

Five British Writers

Welcome to Our Course!



Opening Questions

- What does “*British*” mean and why are we interested in “*British*” writing?
- For that matter, who counts as “*writers*”?
- And why these *five*?

“British” is not a static term

- The borders and meaning of *Britain* change between the medieval period and the present day.
- Some of the writers we study did not consider themselves ‘*British*’... some would have considered the location of Boston ‘*British*’!

“Writer” is not a static term

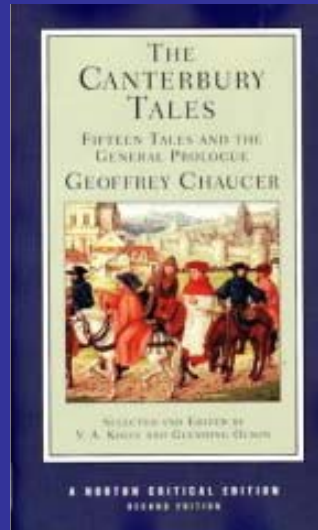
- Not all the *‘writers’* we study *‘wrote’* (in the sense of physically recorded) their work
- Almost none of them earned a living by writing.

In what language did these writers write?

- *Canterbury Tales, General Prologue*, lines 731-738
- *Twelfth Night*, Act 1, scene 5, lines 185-192
- *Isabella*, lines 155-160
- *Jane Eyre*, Volume 1, chapter 10, page 97
- *Time's Arrow*, Section 1, part 1, page 7

Tools for Middle English

- Notes in text



- On-line [Geoffrey Chaucer](#) page
- Middle English Dictionary (4th floor, reference at Healey)

Oxford English Dictionary

Address  http://proxy.library.upenn.edu:8411/cgi/entry/50027713?query_type=word&queryword=britain&first=1&max_to_show=10&sort_t Links

Oxford English Dictionary Lost for Words?   Find Word

Results **Britain, n.¹** SECOND EDITION 1989

Entry Pronunciation Spellings Etymology Quotations Date chart

bristling, *ppl.* *a.2*
bristly, *a.*
Bristol
brisure
brit, britt, *n.1*
Brit, *n.3*
Brit, Brett, *n.2* (and *a.*)
brit, britt, *v.*
Brit-, *comb. form*
Britain, *n.1*
Britain, *n.2* and *a.*
Britainer, Britaner
Britannia
britannic, *n.*
Britannic, *a.*
britannicize, *v.*
Britannish, *a.*
Britany

1. a. The proper name of the whole island containing England, Wales, and Scotland, with their dependencies; more fully called Great Britain; now also used for the British state or empire as a whole.

After the OE. period, *Britain* was used only as a historical term, until about the time of Henry VIII and Edward VI, when it came again into practical politics in connexion with the efforts made to unite England and Scotland; in 1604 James I was proclaimed 'King of Great Britain'; and this name was adopted for the United Kingdom, at the Union in 1707. After that event, *South Britain* and *North Britain* are frequent in Acts of Parl. for England and Scotland respectively: the latter is still in occasional (chiefly postal) use. (So *West Britain*, humorously or polemically for 'Ireland'.) *Greater Britain* is a modern rhetorical phrase for 'Great Britain and the colonies', 'the British Empire', brought into vogue in 1868.

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Chaucer's Lifetime: the 14th Century



- Geoffrey Chaucer, c. 1340 – c. 1400
Courtier, Ambassador, Customs Officer, Member of Parliament

- “British” is a historical term, supposedly derived from the legendary Trojan conqueror, Brutus.

He was Brutus ihote þat lond Brutaine...

Hire oðene speche Troynisse; seopþe hii cleopede Bruttisse.

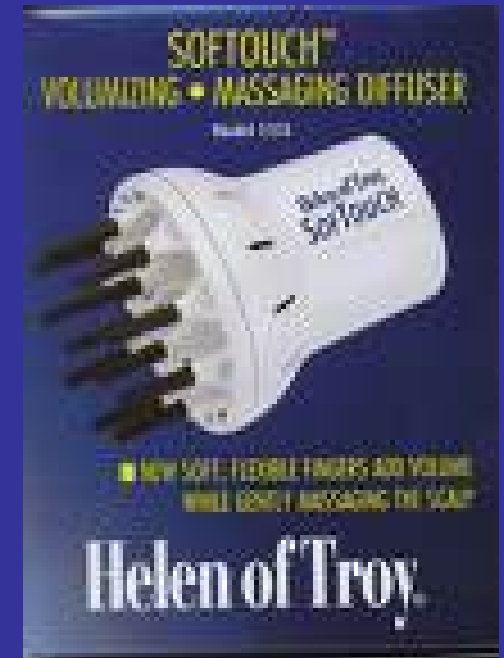
ac Englissemen hit habbeþ iwende...

of Engle come Englessemen; and Engeland hit cleopede.

þe Engles ouer-come þe Brutuns; and brohte heom vnder fote.



Our Own Trojan Fascination



Shakespeare's Lifetime: the 15th Century



- William Shakespeare, 1564-1616
Theatre shareholder, actor,
collaborative playwright,
who never published anything
“an upstart crow”

- The years in which Shakespeare lived (1564-1616) saw a revival of the term
“Britain”:

In 1601, King James unified England and Scotland and called himself
“King of Great Britain”

Keats' Lifetime: Early 19th century

- John Keats, 1795-1821
Surgeon's apprentice, would-be writer
“I do nothing for my subsistence—make no exertion”
- 1783 Treaty of Paris recognizes the independence of the United States just before Keats' birth
- War of 1812 will again mark hostilities between the United States and the British during Keats' brief lifetime
- In Keats's famous poem
On first looking into Chapman's Homer

Discovery of the Americas = Discovery of a good Greek translation?



Brontë's Lifetime: mid-19th century

- Charlotte Brontë, 1816-1854

Curate's daughter, teacher, governess

“Literature cannot be the business of
a woman's life, and it ought not to be”

- Looking beyond Haworth:
An Eye for Empire?

- *Jane Eyre*'s title character has an uncle in Funchal, Madeira—a Portuguese island
- *Jane Eyre* features a Creole (West Indian) character and the novel's last line is part of a letter from India



Martin Amis's Lifetime: mid-20th to 21st century



- Martin Amis, 1949-Present
- What does it mean to be a 'British writer' today?