

# History of literature

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The **history of literature** is the historical development of writings in prose or poetry that attempt to provide entertainment, enlightenment, or instruction to the reader/listener/observer, as well as the development of the literary techniques used in the communication of these pieces. Not all writings constitute literature. Some recorded materials, such as compilations of data (e.g., a check register) are not considered literature, and this article relates only to the evolution of the works defined above.

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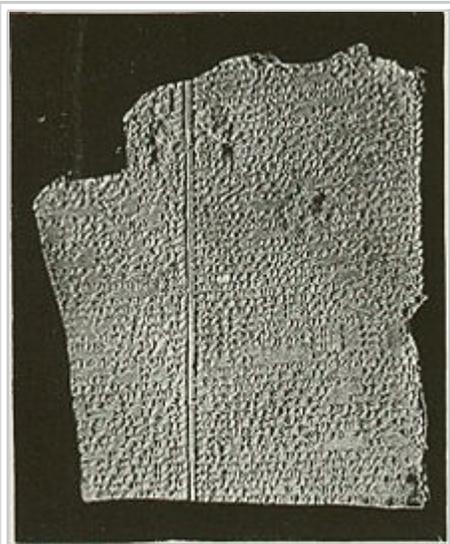
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## The beginnings of literature

Literature and writing, though connected, are not synonymous. The very first writings from ancient Sumer by any reasonable definition do not constitute literature—the same is true of some of the early Egyptian

hieroglyphics or the thousands of logs from ancient Chinese regimes. Scholars have often disagreed concerning when written record-keeping became more like "literature" than anything else; the definition is largely subjective.

Moreover, given the significance of distance as a cultural isolator in earlier centuries, the historical development of literature did not occur at an even pace across the world. The problems of creating a uniform global history of literature are compounded by the fact that many texts have been lost over the millennia, either deliberately, by accident, or by the total disappearance of the originating culture. Much has been written, for example, about the destruction of the Library of Alexandria in the 1st century BC, and the innumerable key texts which are believed to have been lost forever to the flames. The deliberate suppression of texts (and often their authors) by organisations of either a spiritual or a temporal nature further shrouds the subject.



A stone tablet containing part of the Epic of Gilgamesh

Certain primary texts, however, may be isolated which have a qualifying role as literature's first stirrings. Very early examples include *Epic of Gilgamesh*, in its Sumerian version predating 2000 BC, and the *Egyptian Book of the Dead* written down in the *Papyrus of Ani* in approximately 1250 BC but probably dates from about the 18th century BC. Ancient Egyptian literature was not included in early studies of the history of literature because the writings of Ancient Egypt were not translated into European languages until the 19th century when the Rosetta stone was deciphered.

Many texts handed down by oral tradition over several centuries before they were fixed in written form are difficult or impossible to date. The core of the Rigveda may date to the mid 2nd millennium BC. The Pentateuch is traditionally dated to the 15th century, although modern scholarship estimates its oldest part to date to the 10th century BC at the earliest.

Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* date to the 8th century BC and mark the beginning of Classical Antiquity. They also stand in an oral tradition that

stretches back to the late Bronze Age.

Indian śruti texts post-dating the Rigveda (such as the Yajurveda, the Atharvaveda and the Brahmanas), as well as the Hebrew Tanakh and the mystical collection of poems attributed to Lao Tze, the Tao te Ching, date to the Iron Age, but their dating is difficult and controversial. The great Hindu epics were also transmitted orally, likely predating the Maurya period.

## Antiquity

### China

The Classic of Poetry (or Shijing) is the oldest existing collection of Chinese poetry, comprising 305 works by anonymous authors dating from the 11th to 7th centuries BC. The Chu Ci anthology (or Songs of Chu) is a volume of poems attributed to or considered to be inspired by Qu Yuan's verse writing. Qu Yuan is the first author of verse in China to have his name associated to his work and is also regarded as one of the most prominent figures of Romanticism in Chinese classical literature.

The first great author on military tactics and strategy was Sun Tzu, whose *The Art of War* remains on the shelves of many modern military officers (and its advice has been applied to the corporate world as well).

