THE LITERATURE BOOK
BIG IDEAS SIMPLY EXPLAINED

EVERY MAN IS THE CHILD OF HIS OWN DEEDS

IF THIS IS THE BEST OF ALL POSSIBLE WORLDS, WHAT ARE THE OTHERS?

HUMAN BEINGS CAN BE AWFUL CRUEL TO ONE ANOTHER

I AM NO BIRD; AND NO NET ENSNARES ME

DEAD MEN ARE HEAVIER THAN BROKEN HEARTS

TO UNDERSTAND JUST ONE LIFE YOU HAVE TO SWALLOW THE WORLD

ENDING AT EVERY MOMENT BUT NEVER ENDING ITS ENDING

A MAN SHOULD SUFFER GREATLY FOR HIS LORD

THE ONLY WAY TO GET RID OF A TEMPTATION IS TO YIELD TO IT

FATE WILL UNWIND AS IT MUST
THE LITERATURE BOOK
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CONTENTS

10 INTRODUCTION

HEROES AND LEGENDS

3000 BCE–1300 CE

20 Only the gods dwell forever in sunlight
The Epic of Gilgamesh

21 To nourish oneself on ancient virtue induces perseverance
Book of Changes, attributed to King Wen of Zhou

22 What is this crime I am planning, O Krishna?
Mahabharata, attributed to Vyasa

26 Sing, O goddess, the anger of Achilles
Iliad, attributed to Homer

34 How dreadful knowledge of the truth can be when there’s no help in truth!
Oedipus the King, Sophocles

40 The gates of hell are open night and day; smooth the descent, and easy is the way
Aeneid, Virgil

42 Fate will unwind as it must
Beowulf

44 So Scheherazade began...
One Thousand and One Nights

46 Since life is but a dream, why toil to no avail?
Quan Tangshi

47 Real things in the darkness seem no realer than dreams
The Tale of Genji, Murasaki Shikibu

48 A man should suffer greatly for his Lord
The Song of Roland

49 Tandaradei, sweetly sang the nightingale
“Under the Linden Tree,” Walther von der Vogelweide

50 He who dares not follow love’s command errs greatly
Lancelot, the Knight of the Cart, Chrétien de Troyes

52 Let another’s wound be my warning
Njal’s Saga

54 Further reading

RENAISSANCE TO ENLIGHTENMENT

1300–1800

62 I found myself within a shadowed forest
The Divine Comedy, Dante Alighieri

66 We three will swear brotherhood and unity of aims and sentiments
Romance of the Three Kingdoms, Luo Guanzhong

68 Turn over the leaf and chese another tale
The Canterbury Tales, Geoffrey Chaucer

72 Laughter’s the property of man. Live joyfully
Gargantua and Pantagruel, François Rabelais

74 As it did to this flower, the doom of age will blight your beauty
Les Amours de Cassandre, Pierre de Ronsard

75 He that loves pleasure must for pleasure fall
Doctor Faustus, Christopher Marlowe

76 Every man is the child of his own deeds
Don Quixote, Miguel de Cervantes

82 One man in his time plays many parts
First Folio, William Shakespeare

90 To esteem everything is to esteem nothing
The Misanthrope, Molière

91 But at my back I always hear Time’s winged chariot hurrying near
Miscellaneous Poems, Andrew Marvell

92 Sadly, I part from you; like a clam torn from its shell, I go, and autumn too
The Narrow Road to the Interior, Matsuo Bashō

93 None will hinder and none be hindered on the journey to the mountain of death
The Love Suicides at Sonezaki, Chikamatsu Monzaemon
Romanticism and the Rise of the Novel
1800–1855

94 I was born in the Year 1632, in the City of York, of a good family
Robinson Crusoe, Daniel Defoe

96 If this is the best of all possible worlds, what are the others?
Candide, Voltaire

98 I have courage enough to walk through hell barefoot
The Robbers, Friedrich Schiller

100 There is nothing more difficult in love than expressing in writing what one does not feel
Les Liaisons dangereuses, Pierre Choderlos de Laclos

102 Further reading

110 Poetry is the breath and the finer spirit of all knowledge
Lyrical Ballads, William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge

111 Nothing is more wonderful, nothing more fantastic than real life
Nachtstücke, E. T. A. Hoffmann

112 Man errs, till he has ceased to strive
Faust, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

116 Once upon a time...
Children’s and Household Tales, Brothers Grimm

118 For what do we live, but to make sport for our neighbours, and laugh at them in our turn?
Pride and Prejudice, Jane Austen

120 Who shall conceive the horrors of my secret toil
Frankenstein, Mary Shelley

122 All for one, one for all
The Three Musketeers, Alexandre Dumas

124 But happiness I never aimed for, it is a stranger to my soul
Eugene Onegin, Alexander Pushkin

125 Let your soul stand cool and composed before a million universes
Leaves of Grass, Walt Whitman

126 You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man
Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, Frederick Douglass

128 I am no bird; and no net ensnares me
Jane Eyre, Charlotte Brontë

132 I cannot live without my life! I cannot live without my soul!
Wuthering Heights, Emily Brontë

138 There is no folly of the beast of the Earth which is not infinitely outdone by the madness of men
Moby-Dick, Herman Melville

146 All partings foreshadow the great final one
Bleak House, Charles Dickens

150 Further reading

Depicting Real Life
1855–1900

158 Boredom, quiet as the spider, was spinning its web in the shadowy places of her heart
Madame Bovary, Gustave Flaubert

164 I too am a child of this land; I too grew up amid this scenery
The Guarani, José de Alencar

165 The poet is a kinsman in the clouds
Les Fleurs du mal, Charles Baudelaire

166 Not being heard is no reason for silence
Les Misérables, Victor Hugo

168 Curiouser and curiouser!
Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, Lewis Carroll

172 Pain and suffering are always inevitable for a large intelligence and a deep heart
Crime and Punishment, Fyodor Dostoyevsky

178 To describe directly the life of humanity or even of a single nation, appears impossible
War and Peace, Leo Tolstoy

182 It is a narrow mind which cannot look at a subject from various points of view
Middlemarch, George Eliot

184 We may brave human laws, but we cannot resist natural ones
Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea, Jules Verne
185 In Sweden all we do is to celebrate jubilees
The Red Room, August Strindberg

186 She is written in a foreign tongue
The Portrait of a Lady, Henry James

188 Human beings can be awful cruel to one another
The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Mark Twain

190 He simply wanted to go down the mine again, to suffer and to struggle
Germinal, Émile Zola

192 The evening sun was now ugly to her, like a great inflamed wound in the sky
Tess of the d’Urbervilles, Thomas Hardy

194 The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it
The Picture of Dorian Gray, Oscar Wilde

195 There are things old and new which must not be contemplated by men’s eyes
Dracula, Bram Stoker

196 One of the dark places of the earth
Heart of Darkness, Joseph Conrad

198 Further reading

---

BREAKING WITH TRADITION
1900–1945

208 The world is full of obvious things which nobody by any chance ever observes
The Hound of the Baskervilles, Arthur Conan Doyle

209 I am a cat. As yet I have no name. I’ve no idea where I was born
I Am a Cat, Natsume Sōseki

210 Gregor Samsa found himself, in his bed, transformed into a monstrous vermin
Metamorphosis, Franz Kafka

212 Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori
Poems, Wilfred Owen

213 Ragtime literature which flouts traditional rhythms
The Waste Land, T. S. Eliot

214 The heaventree of stars hung with humid nightblue fruit
Ulysses, James Joyce

222 When I was young I, too, had many dreams
Call to Arms, Lu Xun

223 Love gives naught but itself and takes naught but from itself
The Prophet, Kahlil Gibran

224 Criticism marks the origin of progress and enlightenment
The Magic Mountain, Thomas Mann

228 Like moths among the whisperings and the champagne and the stars
The Great Gatsby, F. Scott Fitzgerald

---

POSTWAR WRITING
1945–1970

234 The old world must crumble. Awake, wind of dawn!
Berlin Alexanderplatz, Alfred Döblin

235 Ships at a distance have every man’s wish on board
Their Eyes Were Watching God, Zora Neale Hurston

236 Dead men are heavier than broken hearts
The Big Sleep, Raymond Chandler

238 It is such a secret place, the land of tears
The Little Prince, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

240 Further reading

---
263 It is impossible to touch eternity with one hand and life with the other
The Temple of the Golden Pavilion, Yukio Mishima

