

## Book review

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*Old and Middle English Literature. The Literature of the Renaissance.*  
By Cătălina Bălinișteanu-Furdu, Alma Mater Publishing House, Bacău,  
2021, ISBN 907-606-527-673-4, 212 pp.

The survey intends to be an introduction to Old and Middle English Literature and to the literature of the English Renaissance, which explains why the readers interested in these literary epochs might view it as a mere collection of lecture notes. However, upon careful consideration, we discover that this is a more ambitious editorial project with its eleven chapters grouped into three sections that correspond to the three main eras mentioned in the title: Old English literature, Middle English literature, and English Renaissance literature. The author chose to offer the necessary historical data and the main social and political events in order to make the readers understand better the writers' choices of characters and events depicted in their works. The literary genres as well as the themes and motifs chosen by different writers also reflect the period when the works were created or written down.

The book opens with the general characteristics of all literary movements and eras specific to English literature, which is meant to help unexperienced readers differentiate between historical eras and literary epochs. The section on Old English literature consists of two chapters in which the readers are provided with important information about the Anglo-Saxon occupation and the English culture from the Early Middle Ages. The survey starts with the general considerations about the Old English poetry, analysing different genres specific to this period: heroic poetry, religious poetry, elegy, Anglo-Saxon riddles. The cultural types and values specific to the Anglo-Saxon literature can be detected in the analysis suggested by the author in which Cătălina Bălinișteanu-Furdu discusses several poems emphasizing the stylistic elements: kennings, alliterative verse, caesura, double-meaning verses, and other archaic linguistic games. In the next chapter, the author delves

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into the analysis of *Beowulf* offering the sources of this heroic poem, the influence of both paganism and Christianity on the Anglo-Saxon literature, and other details referring to the genre, style, and structure of this orally transmitted epic poem. Time and space are presented as being paramount concepts in the construction of the characters and in the depiction of different events. Furthermore, *Beowulf*'s major themes, motifs, and symbols are also discussed highlighting the importance of the primitive heroic ideal.

The next two chapters deal with England's historical context from High and Late Middle Ages which will have a huge impact on its culture. The cultural types (the knight and the damsel in distress), the features of the chivalric romances, as well as the definition of mystery, miracle and morality plays are embedded in the author's analysis of the English medieval literature. The discussion continues with the well-known 14<sup>th</sup> century romance: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and here the author applies all concepts discussed before so that the readers should perceive the work's medieval traits. The author further aims at presenting the importance of Geoffrey Chaucer's vernacular literary work *The Canterbury Tales* with its wide range of genres and styles included in the framed narrative, with its original use of the English language and its variety of themes. The author's analysis of Chaucer's book seems to be mostly anthropological as the readers are suggested to consider historical data and political events as the major source/influence for the characters and for their 'tales', since various pilgrims mirror certain medieval cultural types. The analysis of Geoffrey Chaucer's characterization techniques further underline the importance of social life in the Middle Ages, as the author provides numerous examples from the General Prologue. These examples, however, are meant to illustrate the occasional subversion of the archetypal Middle Ages stereotypes.

The second half of Cătălina Bălinișteanu-Furdu's book begins with the presentation of the Renaissance, both historically as well as culturally. The four literary ages (the Elizabethan Era, the Jacobean Era,

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the Caroline Era and the Commonwealth Period), in which the English Renaissance is divided, are briefly presented in the beginning of Chapter VI, with the author highlighting the 'Golden Age' of the English Renaissance and its most significant writers: the Elizabethan theatre and drama. The next five chapters, the bulk of this book, refer to William Shakespeare's work ranging from sonnets to tragedies, comedies, romances and ultimately to his history plays. The Shakespearean sonnets are discussed based on their themes and motifs, which differ according to the stages in the writer's life. The thematic approach is the one used in the analysis of Shakespeare's greatest tragedies and romances showing interest in having her readers understand the characters' choices and failures. She also insists upon the traits specific to tragic and comic heroes/heroines and challenges her readers to detect whether the Shakespearean heroes/heroines match these definitions, whether they accomplish their predetermined condition, whether they experience the predestined moments of despair and/or epiphany.

In conclusion, Cătălina Bălinișteanu-Furdu's book appears to be an anthropological approach to Old and Middle English literature, and to the literature of the English Renaissance considering all social and political events, as well as the historical data mentioned at the beginning of each analysis. However, the author's effort to define literary concepts, to discuss space and time in each literary work mentioned, to detect themes, motifs, and symbols specific to each literary era - all these demonstrate her interest in delivering the readers an introductory survey on the literary movements mentioned above leaving ample space for the readers to choose their own interpretation of the literary texts.

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