Philosophy developed far differently in China than in Greece—rather than presenting extended dialogues, the *Analects* of Confucius and Lao Zi's *Tao Te Ching* presented sayings and proverbs more directly and didactically. The *Zhuangzi* is composed of a large collection of creative anecdotes, allegories, parables, and fables; a masterpiece of both philosophical and literary skill, it has significantly influenced writers and poets for more than 2000 years from the Han dynasty to the present.

Among the earliest Chinese works of narrative history, Zuo Zhuan is a gem of classical Chinese prose. This work and the Shiji or Records of the Grand Historian, were regarded as the ultimate models by many generations of prose stylists in ancient China.

## Hebrew Literature

The books that constitute the Hebrew Bible developed over roughly a millennium. The oldest texts seem to come from the eleventh or tenth centuries BCE, whilst most of the other texts are somewhat later. They are edited works, being collections of various sources intricately and carefully woven together.

The Old Testament was compiled and edited by various men<sup>[1]</sup> over a period of centuries, with many scholars concluding that the Hebrew canon was solidified by about the 3rd century BC.<sup>[2][3]</sup> The works have been subject to various literary evaluations (both secular and religious). Friedrich Nietzsche wrote: “In the Jewish Old Testament, there are men, things and speeches in so grand a style that Greek and Indian literature have nothing to compare to it. One stands with awe and reverence before these tremendous remnants of what man once was... The taste for the Old Testament is a touchstone of 'greatness' and 'smallness'.”<sup>[4]</sup>

## Classical antiquity

### Greek literature

Ancient Greek society placed considerable emphasis upon literature. Many authors consider the western literary tradition to have begun with the epic poems *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, which remain giants in the literary canon for their skillful and vivid depictions of war and peace, honor and disgrace, love and hatred. Notable among later Greek poets was Sappho, who defined, in many ways, lyric poetry as a genre.

A playwright named Aeschylus changed Western literature forever when he introduced the ideas of dialogue and interacting characters to playwriting. In doing so, he essentially invented "drama": his *Oresteia* trilogy of plays is seen as his crowning achievement. Other refiners of playwriting were Sophocles and Euripides. Sophocles is credited with skillfully developing irony as a literary technique, most famously in his play *Oedipus Rex*. Euripides, conversely, used plays to challenge societal norms and mores—a hallmark of much of Western literature for the next 2,300 years and beyond—and his works such as *Medea*, *The Bacchae* and *The Trojan Women* are still notable for their ability to challenge our perceptions of propriety, gender, and war. Aristophanes, a comic playwright, defines and shapes the idea of comedy almost as Aeschylus had shaped tragedy as an art form—Aristophanes' most famous plays include the *Lysistrata* and *The Frogs*.

Philosophy entered literature in the dialogues of Plato, who converted the give and take of Socratic questioning into written form. Aristotle, Plato's student, wrote dozens of works on many scientific disciplines, but his greatest contribution to literature was likely his *Poetics*, which lays out his understanding of drama, and thereby establishes the first criteria for literary criticism.

The New Testament is an unusual collection of texts--John's *Book of Revelation*, though not the first of its kind, essentially defines apocalypse as a literary genre.

## Latin literature

In many respects, the writers of the Roman Republic and the Roman Empire chose to avoid innovation in favor of imitating the great Greek authors. Virgil's *Aeneid*, in many ways, emulated Homer's *Iliad*; Plautus, a comic playwright, followed in the footsteps of Aristophanes; Tacitus' *Annals* and *Germania* follow essentially the same historical approaches that Thucydides devised (the Christian historian Eusebius does also, although far more influenced by his religion than either Tacitus or Thucydides had been by Greek and Roman polytheism); Ovid and his *Metamorphoses* explore the same Greek myths again in new ways. It can be argued, and has been, that the Roman authors, far from being mindless copycats, improved on the genres already established by their Greek predecessors. For example, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* creates a form which is a clear predecessor of the stream of consciousness genre. What is undeniable is that the Romans, in comparison with the Greeks, innovate relatively few literary styles of their own.