264 He was beat—the root, the soul of beatific
On the Road, Jack Kerouac

266 What is good among one people is an abomination with others
Things Fall Apart, Chinua Achebe

270 Even wallpaper has a better memory than human beings
The Tin Drum, Günter Grass

272 I think there's just one kind of folks. Folks
To Kill a Mockingbird, Harper Lee

274 Nothing is lost if one has the courage to proclaim that all is lost and we must begin anew
Hopscotch, Julio Cortázar

276 He had decided to live forever or die in the attempt
Catch-22, Joseph Heller

277 Everyday miracles and the living past
Death of a Naturalist, Seamus Heaney

278 There's got to be something wrong with us. To do what we did
In Cold Blood, Truman Capote

280 Ending at every moment but never ending its ending
One Hundred Years of Solitude, Gabriel García Márquez

286 Further reading

CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE
1970–PRESENT

296 Our history is an aggregate of last moments
Gravity's Rainbow, Thomas Pynchon

298 You are about to begin reading
Italo Calvino's new novel
If on a Winter's Night a Traveler, Italo Calvino

300 To understand just one life you have to swallow the world
Midnight's Children, Salman Rushdie

306 Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another
Beloved, Toni Morrison

309 Heaven and Earth were in turmoil
Red Sorghum, Mo Yan

311 You could not tell a story like this. A story like this you could only feel
Oscar and Lucinda, Peter Carey

312 A historical vision, the outcome of a multicultural commitment
Omeros, Derek Walcott

313 I felt lethal, on the verge of frenzy
American Psycho, Bret Easton Ellis

314 Quietly they moved down the calm and sacred river
A Suitable Boy, Vikram Seth

318 It's a very Greek idea, and a profound one. Beauty is terror
The Secret History, Donna Tartt

319 What we see before us is just one tiny part of the world
The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle, Haruki Murakami

320 Perhaps only in a world of the blind will things be what they truly are
Blindness, José Saramago

322 English is an unfit medium for the truth of South Africa
Disgrace, J. M. Coetzee

324 Every moment happens twice: inside and outside, and they are two different histories
White Teeth, Zadie Smith

326 The best way of keeping a secret is to pretend there isn't one
The Blind Assassin, Margaret Atwood

328 There was something his family wanted to forget
The Corrections, Jonathan Franzen

330 It all stems from the same nightmare, the one we created together
The Guest, Hwang Sok-yong

331 I regret that it takes a life to learn how to live
Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close, Jonathan Safran Foer

332 Further reading

340 GLOSSARY
344 INDEX
352 ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
ACTION
Storytelling is as old as humanity itself. The tradition of capturing the events and beliefs of communities reaches back to a time when humans first sat by a fire and told tales. History was preserved in the form of legends and mythologies that were passed down from one generation to the next, and offered answers to the mysteries of the universe and its creation.

Written accounts emerged at the same time as ancient civilizations, but at first the invention of writing met simple, prosaic functions—for example to record transactions between traders or tally quantities of goods. The thousands of cuneiform clay tablets discovered at Ugarit in Syria reveal the already complex nature of the written form by 1500 BCE. Writing soon evolved from a means of providing trading information, to preserving the oral histories that were integral to every culture and their customs, ideas, morals, and social structures. This led to the first examples of written literature, in the epic stories of Mesopotamia, India, and ancient Greece, and the more philosophical and historical texts of ancient China. As John Steinbeck so succinctly put it in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech in 1962: “Literature is as old as speech. It grew out of human need for it, and it has not changed except to become more needed.”

Miss Bingley of Jane Austen’s Pride and Prejudice may have been talking fatuously when she declared: “How much sooner one tires of anything than of a book!” but this sentiment rings true for many of us. Despite the almost limitless diversions that face readers today, literature continues to satisfy a spiritual or psychological need, and open readers’ minds to the world and its extraordinary variety. There are works penned hundreds of years ago that continue to enchant and amuse to this day; complex postmodern texts that can be challenging in the extreme, yet still hold us in their grip; and new novels that feel so fresh that they read as if words have only just been invented.

Defining literature

Although the simple definition of “literature” is “anything that is written down,” the word has become primarily associated with works of fiction, drama, and poetry, and weighted with the impossible-to-quantify distinction of merit and superiority. These values are intrinsic to the canon of literature drawn upon for academic study and appreciation that has been evolving since the middle of the 19th century. The term “canon” was borrowed from the ecclesiastical canons of authorized religious texts. The literary canon—a collection of works commonly agreed to be of exceptional quality—was formed almost entirely from familiar works of Western European literature.

Since the mid-20th century, cultural and literary theorists have done much to destabilize the canon by disputing the authority of these lists of the works of “dead, white Europeans.” The idea of a perceived canon of “great works” still stands as a useful framework, but rather than the term being used to define the same set of titles, it evolves with each new generation, which

I begin with writing the first sentence—and trusting to Almighty God for the second.

 Laurence Sterne

“
reexamines the ideology and power structures that underpin the selections of previous generations, and questions why certain other works were excluded. Arguably, studying how literature is created and testing its place in the canon may help to make us better readers. In the same spirit, this book features many titles that are traditionally regarded as “great works,” but explores their place in the wider story of literature, and within a richer mix of writing drawn from around the globe. They sit alongside newer texts that empower some of the voices that were silenced over the centuries by social constructs such as colonialism and patriarchy, and Europe’s dominance over literature.

Choosing books
This book takes a chronological journey through literature, using more than a hundred books as guideposts along the route. It also takes a global approach, exploring literary texts from a wide range of different cultures that many readers may not have encountered previously.

*The Literature Book*'s chosen works are either exemplars of a particular writing style or technique, or represent a group or movement that took a new direction, which was then adopted by other contemporary writers or expanded upon by future generations. The works are arranged chronologically to highlight the emergence of literary innovations against the social and political backdrop of their times. For example, during the 17th and 18th century, French literature evolved from Molière’s neoclassical comedies of manners into Voltaire’s satirical undermining of Enlightenment optimism, and later into a savage depiction of decadent French aristocracy shown in Pierre Choderlos de Laclos’ *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, published in the lead-up to the French Revolution. These changes in literature inevitably overlap as writers pioneered techniques that took time to enter the mainstream, while others continued literary traditions from previous eras.

Lists are always contentious; arguably the hundred or so books chosen here could be replaced with a hundred others, many times over. They are not presented as a definitive list of “must reads,” instead each work is framed by a focus or context that is supported by a timeline of related literary milestones and events. Cross-references link to works of a similar type, or that have influenced or been influenced by the book under discussion, while more than 200 titles are listed for further reading, exploring the literary landscape of each period in greater detail.

The story of literature
Around 4,000 years ago, the first stories to be written down came in the form of poems such as Mesopotamia’s *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and India’s *Mahabharata*, which were based on oral traditions. Rhyme, rhythm, and meter were essential aids to memory in songs and oral accounts, so it is unsurprising that the first texts made use of familiar poetic devices. Many early written texts were religious, and sacred texts such as the Bible and the Koran tell »

Some books leave us free and some books make us free.
*Ralph Waldo Emerson*
the stories of early histories, and have influenced writing for centuries. The form of literature that became Greek drama used a narrative balladlike form and introduced characters with individual voices, choruses of commentary, and the distinct categories of comedy and tragedy that continue to be used today. The collections of stories that make up the Arabic *One Thousand and One Nights* have multiple origins, but this prose fiction, written in plain speech, makes use of techniques that eventually became a mainstay in modern novels, such as framing (which introduces stories within the framework of another story), foreshadowing, and the inclusion of repetitive themes.

Although the vast medieval era was studied with secular highlights such as the Anglo-Saxon *Beowulf* and tales of chivalric romance, it was dominated in the West by religious texts in Latin and Greek. During the Renaissance, the joint energies of new philosophical investigation and sheer invention opened the door to literary innovation. The driving force behind the Renaissance was the production of new translations of ancient Greek and Roman texts which freed scholars from the dogma of the church. A humanist program of education which incorporated philosophy, grammar, history, and languages was built on the wisdom of the ancients. The Bible was translated into vernacular speech, enabling Christians to commune directly with their God. Gutenberg’s printing press brought books into the lives of ordinary people, and authors such as Geoffrey Chaucer and Giovanni Boccaccio made everyday life the subject of literature. By the early 17th century, Miguel de Cervantes and Daniel Defoe had given the world what many scholars consider to be the first novels, and the First Folio of Shakespeare’s plays was published.

