae J. *The routledge history of literature in English Britain and Ireland* (3rd ed.). Taylor and Francis, 2016.
2. W. Rothwell *English and French in England after 1362*, *English Studies*, 2001;82:(6)539-559, DOI: 10.1076/enst.82.6.539.9550.
3. Palliser DM. *The Age of Elizabeth: England under the Later Tudors* (2nd ed.). Routledge, 1992. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315846750>.
4. Long WJ. *English Literature*. India: Copia Interactive, LLC, 2021.
5. <https://poets.org/poet/sir-philip-sidney> accessed on 09-03-2023.
6. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/William-Shakespeare> accessed on 09-13-2023.
7. Rao PS. the influence of Shakespeare on the English. *Research Journal of English (RJOE)*, 2018;3(2):2456-2696.
8. Quinton AM. *Quinton Baron Urbach Peter Michael and Lea, Kathleen Marguerite*, 2023.
9. Francis Bacon. *Encyclopedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Francis-Bacon-Viscount-Saint-Alban>.