Satire is one of the few Roman additions to literature—Horace was the first to use satire extensively as a tool for argument, and Juvenal made it into a weapon.

Augustine of Hippo and his *The City of God* do for religious literature essentially what Plato had done for philosophy, but Augustine's approach was far less conversational and more didactic. His *Confessions* is perhaps the first true autobiography, and it gave rise to the genre of confessional literature which is now more popular than ever.

## India

Knowledge traditions in India handed down philosophical gleanings and theological concepts through the two traditions of Shruti and Smriti, meaning *that which is learnt* and *that which is experienced* - this included the Vedas. It is generally believed that the Puranas are the earliest philosophical writings in Indian history, although linguistic works on Sanskrit existed earlier than 1000 BC. Puranic works such as the Indian epics: Ramayana and *Mahabharata*, have influenced countless other works, including Balinese Kecak and other performances such as shadow puppetry (wayang), and many European works. Pali literature has an important position in the rise of Buddhism. Classical Sanskrit literature flowers in the Maurya and Gupta periods, roughly spanning the 2nd century BC to the 8th century AD.

## Middle Ages

### Europe

After the fall of Rome (in roughly 476), many of the literary approaches and styles invented by the Greeks and Romans fell out of favor in Europe. In the millennium or so that intervened between Rome's fall and the Florentine Renaissance, medieval literature focused more and more on faith and faith-related matters, in part because the works written by the Greeks had not been preserved in Europe, and therefore there were few models of classical literature to learn from and move beyond. What little there was became changed and distorted, with new forms beginning to develop from the distortions. Some of these distorted beginnings of new styles can be seen in the literature generally described as Matter of Rome, Matter of France and Matter of Britain.

Following Rome's fall, Islam's spread across Asia and Africa brought with it a desire to preserve and build upon the work of the Greeks, especially in literature. Although much had been lost to the ravages of time (and to catastrophe, as in the burning of the Library of Alexandria), many Greek works remained extant: they were preserved and copied carefully by Muslim scribes.

In Europe Hagiographies, or "lives of the saints", are frequent among early medieval texts. The writings of Bede—*Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*—and others continue the faith-based historical tradition begun by Eusebius in the early 4th century. Playwriting essentially ceased, except for the mystery plays and the passion plays that focused heavily on conveying Christian belief to the common people. Around 400 AD the *Prudenti Psychomachia* began the tradition of allegorical tales. Poetry flourished, however, in the hands of the troubadours, whose courtly romances and *chanson de geste* amused and entertained the upper classes who were their patrons. Geoffrey of Monmouth wrote works which he claimed were histories of Britain. These were highly fanciful and included stories of Merlin the magician and King Arthur. Epic poetry continued to develop with the addition of the mythologies of Northern Europe: *Beowulf* and the Norse sagas have much in common with Homer and Virgil's approaches to war and honor, while poems such as Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* take much different stylistic directions.

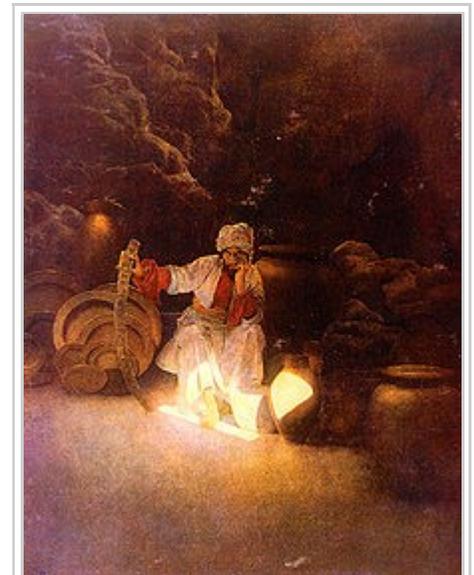
In November 1095 - Pope Urban II preached the First Crusade at the Council of Clermont. The crusades would affect everything in Europe and the Middle East for many years to come and literature would, along with everything else, be transformed by the wars between these two cultures. For instance the image of the knight would take on a different significance. Also the Islamic emphasis on scientific investigation and the preservation of the Greek philosophical writings would eventually affect European literature.