**The rise of the novel**

Drama and poetry continued to evolve as the novel rose inexorably in importance, and by the end of the 18th century the novel had become a major form of literary expression.

Just as artists are described in terms of movements such as Baroque and Rococo, so literary history is defined by authors united by a particular style, technique, or location. The Romantic movement, characterized by stories driven by the emotions of idiosyncratic heroes, rather than plot and action, had its roots in the German Sturm und Drang movement. Meanwhile, in England, the Romantic poets testified to the power of nature to heal the human soul, and similar themes were taken up by the New England Transcendentalists. The word “genre” was increasingly applied to fiction’s subsets—for example, novels in the gothic genre. In the 19th century, Romanticism was superseded by a new form of social realism, played out in the drawing rooms of Jane Austen’s English middle and upper classes, and Gustave Flaubert’s provincial French towns, but used increasingly to depict the harsh lives of the poor. Fyodor Dostoyevsky described his novel *Crime and Punishment* as “fantasy realism,” and the dark interior monologues of the murderer Raskolnikov have the elements of a psychological thriller. Over the years,
fiction has diversified into multiple genres and subgenres, which today include everything from dystopian novels to fictional autobiography and Holocaust writing.

Alongside the growth of the novel, the vocabulary of literature expanded to describe styles of writing: for example, “epistolary” novels were written in the form of letters; and “Bildungsroman” and “picaresque” denoted coming-of-age tales. The language used within literature was developing too, and novels in the vernacular voice broadened the scope of national literature with writers such as Harriet Beecher Stowe and Mark Twain capturing the diversity of the people of the US.

In the early 20th century, Western society was revolutionized by industrial and technological advances, new artistic movements, and scientific developments. Within two decades, a generation of young men had been wasted in World War I. A perfect storm of literary experimentation followed, as Modernist writers searched for inventive stylistic features such as stream-of-consciousness writing, and wrote fragmented narratives representing the anguish and alienation of their changing world. After a brief period of literary optimism and experimentation, the world was again thrown into turmoil as World War II began, and the production of literature slowed as many writers became involved in the war effort, and produced propaganda or reported from the front rather than writing literature.

The global explosion

After two brutal global wars, the world was ready for change, and literature was central to the counterculture in the West of the 1950s and ’60s. Postmodernist writers and theorists focused on the artifice of writing, demanding more of the reader than simply engaging with a realist narrative. Novels now had fractured or nonlinear time spans, unreliable narrators, episodes of magical realism, and multiple-choice endings. During this period, the West, and in particular writing in English, also loosened its grip on world culture. Postcolonial writing emerged in countries such as Nigeria, South Africa, and India, and authors such as Gabriel García Márquez helped raise the status of a group of South American writers of extraordinary creativity.

Modern literature now sings with the previously unheard voices of feminists, civil rights campaigners, gay people, black and Native Americans, and immigrants. There is a healthy meritocratic blurring of distinction between classic and popular fiction. Global publishing, independent and internet publishing, global literature courses, national and international book prizes, and the growing number of works published in translation are bringing Australian, Canadian, South African, Indian, Caribbean, and modern Chinese novels, among others, to a world audience. This vast library of global literature has become both a reminder of shared connections worldwide and a celebration of difference.

Reading is the sole means by which we slip, involuntarily, often helplessly, into another’s skin, another’s voice, another’s soul.

Joyce Carol Oates
Systems of writing were first used as a means of recording administrative and commercial transactions. Gradually, these systems became more advanced, preserving ancient wisdom, historical records, and religious ceremonies, all of which had previously been memorized and were passed down orally. Throughout the world’s early civilizations, in Mesopotamia, China, India, and Greece, the written canon of literature first emerged as history and mythology.

The form that this earliest literature took was a long narrative poem, known as an epic, which focuses on the legends surrounding a great warrior or leader, and his battles to protect his people from their enemies and the forces of evil. The combination of historical events and mythical adventures, told in a metrical verse form, explained the people’s cultural inheritance in an exciting and memorable way.

**Tales of gods and men**
The first known epics, which include the various versions of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, and the great Sanskrit epics *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, often tell of the origin of a civilization, or a defining moment in its early history. Seen through the exploits of a heroic individual or a ruling family, these epics also explained the involvement of the gods, often contrasting their powers with the frailties of human heroes. This was a theme that also appeared in the later epics ascribed to Homer. His heroes Achilles and Odysseus are depicted not only as noble warriors in the Trojan War that established ancient Greece as a great power, but also as very human characters confronting both fate and their own weaknesses. Later, as Greek influence declined, Roman poets developed their own Latin version of the form, even borrowing the story of the Trojan War, as Virgil did in the *Aeneid*, to produce an epic of the beginning of Rome. The scale and depth of Homer’s epics, and their poetic structure, provided the foundation on which Western literature is built.

**Greek drama**
Another product of the tradition of storytelling in ancient Greece was drama, which developed from recounting a narrative to acting out the part of a character and thereby bringing the tale to life. Gradually,
this dramatic storytelling became more sophisticated, and by the time Athens was established as a democratic nation-state, the theater was an integral part of its culture, with dramatists such as Aeschylus, Euripides, and Sophocles producing tragedies and comedies which attracted audiences of thousands.

From Europe to Asia
In northern Europe oral storytelling prevailed, and the tales of these cultures were not written down until around the 8th century. The earliest known complete Anglo-Saxon epic, Beowulf, relates history and mythology preserved by the Scandinavian ancestors of the English. The later Icelandic sagas also drew from the Norse legends.

Meanwhile, in mainland Europe the nobility were entertained by professional poets. Some poets took their subject matter from the mythology of ancient Greece and Rome, while the troubadours of southern France chose stirring stories of Charlemagne and his men in battle with the Islamic Moors and Saracens. The trouvères of northern France, in contrast, recited lyrical and passionate tales of chivalry and courtly love about the reign of the legendary King Arthur of Britain.

Farther east, during the “Golden Age” of Islamic culture in the late medieval period when scholarship was held in high esteem, epic narrative tales such as those in the One Thousand and One Nights were valued for their capacity to entertain, although poetry was considered to be the highest form of literature. In ancient China, too, heroic legends were considered more a form of folklore than literature, and the first written texts to be accorded the status of classics were those that preserved the history, customs, and philosophy of the culture. Along with these factual texts, however, was a collection of odes that provided a model for Chinese poetry for centuries, reaching its high point under the emperors of the Tang dynasty.

In the 11th century, Japan, which had been dominated by Chinese culture, produced its own distinctive literature in the Japanese language. Fictional prose accounts of life in the Heian court developed from the ancient chronicles of the ruling dynasties, anticipating the emergence of the novel in Europe.
IN CONTEXT

FOCUS
Bronze Age literature

BEFORE
30th century BCE Systems of writing first emerge in Mesopotamia and Egypt.

c.2600 BCE The earliest known texts—although not literary ones—are written on tablets, in the Sumerian language, at Abu Salabikh, Mesopotamia.

c.2285–2250 BCE The earliest known author, Akkadian princess and priestess Enheduanna, lives and works in the Sumerian city of Ur.

AFTER

c.1700–1100 BCE The Rig Veda, the first of the four Hindu sacred texts known as Vedas, is written in northwestern India.

c.1550 BCE The Egyptian Book of the Dead is the first of the Egyptian funerary texts to be written on papyrus rather than the walls of tombs or coffins.

W
riting first appeared in Mesopotamia at the beginning of what is now known as the Bronze Age (c.3300–1200 BCE). Cuneiform symbols, originally devised as a means of recording commercial transactions, had evolved from numerals into representations of sounds, which offered a means of writing down the Sumerian and Akkadian languages.

Among the fragments of texts discovered in 1853 by the Assyrian archaeologist Hormuzd Rassan are tablets inscribed with tales of the legendary King Gilgamesh of Uruk, which are some of the earliest examples of written literature. The stories had probably been passed down orally in a form that combined history and mythology.