Between Augustine and *The Bible*, religious authors had numerous aspects of Christianity that needed further explication and interpretation. Thomas Aquinas, more than any other single person, was able to turn theology into a kind of science, in part because he was heavily influenced by Aristotle, whose works were returning to Europe in the 13th century.

## Islamic world

The most well known fiction from the Islamic world was *The Book of One Thousand and One Nights* (*Arabian Nights*), which was a compilation of many earlier folk tales told by the Persian Queen Scheherazade. The epic took form in the 10th century and reached its final form by the 14th century; the number and type of tales have varied from one manuscript to another.<sup>[5]</sup> All Arabian fantasy tales were often called "Arabian Nights" when translated into English, regardless of whether they appeared in *The Book of One Thousand and One Nights*, in any version, and a number of tales are known in Europe as "Arabian Nights" despite existing in no Arabic manuscript.<sup>[5]</sup>

This epic has been influential in the West since it was translated in the 18th century, first by Antoine Galland.<sup>[6]</sup> Many imitations were written, especially in France.<sup>[7]</sup> Various characters from this epic have themselves become cultural icons in Western culture, such as Aladdin, Sinbad and Ali Baba. However, no medieval Arabic source has been traced for Aladdin, which was incorporated into *The Book of One Thousand and One Nights* by its French translator, Antoine Galland, who heard it from an Arab Syrian Christian storyteller from Aleppo. The popularity of the work may in part be due to greater popular knowledge of history and geography since it was written. This meant that the plausibility of great marvels had to be set at a greater distance of time ("long ago") and place ("far away"). This is a process that continues, and finally culminates in fantasy fiction having little connection, if any, to actual times and places. A number of elements from Arabian mythology and Persian mythology are now common in modern fantasy, such as genies, bahamuts, magic carpets, magic lamps, etc.<sup>[7]</sup> When L. Frank Baum proposed writing a



"Ali Baba" by Maxfield Parrish.

modern fairy tale that banished stereotypical elements he felt the genie, dwarf and fairy were stereotypes to avoid.<sup>[8]</sup>



Arabic manuscript of the *One Thousand and One Nights*.

A number of stories within the *One Thousand and One Nights* (*Arabian Nights*) also feature science fiction elements. One example is "The Adventures of Bulukiya", where the protagonist Bulukiya's quest for the herb of immortality leads him to explore the seas, journey to the Garden of Eden and to Jahannam, and travel across the cosmos to different worlds much larger than his own world, anticipating elements of galactic science fiction;<sup>[9]</sup> along the way, he encounters societies of jinns,<sup>[10]</sup> mermaids, talking serpents, talking trees, and other forms of life.<sup>[9]</sup> In another *Arabian Nights* tale, the protagonist Abdullah the Fisherman gains the ability to breathe underwater and discovers an underwater submarine society that is portrayed as an inverted reflection of society on land, in that the underwater society follows a form of primitive

communism where concepts like money and clothing do not exist. Other *Arabian Nights* tales deal with lost ancient technologies, advanced ancient civilizations that went astray, and catastrophes which overwhelmed them.<sup>[11]</sup> "The City of Brass" features a group of travellers on an archaeological expedition<sup>[12]</sup> across the Sahara to find an ancient lost city and attempt to recover a brass vessel that Solomon once used to trap a jinn,<sup>[13]</sup> and, along the way, encounter a mummified queen, petrified inhabitants,<sup>[14]</sup> lifelike humanoid robots and automata, seductive marionettes dancing without strings,<sup>[15]</sup> and a brass horseman robot who directs the party towards the ancient city. "The Ebony Horse" features a robot<sup>[16]</sup> in the form of a flying mechanical horse controlled using keys that could fly into outer space and towards the Sun,<sup>[17]</sup> while the "Third Qalandar's Tale" also features a robot in the form of an uncanny boatman.<sup>[16]</sup> "The City of Brass" and "The Ebony Horse" can be considered early examples of proto-science fiction.<sup>[18]</sup>

Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*, considered the greatest epic of Italian literature, derived many features of and episodes about the hereafter directly or indirectly from Arabic works on Islamic eschatology: the *Hadith* and the *Kitab al-Miraj* (translated into Latin in 1264 or shortly before<sup>[19]</sup> as *Liber Scale Machometi*, "The Book of Muhammad's Ladder") concerning Muhammad's ascension to Heaven, and the spiritual writings of Ibn Arabi. The Moors also had a noticeable influence on the works of George Peele and William Shakespeare. Some of their works featured Moorish characters, such as Peele's *The Battle of Alcazar* and Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, *Titus Andronicus* and *Othello*, which featured a Moorish Othello as its title character. These works are said to have been inspired by several Moorish delegations from Morocco to Elizabethan England at the beginning of the 17th century.<sup>[20]</sup>

## Arabic literature

Ibn Tufail (Abubacer) and Ibn al-Nafis (1213-1288) were pioneers of the philosophical novel. Ibn Tufail wrote the first fictional Arabic novel *Hayy ibn Yaqdhan* (*Philosophus Autodidactus*) as a response to al-Ghazali's *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, and then Ibn al-Nafis also wrote a novel *Theologus Autodidactus* as a response to Ibn Tufail's *Philosophus Autodidactus*. Both of these narratives had protagonists (Hayy in *Philosophus Autodidactus* and Kamil in *Theologus Autodidactus*) who were autodidactic feral children living in seclusion on a desert island, both being the earliest examples of a desert island story. However, while Hayy lives alone with animals on the desert island for the rest of the story in *Philosophus Autodidactus*, the story of Kamil extends beyond the desert island setting in *Theologus Autodidactus*, developing into the earliest known coming of age plot and eventually becoming the first example of a science fiction novel.<sup>[21][22]</sup>

*Theologus Autodidactus* deals with various science fiction elements such as spontaneous generation, futurology, the end of the world and doomsday, resurrection, and the afterlife. Rather than giving supernatural or mythological explanations for these events, Ibn al-Nafis attempted to explain these plot elements using the scientific knowledge of biology, astronomy, cosmology and geology known in his time. His main purpose behind this science fiction work was to explain Islamic religious teachings in terms of science and philosophy through the use of fiction.<sup>[23]</sup>

A Latin translation of Ibn Tufail's work, *Philosophus Autodidactus*, first appeared in 1671, prepared by Edward Pococke the Younger, followed by an English translation by Simon Ockley in 1708, as well as German and Dutch translations. These translations later inspired Daniel Defoe to write *Robinson Crusoe*, a candidate for the title of "first novel in English".<sup>[24][25][26][27]</sup> *Philosophus Autodidactus* also inspired Robert Boyle to write his own philosophical novel set on an island, *The Aspiring Naturalist*.<sup>[28]</sup> The story also anticipated Rousseau's *Emile: or, On Education* in some ways, and is also similar to Mowgli's story in Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book* as well as Tarzan's story, in that a baby is abandoned but taken care of and fed by a mother wolf.

Among other innovations in Arabic literature was Ibn Khaldun's perspective on chronicling past events—by fully rejecting supernatural explanations, Khaldun essentially invented the scientific or sociological approach to history.

## Persian literature

Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, the national epic of Iran, is a mythical and heroic retelling of Persian history. It is the longest epic poem ever written.

From Persian culture the book which would, eventually, become the most famous in the west is the *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*. The Rubáiyát is a collection of poems by the Persian mathematician and astronomer Omar Khayyám (1048–1122). "Rubaiyat" means "quatrains": verses of four lines.

*Amir Arsalan* was also a popular mythical Persian story, which has influenced some modern works of fantasy fiction, such as *The Heroic Legend of Arslan*.

Examples of early Persian proto-science fiction include Al-Farabi's *Opinions of the residents of a splendid city* about a utopian society, Al-Qazwini's futuristic tale of *Awaj bin Anfaq* about a man who travelled to Earth from a distant planet, and elements such as the flying carpet.<sup>[29]</sup>

## Ottoman literature

The two primary streams of Ottoman written literature are poetry and prose. Of the two, divan poetry was by far the dominant stream. Moreover, it should be noted that, until the 19th century, Ottoman prose did not contain any examples of fiction; that is, there were no counterparts to, for instance, the European romance, short story, or novel (though analogous genres did, to some extent, exist in both the Turkish folk tradition and in divan poetry). Until the 19th century, Ottoman prose never managed to develop to the extent that contemporary divan poetry did. A large part of the reason for this was that much prose was expected to adhere to the rules of *sec'* (سجع, also transliterated as *seci*), or rhymed prose,<sup>[30]</sup> a type of writing descended from the Arabic *saj'* and which prescribed that between each adjective and noun in a sentence, there must be a rhyme.

## Jewish literature

Medieval Jewish fiction often drew on ancient Jewish legends, and was written in a variety of languages

including Hebrew and Judeo-Arabic. Liturgical Jewish poetry in Hebrew flourished in Palestine in the seventh and eighth centuries with the writings of Yose ben Yose, Yanai, and Eleazar Kalir<sup>[31]</sup> Later Jewish poets in Spain, Provençal, and Italy wrote both religious and secular poems in Hebrew; particularly prominent poets were the Spanish Jewish poets Solomon ibn Gabirol and Yehuda Halevi. In addition to poetry and fiction, medieval Jewish literature also includes philosophical literature, mystical (Kabbalistic) literature, ethical (musar) literature, legal (halakhic) literature, and commentaries on the Bible.

## India

Early Medieval (Gupta period) literature in India sees the flowering of Sanskrit drama, classical Sanskrit poetry and the compilation of the Puranas. Sanskrit declines in the early 2nd millennium, late works such as the *Kathasaritsagara* dating to the 11th century, to the benefit of literature composed in Middle Indic vernaculars such as Old Bengali, Old Hindi.

## China

Lyric poetry advanced far more in China than in Europe prior to 1000, as multiple new forms developed in the Han, Tang, and Song dynasties: perhaps the greatest poets of this era in Chinese literature were Li Bai and Du Fu.

Printing began in Tang Dynasty China. A copy of the *Diamond Sutra*, a key Buddhist text, found sealed in a cave in China in the early 20th century, is the oldest known dated printed book, with a printed date of 868. The method used was block printing.

The scientist, statesman, and general Shen Kuo (1031-1095 AD) was the author of the *Dream Pool Essays* (1088), a large book of scientific literature that included the oldest description of the magnetized compass. During the Song Dynasty, there was also the enormous historical work of the *Zizhi Tongjian*, compiled into 294 volumes of 3 million written Chinese characters by the year 1084 AD.

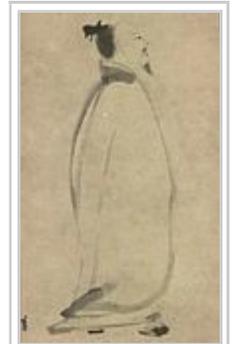
The true vernacular novel was developed in China during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644 AD). Some authors feel that China originated the novel form with the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* by Luo Guanzhong (in the 14th century), although others feel that this epic is distinct from the novel in key ways. Fictional novels published during the Ming period include the *Water Margin* and the *Journey to the West*, which represent two of the Four Great Classical Novels of Chinese literature.

## Japan

Classical Japanese literature generally refers to literature produced during the Heian Period, what some would consider a golden era of art and literature. *The Tale of Genji* (early 11th century) by Murasaki Shikibu is considered the pre-eminent masterpiece of Heian fiction and an early example of a work of fiction in the form of a novel. It is sometimes called the world's first novel, the first modern novel, the first romance novel, or the first novel to still be considered a classic.

Other important works of this period include the *Kokin Wakashū* (905), a waka-poetry anthology, and *The Pillow Book* (990s), the latter written by Murasaki Shikibu's contemporary and rival, Sei Shōnagon, as an essay about the life, loves, and pastimes of nobles in the Emperor's court. The *iroha* poem, now one of two standard orderings for the Japanese syllabary, was also written during the early part of this period.