From tyrant to hero
The Epic of Gilgamesh, as the collected tales are known, tells how the oppressive ruler of the Mesopotamian city of Uruk is taught a lesson, and goes on to become a local hero. To punish Gilgamesh for his arrogance, the gods send the “wild man” Enkidu, formed from clay, to torment him. After a fight, however, they become friends, and embark on a series of monster-slaying adventures. Angered by this turn of events, the gods sentence Enkidu to death. Gilgamesh is distraught at the loss of his companion, but also becomes aware of his own mortality. The second half of the tale tells of Gilgamesh’s quest for the secret of eternal life and of his return to Uruk—still a mortal, but a wiser man and more noble ruler.

“
The life that you seek you never will find.

The Epic of Gilgamesh

“
The Book of Changes is about divination; it is a kind of oracle. The original method of divination from which it evolved is attributed to the legendary emperor Fu Xi, and was formalized by King Wen of Zhou (1152–1056 BCE) in a text known as the *Zhou yi*. The “King Wen sequence” describes 64 hexagrams, possible combinations of numbers obtained by casting yarrow stalks or coins, each associated with a certain situation or circumstance, to which Wen offered judgments. Later scholars added comments in the “Ten Wings,” including the Great Commentary, which together with the *Zhou yi* became known as the *Book of Changes* (*Yijing* or *I Ching*, as it is still often called).

The book is often referred to as one of the Five Classics, with the *Book of Documents* (*Shujing*), *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chunqiu*), *Book of Rites* (*Liji*), and *Book of Odes* (*Shijing*). These Classics are believed to have been compiled by Kong Fuzi (traditional dates 551–479 BCE), who is better known in the West as Confucius. Kong Fuzi’s moral and political philosophy was adopted as the official ideology of China during the 3rd century BCE.

Much later, in around the 12th century, shorter writings—either ascribed to Confucius or said to have been inspired by his teachings—were grouped into the Four Books of Confucianism. These were the main point of reference for Confucianism as a state ideology. The Book of Changes seems an odd fit for rational Confucianism, but it was thought to be a source of great wisdom. It complemented the volumes of Confucian philosophy, history, etiquette, and poetry as a book to be consulted not only for its prophetic ability, but also as a model of wise counsel, describing what the “superior man” should do in various situations, and it has remained a source of wisdom in China (and beyond) to the present day.
WHAT IS THIS CRIME I AM PLANNING, O KRISHNA?

MAHABHARATA (9TH–4TH CENTURIES BCE), ATTRIBUTED TO VYASA

IN CONTEXT

FOCUS

The great Sanskrit epics

BEFORE

3rd millennium BCE Vyasa writes the original version of the Mahabharata, in which he appears as a character.

3rd millennium BCE The Vedas (the Rig Veda, Yajur Veda, Sama Veda and Atharva Veda) are composed in Sanskrit, and together constitute the first of the Hindu scriptures.

AFTER

C.5TH–4TH CENTURY BCE According to tradition, Valmiki writes the Ramayana, using the sloka (meaning “song”) which becomes the standard Sanskrit verse form.

C.250 BCE–1000 CE A canon of Hindu texts known as the Puranas develops. It includes the genealogy of the deities and narratives of cosmology.

The epic poetry of the Indian subcontinent is among the oldest known literature, and it emerged from a long oral tradition of storytelling and reciting. As with other ancient literature, the tales are a mixture of mythology, legends, and historical events, which developed over centuries and were eventually written down.

In addition to this epic poetry, ancient Indian writing includes the Vedas, which are the central sacred texts of Brahminical Hinduism, recorded from around the middle of the 2nd millennium BCE. The Vedas and the poetry were written in Sanskrit, which was regarded as the common literary language of
ancient India, and is the language from which many Indo-European languages evolved.

Up to the 1st century CE, Sanskrit literature was dominated by the Vedas and two great epic poems: the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. Although the Ramayana contains historical narrative, mythology, and folktales, it appears to be an original work by a single poet, and is traditionally attributed to the sage Valmiki. In contrast, the Mahabharata, the better known and much longer of the two, has a more complex provenance, which suggests a long period of evolution.

A gift of Vishnu
The Mahabharata probably first took shape in the 9th century BCE and only reached its final form in around the 4th century BCE. The work is very long and comprises more than 100,000 verse couplets, known as shloka, divided into 18 books, or parvas. In addition to recounting the story of two warring families, it tells of their history, and that of India and the Hindu religion that is integral to it. At the outset, the narrator of the first book, the Adi Parva (“The Book of the Beginning”), explains: “Whatever is here, is found elsewhere. But what is not here, is nowhere else.”

According to tradition, and as described in its opening section, the Mahabharata was written by a poet and wise man called Vyasa. Said to have lived in the 3rd millennium BCE, Vyasa was an avatar (incarnation) of the Hindu god Vishnu. The narrator of the greater part of the epic is Vyasa’s disciple Vaisampayana, but two other people also narrate sections: a minstrel-sage, Ugrasrava Sauti, and a courtier, Sanjaya.

Vaisampayana explains how Vyasa dictated the entire story to the elephant-headed god Ganesha in a single sitting. Subsequently, many years later, Vaisampayana’s story takes its final form as the Mahabharata when it is retold by Sauti to a meeting of Hindu sages, as described in the Adi Parva. This complicated nesting of frame narratives probably reflects the existence of different historical versions of the story before it took the shape we know today.

It is also typical of the way in which the historical, mythological, and religious intertwine throughout the Mahabharata. Although the central plot concerns the split in the ruling Bharata family of northern India, and the ensuing battle at Kurukshetra and its aftermath, the story is given a mythical dimension by the introduction of the character Krishna, another avatar of Vishnu. There are also numerous subplots, and several philosophical and »

The sage Vyasa dictates the epic Mahabharata, which means “Great Story of the Bharata,” referring to a ruling family of northern India. The scribe is elephant-headed god Ganesha.
Family divisions
After its explanatory preamble, the Mahabharata proper describes how the ruling clan of the Kuru becomes divided into two rival families, the Kaurava and the Pandava. These are the descendants of two princes, the blind Dhritarashtra and his brother Pandu. The enmity begins when Dhritarashtra is denied the throne because of his disability. Pandu becomes king instead, but a curse prevents him from fathering children. The gods, however, impregnate his wife and the line of Pandava seems safe. But the 100 sons of Dhritarashtra feel that they have a claim to the kingdom, and after Yudhishtira, the eldest Pandava, is crowned, they trick him into losing everything in a game of dice. In disgrace, the Pandavas are sent into exile.

Some years later, the five Pandava brothers return to claim the throne, and so starts the series of battles at Kurukshetra. The second son of Pandu, Arjuna, goes into war with his cousin and close companion Krishna as his charioteer, but only reluctantly joins the fight after Krishna persuades him that it is his duty to fight for what is right. The war turns out to be a bloodbath, in which almost all the Kauravas are slaughtered; the few who survive take their revenge on the Pandava troops by murdering them in their sleep. Only the five brothers survive the massacre, and they ensure the Kauravas are wiped out completely.

Yudhishtira becomes king again, but the victory is hollow and the poem goes on to detail the war’s awful aftermath. Krishna, or at least this particular incarnation of Vishnu, is accidentally killed, and the Pandavas begin their long, dangerous journey to heaven. Only at the very end are the brothers reunited, and reconciled with their cousins the Kauravas, in the spiritual world.

Moral dilemmas
Dharma is a recurrent theme in the Mahabharata, both in terms of how this notion applies to each of us in every situation, and of how it is a difficult path to follow, because of human weaknesses and the
Dhritarashtra reaches out blindly for his wife Gandhari, who has bound her eyes to share his darkened world. Bad actions in a previous life meant his disability was a consequence of karma.

force of fate. As Kripa—one of the Kauravas—says in the tenth book, Sauptika Parva (“The Book of the Sleeping Warriors”), “There are two forces: fate and human effort—all men depend on and are bound by these, there is nothing else.” What is right and wrong is seldom clear, and it is by reconciling conflicting interests such as love and duty that we can achieve liberation from the cycle of life, death, and rebirth.