The 10th-century Japanese narrative, *The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter*, can be considered an early example of



Li Po Chanting a Poem, by Liang K'ai (13th century)

proto-science fiction. The protagonist of the story, Kaguya-hime, is a princess from the Moon who is sent to Earth for safety during a celestial war, and is found and raised by a bamboo cutter in Japan. She is later taken back to the Moon by her real extraterrestrial family. A manuscript illustration depicts a disc-shaped flying object similar to a flying saucer.<sup>[32]</sup>

In this time the imperial court patronized the poets, most of whom were courtiers or ladies-in-waiting. Editing anthologies of poetry was a national pastime. Reflecting the aristocratic atmosphere, the poetry was elegant and sophisticated and expressed emotions in a rhetorical style.

## Renaissance

Had nothing occurred to change literature in the 15th century but the Renaissance, the break with medieval approaches would have been clear enough. The 15th century, however, also brought Johann Gutenberg and his invention of the printing press, an innovation (for Europe, at least) that would change literature forever. Texts were no longer precious and expensive to produce—they could be cheaply and rapidly put into the marketplace. Literacy went from the prized possession of the select few to a much broader section of the population (though by no means universal). As a result, much about literature in Europe was radically altered in the two centuries following Gutenberg's unveiling of the printing press in 1455.

William Caxton was the first English printer and published English language texts including *Le Morte d'Arthur* (a collection of oral tales of the Arthurian Knights which is a forerunner of the novel) and Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. These are an indication of future directions in literature. With the arrival of the printing press a process begins in which folk yarns and legends are collected within a frame story and then mass published.

In the Renaissance, the focus on learning for learning's sake causes an outpouring of literature. Petrarch popularized the sonnet as a poetic form; Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* made romance acceptable in prose as well as poetry; François Rabelais rejuvenates satire with *Gargantua and Pantagruel*; Michel de Montaigne single-handedly invented the essay and used it to catalog his life and ideas. Perhaps the most controversial and important work of the time period was a treatise printed in Nuremberg, entitled *De Revolutionibus Orbium Coelestium*: in it, the astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus removed the Earth from its privileged position in the universe, which had far-reaching effects, not only in science, but in literature and its approach to humanity, hierarchy, and truth.

## Early modern period

A new spirit of science and investigation in Europe was part of a general upheaval in human understanding which began with the European invasion of the New World in 1492 and continues through the subsequent centuries, even up to the present day.

The form of writing now commonplace across the world—the novel—originated from the early modern period and grew in popularity in the next century. Before the modern novel became established as a form there first had to be a transitional stage when "novelty" began to appear in the style of the epic poem.

Plays for entertainment (as opposed to religious enlightenment) returned to Europe's stages in the early modern period. William Shakespeare is the most notable of the early modern playwrights, but numerous others made important contributions, including Molière, Pierre Corneille, Jean Racine, Pedro Calderón de la Barca, Lope de Vega, Christopher Marlowe, and Ben Jonson. From the 16th to the 18th century Commedia dell'arte performers improvised in the streets of Italy and France. Some Commedia dell'arte plays were written down. Both the written plays and the improvisation were influential upon literature of the time, particularly upon the work of

Molière. Shakespeare drew upon the arts of jesters and strolling players in creating new style comedies. All the parts, even the female ones, were played by men (*en travesti*) but that would change, first in France and then in England too, by the end of the 17th century.

The epic Elizabethan poem *The Faerie Queene* by Edmund Spenser was published, in its first part, in 1590 and then in completed form in 1597. *The Fairie Queen* marks the transitional period in which "novelty" begins to enter into the narrative in the sense of overturning and playing with the flow of events. Theatrical forms known in Spenser's time such as the Masque and the Mummers' Play are incorporated into the poem in ways which *twist tradition* and turn it to political propaganda in the service of Queen Elizabeth I.

The earliest work considered an opera in the sense the work is usually understood dates from around 1597. It is *Dafne*, (now lost) written by Jacopo Peri for an elite circle of literate Florentine humanists who gathered as the "Camerata".

17th century is considered as the greatest era of Spanish and French literature where it is called Siglo de Oro and Grand Siècle respectively. The most famous authors beside playwrights include Jean de La Fontaine and Charles Perrault known primarily for their fables.

Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote* has been called "the first novel" by many literary scholars (or the first of the modern European novels). It was published in two parts. The first part was published in 1605 and the second in 1615. It might be viewed as a parody of *Le Morte d'Arthur* (and other examples of the chivalric romance), in which case the novel form would be the direct result of poking fun at a collection of heroic folk legends. This is fully in keeping with the spirit of the age of enlightenment which began from about this time and delighted in giving a satirical twist to the stories and ideas of the past. It's worth noting that this trend toward satirising previous writings was only made possible by the printing press. Without the invention of mass-produced copies of a book it would not be possible to assume the reader will have seen the earlier work and will thus understand the references within the text.

The new style in English poetry during the 17th century was that of the metaphysical movement. The metaphysical poets were John Donne, George Herbert, Andrew Marvell and others. Metaphysical poetry is characterised by a spirit of intellectual investigation of the spiritual, rather than the mystical reverence of many earlier English poems. The metaphysical poets were clearly trying to *understand* the world around them and the spirit behind it, instead of accepting dogma on the basis of faith.

In the middle of the century the king of England was overthrown and a republic declared. In the new regime (which lasted from 1649 to 1653) the arts suffered. In England and the rest of the British Isles Oliver Cromwell's rule temporarily banned all theatre, festivals, jesters, mummers plays and frivolities. The ban was lifted when the monarchy was restored with Charles II. The Drury Lane theatre was favorite of King Charles.

In contrast to the metaphysical poets was John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, an epic religious poem in blank verse. Milton had been Oliver Cromwell's chief propagandist and suffered when the Restoration came. *Paradise Lost* is one of the highest developments of the epic form in poetry immediately preceding the era of the modern prose novel.

An allegorical novel, *The Pilgrim's Progress from This World to That Which Is to Come* was published by John Bunyan in 1678.

Other early novelists include Daniel Defoe (born 1660) and Jonathan Swift (born 1667).

## Modern period

## 18th century

This is the Age of Enlightenment and its most important authors are Voltaire, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Immanuel Kant and Adam Smith. The second half of the century sees the beginnings of Romanticism with Goethe.

## 19th century

In Britain, the 19th century is dominated by the Victorian era, characterized by Romanticism, with Romantic poets such as William Wordsworth, Lord Byron or Samuel Taylor Coleridge and genres such as the gothic novel.

In Germany, the *Sturm und Drang* period of the late 18th century merges into a Classicist and Romantic period, epitomized by the long era of Goethe's activity, covering the first third of the century. The conservative *Biedermeier* style conflicts with the radical *Vormärz* in the turbulent period separating the end of the Napoleonic wars from the Revolutions of 1848.

In Denmark, the early 19th century Golden Age produced prolific literary authors such as Søren Kierkegaard and Hans Christian Andersen.

In the later 19th century, Romanticism is countered by Realism and Naturalism. The late 19th century, known as the *Belle Époque*, with its *Fin de siècle* retrospectively appeared as a "golden age" of European culture, cut short by the outbreak of World War I in 1914.

## 20th century

The main periods of 20th century literature are captured in the bipartite division, Modernist literature and Postmodern literature, flowering from roughly 1900 to 1940 and 1945 to 1980 respectively, divided, as a rule of thumb, by World War II.

Popular literature develops its own genres such as fantasy and science fiction. Ignored by mainstream literary criticism, these genres develop their own establishments and critical awards, such as the *Nebula Award* (since 1965), the *British Fantasy Award* (since 1971) or the *Mythopoeic Awards* (since 1971).

## History of the book

Related to other forms of literary history, the history of the book is a field of interdisciplinary enquiry drawing on the methods of bibliography, cultural history, literary criticism, and media theory. Principally concerned with the production, circulation, and reception of texts and their material forms, book history seeks to connect forms of textuality with their material aspects.

Among the issues within the history of literature with which book history can be seen to intersect are: the development of authorship as a profession, the formation of reading audiences, the constraints of censorship and copyright, and the economics of literary form.

## See also

- History of the book
- History of theater
- History of fantasy

- History of science fiction
- History of ideas
- Intellectual history
- Literature by country

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