In each of the Mahabharata’s episodes human strengths and weaknesses are contrasted, and the battle between right and wrong, writ large in the devastating war between the Kauravas and the Pandavas, is shown to be complex, subtle, and ultimately destructive. While most of the poem shows its characters dealing with moral dilemmas in their human affairs, in the final sections, and especially after the death of Krishna, we see them facing their spiritual fate. The story ends, after much tragedy and conflict, with the protagonists achieving eternal bliss, but also with the warning that the human struggles continue here on Earth.

Cultural touchstone
The Mahabharata’s wide-ranging plot and subject matter, built on favorite mythological and historical stories with a moral and religious message, have ensured the epic’s popularity up to the present day. Such was its success that for several centuries only the Ramayana could rival its claim to be the great Sanskrit epic. While it cannot match the Mahabharata for sheer scope and excitement, the Ramayana is more consistent and elegantly poetic, and together the two inspired a school of Sanskrit epic poetry that flourished from the 1st to the 7th centuries ce. As sources of Hindu wisdom and Indian history and mythology, the great epics enjoy a cultural value in India comparable with Homer’s Iliad and Odyssey in the West.

The Bhagavad Gita
At the heart of the epic Mahabharata is the war at Kurukshetra, beginning with the sixth book, which includes a section now known as the Bhagavad Gita, the “Song of the Blessed.” Prior to battle, Arjuna, the Pandava prince, recognizes members of his family in the opposing Kaurava army, and lays down his bow. But his cousin and companion Krishna reminds him of his duty to fight this just war. The philosophical dialogue between them is described in the 700-verse Bhagavad Gita, which has become an important Hindu scripture in its own right, explaining such concepts as dharma (right conduct), karma (intentions and outcomes), and moksha (liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth). Although Krishna’s counsel is specific to Arjuna’s duty to fight, the battleground setting can be interpreted as a metaphor for the opposing forces of good and evil in general, and Arjuna’s crisis of conscience as representing the choices we all must make.

When the Gods deal defeat to a person, they first take his mind away, so that he sees things wrongly. Mahabharata
SING, O GODDESS, THE ANGER OF ACHILLES

ILIAD (c. 8TH CENTURY BCE), ATTRIBUTED TO HOMER
Epics are narrative poems that recount the story of a hero who represents a particular culture. They chronicle his quests and ordeals, and account for the hero’s choices and motives, so helping to establish and codify the moral principles of a society.

Epics were among the earliest forms of literature in many cultures around the world. These popular stories were initially told orally, and over time were embellished, reinterpreted, formalized, and finally written down, often laying the foundation’s of a culture’s literary history. Epics usually contained many characters and genealogies, and were long and complex in structure. They were probably learned by rote in a repetitive poetic meter, or recited to a musical accompaniment, since it is far easier to memorize verse than prose. Indeed, the word “epic” itself is derived from the ancient Greek word *epos*, meaning both “story” and “poem.”

The Trojan War
In ancient Greece many epic tales were told about the Trojan War—a conflict between the Achaean (an alliance of the Greek states) and the city of Troy. The first and most famous of these accounts were the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, both attributed to a single author, known as Homer. Historians concede that these epics were inspired by actual events—sporadic wars between Greece and Troy did occur some five centuries before the works were written—but their characters and plots are works of the imagination. However, the Greeks of Homer’s era would have believed these stories to be true accounts of the heroism of their ancestors.

The Greeks began to write down their epics around the 8th century BCE. Like the spoken tales on which they were based, they

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**The Homeric question**

The two great ancient Greek epics, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, are traditionally ascribed to the poet Homer—yet little is known about him. Since the time of the Greek historian Herodotus in the 5th century BCE, widely differing suggestions have been made for Homer’s dates of birth and death, place of origin, and other details of his life. Classical scholars refer to “the Homeric question,” which includes a number of related issues. Who is Homer—did he ever exist, and if so when? Was Homer the sole author of the epics, or one of a number of authors? Did the author or authors of the work originate them, or simply make a written record of poems that had been passed down orally through the generations?

Many scholars argue that the epics evolved from an oral tradition and were refined and embroidered upon by multiple poets in several versions. Solid evidence is lacking and the Homeric question is yet to be answered definitively.
The Greeks and Trojans were helped or hindered by the gods, who used the conflict to fight their own battles. Hera, Athena, and Poseidon were aligned with the Greeks, while Apollo, Aphrodite, and Artemis supported the Trojans. Zeus remained largely neutral.

The Greeks and Trojans

**The Gods**

- **Zeus**
  - king of the gods

**Hera**
- queen of the gods

**Athena**
- goddess of wisdom

**Poseidon**
- god of the sea

**Apollo**
- god of the sun

**Aphrodite**
- goddess of love

**Artemis**
- goddess of the moon

**The Achaeans (Greeks)**

- **Agamemnon**
  - king of Mycenae

- **Achilles**
  - Greece’s greatest warrior

- **Patroclus**
  - companion of Achilles

- **Menelaus**
  - king of Sparta

- **Odysseus**
  - commander, and king of Ithaca

**The Trojans**

- **Priam**
  - king of Troy

- **Hector**
  - son of Priam

- **Paris**
  - brother of Hector

- **Helen**
  - wife of Menelaus

- **Aeneas**
  - a son of Aphrodite

took the form of narrative poems. These Greek epics have a regular meter—each line is comprised of six basic rhythmic units, and each of these units contains one long and two short syllables. This meter is known as dactylic hexameter, or more commonly, “epic meter.” Variations on this basic rhythmic pattern give the flexibility needed for poetic composition.

**A tale of gods and men**

The Iliad is a sophisticated piece of storytelling. It relates the tale of the war in Ilium (Troy) from the perspective of one character in particular—Achilles. Parts of the story of the war are told in flashback, or in prophecies of the future. Woven into this plot are subplots and insights into the lives of the protagonists.

How much of this complexity can be credited to Homer, and how much is a result of refinement and embroidering over previous generations, is impossible to tell. The result is a work that combines history, legend, and mythology, while offering the essential ingredients of good storytelling—adventure and human drama—that make it a compelling read.

The Iliad is massive, both in its length and its narrative scope (it is, after all, where we get the idea of things being on an “epic” scale), consisting of over 15,000 lines of verse, divided into 24 books. Rather than simply telling the tale chronologically, Homer grabs the reader’s attention by using a device common to many epics. This is to drop the reader straight into the thick of the action, or in media res (“the middle of the thing”) as described by the Roman poet, Horace. Homer’s account starts in the final year of the conflict, which has already been

**Troy was believed** for many years to be a mythical city. However, archaeologists now agree that excavations in Anatolia, Turkey, have revealed the Troy of Homer’s Iliad.
raging for nine years. Homer digresses to explain some of the background to the events he is describing, but he assumes much prior knowledge about the causes of the conflict, which contemporary readers would have known well.

**Origins of the war**
The roots of the Trojan War can be found in events that occurred at the wedding of the sea nymph Thetis to the Greek hero Peleus, who was a companion to the hero Hercules. The celebrations were attended by many gods and goddesses, including Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite. An argument broke out between the three goddesses, each of whom claimed to be the most beautiful. To resolve the dispute, Zeus asked Paris, the son of King Priam of Troy, to judge a beauty contest between them. Aphrodite offered Paris a bribe—the hand of Helen of Troy, the most beautiful woman in the world. Unfortunately, Helen was already married to Menelaus, brother of King Agamemnon of Mycenae, a Greek state. The subsequent abduction of Helen by Paris triggered the conflict.

Readers join the narrative when Agamemnon's Achaean forces are fighting to recapture Helen. The book's opening, “Sing, O Goddess, the anger of Achilles” sets the scene, preparing the reader for a story of war, but also implies that this is a tale of personal vengeance—and alludes to the involvement of the gods. The history of the war runs in parallel with Achilles' story, and his sense of honor and valor mirrors that of the Greek nation itself.

**The power of anger**
Anger is a predominant theme in the *Iliad*, manifested in the war itself and as a motivation for the actions of the individual characters. There is the righteous anger of Agamemnon and Menelaus over the kidnapping of Helen, but also the wrath that drives Achilles and makes him such a fearsome warrior, provoked again and again by events in the story. His anger is not directed solely at the Trojans, nor even restricted to human foes; at one point he is so enraged he fights the river god Xanthus.

Underlying the wrath of Achilles is a sense of honor and nobility which, like that of the Greek people, is offended by disrespect and injustice, but is sometimes directed inward as he struggles with the conflicts that arise between duty, destiny, ambition, and loyalty.

At the beginning of the *Iliad*, Achilles becomes enraged by King Agamemnon, the Greek commander, who has taken for himself Briseis—a woman who had been given to Achilles as a prize of war. Unable to vent his anger toward the king directly, Achilles withdraws to his tent, refusing to fight any more. Only the death in action of his close friend, Patroclus, at the hands of Hector, the eldest son of King Priam and the hero of the Trojans, brings him back into battle, more violently than ever, by giving him a focus for his anger.

**A tale of two heroes**
Hector is, like Achilles, a military leader. He is considered the noblest and mightiest of the Trojan
warriors. But his character and motivation stand in contrast to those of Achilles, highlighting two very different attitudes to war. Achilles is driven by an inner rage, but also the nobler motives of defending the honor of his king and country, and ultimately avenging the killing of Patroclus, his comrade-in-arms. Hector fights out of loyalty—to Troy, of course, but also to his family. In addition to being protective of his younger brother, Paris, whose abduction of Helen has caused the war, he is loyal to his father, Priam, who is portrayed as a wise and benevolent king. Achilles is the professional soldier, with few family ties, and Hector the reluctant but fierce fighter, defending home and family rather than honor.

Homer portrays both men as noble, but not without their flaws. Their characteristics and situations are metaphors for the contrasting values of society and those of the individual, and those of duty and responsibility compared with loyalty and love. Neither side is wholly right or wrong, but in this war one must emerge victorious. Even though both heroes ultimately die in the conflict—Achilles slays Hector, and is himself killed by a fatal arrow in his heel—it is the heroism personified by Achilles that wins out over Hector’s bonds of kinship. Ultimately, the Iliad affirms that there is glory in warfare, and that honorable reasons exist for fighting.

**Destiny and the gods**

Homer knew that his readers—the Greeks—were aware of the outcome of the story because if Troy had won the war, there would have been no Greek civilization. The Greeks were destined to win, and to reinforce this inevitability, Homer makes reference to many prophecies throughout the Iliad, and to the role of fate and the gods in deciding the war’s outcome.

To the ancient Greeks, the gods were immortals who had dominion over certain realms or possessed certain powers; they were not the omnipotent deities of later beliefs. Occasionally they interacted with humans, but generally left them to their own devices. In the Iliad, however, several of the gods had vested interests that led them to become involved in the Trojan War from time to time. The war had, after all, been triggered by the abduction of Helen, the daughter of...
of Zeus and Leda. Paris had seized Helen in collusion with Aphrodite, so sides had already been taken on Mount Olympus, the home of the gods. There were also other connections between the gods and the mortals: Thetis, for example, was not only a sea nymph but also the mother of Achilles.

Such allegiances prompted the gods to intervene in human affairs, protecting their favorites from harm, and making life difficult for their enemies. Apollo in particular is fiercely anti-Greek, and causes them trouble on several occasions. For example, when Patroclus goes into battle disguised as Achilles, by wearing Achilles’ famously protective armor, Apollo contrives to dislodge it, allowing Hector to kill him. Incensed by the death of his best friend, Achilles vows vengeance. And again the gods intervene: his immortal mother Thetis presents him with a new suit of divine armor, specially forged by the god Hephaestus.

The need humans have for such protection underlines the difference between them and the gods—their mortality. Heroes go to war knowing they face death, but reconcile themselves with the knowledge that all humans must eventually die. The characters are not only mortal, but their creations are impermanent. They know that the war will have more than human casualties, because one nation must be destroyed—and even the victorious civilization will come to an end one day. Homer sometimes overtly states this fact by citing prophecies of the future for both the Iliad’s main characters and for Troy, but it is implicit that this is the common fate of mankind—the destiny of every society. What lives on, however, is the glory of the heroes and their great deeds, recounted in the stories passed down through the ages.

Beyond the conflict
After war, bloodshed, and fury, Homer’s epic ends with peace and reconciliation. In perhaps the most memorably moving scene of the poem, the elderly King Priam visits Achilles and pleads for the return of the body of Hector, his son. Achilles is moved by the old man’s plea, and a temporary truce is called to give the Trojans time for an appropriate funeral, and this

Priam kisses Achilles’ hand, and asks him to take pity and surrender the body of his son Hector, whom Achilles has killed in battle. Achilles displays empathy with Priam’s grief.
also lays Achilles’ rage to rest. But despite this apparently peaceful ending, we know that this calm will be short-lived. The battle will resume, Troy will fall, and at some point Achilles will die. The story is not over yet.

Indeed, Homer’s second epic poem, the Odyssey, ties up some of the loose ends by following the fortunes of another of the Greek heroes, Odysseus (known to the Romans as Ulysses), as he makes his way home to Ithaca from Troy after the war. In the Odyssey, the hero recounts the eventual destruction of Troy, and the death of Achilles, but this is very much background to the story of his own arduous journey.

**Western cornerstone**

It is almost impossible to overstate the impact of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* on the literature of ancient Greece and Rome, and therefore the whole of Western literature. They were not simply the first literary works in Europe, but monumental examples that firmly laid the foundations of the epic genre.

Homer’s expert use of complex and highly visual similes gave his poetry unprecedented depth, and his mastery of dactylic hexameter provided an inspirational musicality to his verse. The meter used by Homer was adopted for subsequent epic poetry in Greek as well as in Latin, and the hybrid dialect he used became the recognized Greek of literature.

Perhaps most significantly of all, Homer turned an oral tradition of stories about folk heroes into a literary form—the epic. He also set the standard for the subtext of the epic, where personal and social values often stand in opposition.

The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* inspired a number of Greek poets to write epics on similar themes, but they also influenced the new form of drama that developed in the classical period. While Homer was popular reading in ancient Greece, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were standard texts in ancient Rome, inspiring poets to develop a distinctive Latin epic poetry. This reached its height in Virgil’s *Aeneid*, which in addition to being a homage to Homer took as its starting point the fall of Troy.

**Eternally influential**

Reverence for the Homeric epics did not end in classical times. Homer’s works were widely read and studied in the Middle Ages and their stories have been retold countless times in different forms. Homer’s ancient poems can be considered the antecedents of medieval sagas, as well as the novel. Since the beginning of the 20th century, other forms of mass-audience storytelling—from movies to television series—have followed the epic model, and are deeply indebted to Homer for their structure and cultural relevance.

> Zeus knows, no doubt, and every immortal too which fighter is doomed to end all this in death. *Iliad*
HOW DREADFUL
KNOWLEDGE
OF THE TRUTH CAN BE
WHEN THERE’S NO HELP IN
TRUTH!

OEDIPUS THE KING (c.429 BCE),
SOPHOCLES
With the revolt that overthrew the last tyrant king in 510 BCE, and the establishment of a form of democracy, the city-state of Athens ushered in the era of classical Greece. For two centuries, Athens was not only a center of political power in the region, but also a hotbed of intellectual activity that fostered an extraordinary flowering of philosophy, literary culture, and art, which was to have a profound influence on the development of Western civilization.

Classical Greek culture was dominated by the achievements of Athenian thinkers, artists, and writers, who developed aesthetic values of clarity, form, and balance—principles that were epitomized by classical architecture. A human-centered view also influenced the development of a comparatively new literary art form, drama, which evolved from religious performances by a chorus in honor of the god Dionysus.

The birth of drama
By the beginning of the classical era, religious performances had changed from essentially musical ceremonies to something more like drama as we know it today, with the addition of actors to play the parts of the characters in a story, rather than simply narrating.

This new form of entertainment was enormously popular, and formed the focal point of an annual festival of Dionysia, which was held over several days in a custom-built open-air theater that attracted audiences of up to 15,000 people.

Sophocles was born (c.496 BCE) in Colonus, near Athens. He showed an early aptitude for music, and through this became interested in the art of drama, encouraged and perhaps trained by the innovative tragedian Aeschylus. With his first entry in the Dionysia theater contest in 468 BCE, he won first prize from the reigning champion Aeschylus, and he soon became the most celebrated tragedian of his generation. In all, he wrote more than 120 plays, of which only a handful have survived intact. Sophocles was also a respected member of Athens society, and was appointed as a treasurer in Pericles’ government and later as a military commander. He married twice, and both his son Iophon and grandson Sophocles followed in his footsteps as playwrights. Shortly before his death in 406 BCE, he finished his final play, Oedipus at Colonus, which was produced posthumously by his grandson.

Other key works
- c.441 BCE Antigone
- c.429 BCE Oedipus the King
- c.409 BCE Electra
Writers submitted work to be performed at the festival, in the form of a trilogy of tragedies followed by a comic play, and competed for prestigious prizes.

Three dramatists dominated the prizewinners’ list for much of the 5th century BCE: Aeschylus (c.525/524–c.456/455 BCE), Euripides (c.484–406 BCE), and Sophocles (c.496–406 BCE). Their contribution, which amounted to several hundred plays, set a definitive standard for the art of tragedy. Aeschylus, as the earliest of the three great tragedians, is generally considered the innovator, initiating many of the conventions associated with the form. He is credited with expanding the number of actors in his plays, and having them interact in dialogue, which introduced the idea of dramatic conflict. Where formerly the chorus had presented the action of the drama, the actors now took center stage, and the chorus took on the role of setting the scene and commenting on the actions of the characters.

The move toward a greater realism was sustained by Euripides, who further reduced the role of the chorus, and presented more three-dimensional characters with more complex interaction.

**Breaking with convention**

Of the three great dramatists, it is Sophocles whose tragedies have come to be regarded as the high point of classical Greek drama. Sadly, only seven of the 123 tragedies he wrote have survived, but of these perhaps the finest is *Oedipus the King*.

The play was one of three written by Sophocles about the mythical king of Thebes (the others being *Oedipus at Colonus* and *Antigone*), known collectively as the Theban plays. Breaking with the convention of presenting tragedies in trilogies established by Aeschylus, Sophocles conceived each of these as a separate entity, and they were written and produced several years apart and out of chronological order.

In *Oedipus the King* (often referred to instead by its Latinized title *Oedipus Rex*), Sophocles created what is now regarded as the epitome of classical Athenian tragedy. The play follows the established formal structure: a prologue, followed by the introduction of characters and the unfolding of plot through »
a series of episodes interspersed with commentary from the chorus, leading to a choral *exodus*, or conclusion. Within this framework, Sophocles uses his own innovation of a third actor to widen the variety of character interaction and enable a more complex plot, creating the psychological tensions synonymous with the word “drama” today.

Typically, a tragedy of this sort was the story of a hero suffering a misfortune that leads to his undoing, traditionally at the hands of the gods or fate. As classical tragedy developed, however, the hero’s reversal of fortune was increasingly portrayed as the result of a frailty or fault in the character of the protagonist—the “fatal flaw.” In *Oedipus the King* both fate and character play their part in the tragic events. The character of Oedipus is also far from black and white. At the beginning of the play he appears as the respected ruler of Thebes, to whom the people turn to rid them of a curse, but as the plot unfolds his unwitting involvement in the curse is revealed.

This revelation contributes to the atmosphere of foreboding that was a characteristic of the best classical tragedies. The sense of doom arose from the fact that many of these stories were already well known, as that of Oedipus must have been. Such a situation creates tragic irony, when the audience is aware of a character’s fate and witnesses his unsuspecting progress toward inevitable doom. In *Oedipus the King*, Sophocles ratchets up this atmosphere of inevitability by introducing various references to prophecies that were made many years before, which both Oedipus and his wife Jocasta have ignored. The story is not so much about the events that lead to Oedipus’s downfall, as about the events that prompt revelations of the significance of his past actions.

**Tragedy foretold**

The chain of events begins with Thebes stricken by plague. When consulted, the oracle at Delphi says that the plague will abate when the murderer of Laius, the former king of Thebes and previous husband of Jocasta, is found. Oedipus seeks the advice of the blind prophet Tiresias to find the killer. This puts Tiresias in a difficult position because, although blind, he can see what Oedipus cannot: that Oedipus himself is the unwitting murderer, and advises him to let the matter rest. But Oedipus demands the truth, and then furiously refuses to believe the prophet’s accusation, while Tiresias further reveals that the killer will turn out to be the son of his own wife. A rattled Oedipus recalls a visit to Delphi as a youth, where he had gone to determine his true parentage, having overheard that he had been adopted. Instead, the oracle told him that he would murder his father and marry his mother—so he had fled, journeying toward Thebes. On his way to the city, he had met and killed an older man who barred his way.

The significance of this is not lost on the audience, especially when Sophocles introduces Jocasta, Oedipus’s wife and the widow of Laius, who comforts Oedipus by arguing that prophecies are untrue;

An ancient house mosaic depicts masks used in tragedies. Actors often wore masks, some with exaggerated expressions, to help convey the character they were representing.
there was a prophecy that Laius would be killed by his son, she says, when he was slain by bandits. This information makes clear to the audience that the prophecy given to Oedipus has been self-fulfilling; it prompted him to leave home and set in motion the events that led to his unconsciously killing his own father Laius and becoming king of Thebes in his place, with his own mother Jocasta as his wife. The climax is reached as things become clear to Oedipus. He reacts by blinding himself. The chorus, which has throughout the tragedy expressed the inner thoughts and feelings that could not be expressed by the characters themselves, closes the drama by repeating to an empty stage that “no man should be considered fortunate until he is dead.”

The Western tradition

Oedipus the King gained immediate approval with Athenian audiences, and was hailed by Aristotle as probably the finest of all classical Greek tragedies. Sophocles’ skillful handling of a complex plot, dealing with themes of free will and determinacy, and the fatal flaw of a noble character, not only set a benchmark for classical drama, but also formed the basis of the subsequent Western tradition of drama.

Following their deaths, there were no Greek tragedians of the same stature as Aeschylus, Euripides, and Sophocles. Drama continued to be a central part of Athenian cultural life, but the plaudits were more often given to the producer or actors than the writer himself. The comedies of Aristophanes (c.450–c.388 BCE) also helped to fill the void left by the absence of great tragedy, and gradually popular taste grew for less serious drama. Even today, however, the tragedies of the classical Greek period remain significant, not least for their psychological exploration of character, which Freud and Jung used in their theories of the unconscious, drives, and repressed emotion. The surviving works of the Athenian tragedians, and Oedipus the King in particular, were revived during the Enlightenment, and have been performed regularly ever since, with their themes and stories reinterpreted by many writers. ■

Aristotle’s Poetics c.335 BCE

Aristotle (384–322 BCE) held the tragedians in high regard, and his Poetics is a treatise on the art of tragedy. He saw tragedy as a mimesis (an imitation) of an action, one that should arouse pity and fear. These emotions are given a katharsis, a purging, by the unfolding of the drama. The quality of such a tragedy is determined by six elements: plot, character, thought, diction, spectacle, and melody. The plot must be a “unity of action,” with a beginning, middle, and end.

Why should anyone in this world be afraid, Since Fate rules us and nothing can be foreseen? A man should live only for the present day. Oedipus the King

At least one of the characters should undergo a change in fortune, through fate, a flaw in character, or a blend of the two. Next in importance is thought, by which he means the themes, and the moral message, of the play. This is followed by diction, the language, such as the use of metaphors, and the actor’s delivery. The spectacle (scenery and stage effects) and melody (from the chorus) should be integral to the plot and enhance the portrayal of character.
**IN CONTEXT**

**FOCUS**

Literature of the Roman world

**BEFORE**

- **3rd century BCE** Gnaeus Naevius writes epic poems and dramas based on Greek models, but in Latin and about Roman mythology and history.
- **c.200 BCE** Quintus Ennius’s epic *Annals* tells the history of Rome following the fall of Troy.
- **c.80 BCE** Cicero’s oratory as a lawyer marks the beginning of the “Golden Age” of Latin literature, which lasts until the death of Ovid in 17 or 18 CE.

**AFTER**

- **1st century BCE** Horace’s poetry includes the *Odes*, the *Satires*, and the *Epodes*.
- **c.8 CE** Ovid’s narrative poem *Metamorphoses* is published.
- **2nd century** Apuleius writes the irreverent *Metamorphoses*, also known as *The Golden Ass*.

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**Rome**

Rome began to replace Greece as the dominant Mediterranean power from around the 3rd century BCE, and it is from that time that the first literature in Latin appeared. The influence of Greek culture on ancient Rome was enormous to begin with, and a recognizable Roman literary culture emerged only slowly. Although Roman writers were writing in Latin, they produced poetry, drama, and histories firmly in the Greek mold until around 80 BCE when the statesman, orator, writer, and poet Cicero inspired the beginning of a “Golden Age” of Latin literature, which established the style and forms of a distinct Roman tradition.

**Roots of empire**

The so-called Golden Age straddled Rome’s evolution from Republic to Empire. This transformation, which involved the turmoil of civil wars, was reflected in a shift from the historical and rhetorical writings of Cicero, Sallust, and Varro, to the poetic works of Horace, Ovid, and Virgil, especially during the reign of Emperor Augustus from 27 BCE.

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**Virgil**

Publius Vergilius Maro was born in 70 BCE in Mantua, northern Italy. He spent much of his early life in this part of the Roman Republic, and wrote his poems of rustic life, the *Eclogues*, there. Virgil’s next major work, the *Georgics*, was dedicated to his patron, the statesman Gaius Maecenas. Virgil also befriended Octavian, who was to become Emperor Augustus, and established himself in Rome as a poet alongside Horace and Ovid. He began work on his magnum opus, the *Aeneid*, in around 29 BCE, encouraged by Octavian, and continued writing and revising it until his death from fever in 19 BCE. It is said that on his deathbed Virgil asked that the *Aeneid* be destroyed, possibly because of his disappointment with Augustus’s reign, but it was published posthumously on the orders of the emperor.

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**Other key works**

- **c.44–38 BCE** *Eclogues*
- **29 BCE** *Georgics*
Acknowledged during his lifetime as Rome’s leading literary figure, Virgil wrote a number of poetic works, but it is for his epic Aeneid that he achieved lasting respect. His story of the ancestry of Rome was possibly commissioned by Emperor Augustus, and the rising tide of pride in the new imperial era no doubt played some part in the patriotic poem’s success.

Despite its nationalistic theme, the Aeneid has its roots in Greek literature, and especially Homer’s Iliad and Odyssey, on which it is largely modeled, sharing the same regular poetic meter, or classical “epic meter.” The 12 books of the Aeneid recount the journey of Aeneas from his home in Troy to Italy, and the war in Latium (the land of the Latins), which ultimately led to the foundation of Rome.

A Homeric achievement
Aeneas was already known as a character in the Iliad, but Virgil’s continuation of his story neatly connects the legends of Troy with those of Rome, and in particular the virtues of the hero with traditional Roman values.

Virgil begins the poem “Arma virumque cano . . .” (“I sing of arms and a man . . .”), stating his themes in a similar way to the Iliad (“Sing, O goddess, the anger of Achilles, son of Peleus . . .”), and takes up Aeneas’s story on his way to Italy as he is forced by a storm to land in Carthage. Here, he tells Queen Dido and only leaves her because the gods persuade him he must resume his journey. Throughout the epic, Virgil emphasizes Aeneas’s pietas, his virtue and duty, which is steered by fate and the intervention of the gods, taking him from his home to his destiny in Latium.

The Aeneid not only secured Virgil’s reputation as a distinctly Roman writer, but went on to become probably the most respected work in Latin. Virgil was revered as a writer throughout the Middle Ages, and appears as the guide in Dante’s Divine Comedy. Stories from the Aeneid have been retold continuously since it first appeared, and the idea of danger represented by the “Trojan horse”—“Beware of Greeks bearing gifts”—has entered popular culture.
FATE WILL UNWIND AS IT MUST

BEOWULF (8TH–11TH CENTURY)

Although academic opinions differ about the exact date Beowulf was written, it is the earliest Anglo-Saxon epic poem to survive in its entirety. It is told in the language now known as Old English, or Anglo-Saxon, which developed from the Germanic languages brought over to Britain by Scandinavian invaders, and remained the common language until the Norman Conquest in 1066. Old English was widely spoken in England and southern Scotland from the 5th century, but written literature in the vernacular only emerged gradually. During the 7th century, Britain underwent conversion to Christianity. Latin was the language of the literate classes, and used in the Christian monasteries and abbeys where manuscripts were created. But by the reign of King Alfred (reigned 871–899), Old English translations of Christian Latin texts were appearing alongside original texts.

An oral tradition
It is likely that Beowulf dates from between the 8th and early 11th centuries, because it appears to have been written from a Christian perspective, in spite of its pagan subject matter. It is not clear whether Beowulf was composed by the person or persons who wrote the original manuscript, or whether this was a transcription of an older poem. There was an Anglo-Saxon oral tradition of storytelling by reciters of poetry known as “scops,” mentioned in several Old English texts including Beowulf, and it is possible that the poem had been passed down orally many years before it was recorded.

Like its language, the poem’s story has its roots in Scandinavia, and deals with the legends of the
people there, including several historical figures from around 500 CE. It tells of the life and exploits of a Geatish warrior, Beowulf, who comes to the aid of Hrothgar, king of the Danes, to rid the land of the monster Grendel and then Grendel’s mother. Beowulf progresses from a brash young adventurer to become a respected king of the Geats, following Hrothgar’s advice to “Incline not to arrogance, famous warrior!” His final battle is to save his own people from a dragon.

**Both epic and elegy**

In addition to the story of a monster-slaying hero, and the battle of good and evil, the poem deals with themes of loyalty and brotherly love, the ephemeral quality of life, and the danger of pride and arrogance in the face of humanity’s inevitable doom. The English writer and scholar J. R. R. Tolkien argued that *Beowulf* is as much an elegy as an epic, mournful as well as heroic; not just a lament for the death of the eponymous hero, but also a nostalgic elegy for a dying way of life, and of our struggles against fate.

Although the manuscript of *Beowulf* was preserved in the late 10th- or early 11th-century Nowell Codex, it was regarded as simply a historical artifact until the 19th century, when the first translations into modern English were made. Not until the 20th century, largely due to Tolkien’s championing of the work, was its literary merit recognized. *Beowulf* has now been translated countless times into many languages, and in addition to its popularity in its own right, the poem has influenced much recent fantasy literature.

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**Old English kennings**

Derived from the Old Norse word *kenna* (“to know” or “to perceive”), a kenning is a type of metaphor that uses a compound or figurative phrase to replace a common noun—for example, resulting in “battle-sweat” instead of “blood.”

- **hildeswat** “battle-sweat” = blood
- **sólargarð** “sun-table” = sky
- **uhtscæða** “twilight-scather” = dragon
- **hildewulf** “battle-wolf” = warrior
- **wegflota** “wave-floater” = ship
- **hronræð** “whale-road” = sea
- **heofoneswynne** “sky-joy” = the dawn
- **wægflota** “wave-floater” = ship
- **heofoneswynne** “sky-joy” = the dawn
- **weordmyndum** “mind-worth” = honor

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**Poetry in Old English**

*Beowulf* is in the form of an epic poem—3,182 lines long—in a declamatory (forcefully expressed) style and using idiosyncratic Anglo-Saxon poetic devices.

Most strikingly, unlike the rhyme schemes of modern verse, Old English poetry is typically written in a form of alliterative verse. Each line is divided into two halves, which are linked not by the rhyming of the ends of words, but by the similar sounds of the beginnings of words or syllables. The two halves of each line are often divided by a caesura, or pause, effectively marking them as an alliterative couplet. Another feature is a metaphorical device known as a kenning: a figurative compound word in place of a less poetic single word, such as *hildenaedre* (“battle-serpent”) for “arrow.”

Devices such as these pose problems for the translator into modern languages, especially given the richness of allusion in Old English.
SO SCHEHERAZADE Began...
ONE THOUSAND AND ONE NIGHTS (c.8TH–15TH CENTURY)

Across the Arab world there is a long tradition of storytelling, with folktales passed down orally through many generations. However, from the 8th century onward, with the rise of flourishing urban centers and a sophisticated Arabian culture that prospered under the guidance of Islam, a widening distinction was made between al-fus’ha (the refined language taught at educational centers) and al-ammiyyah (the language of the common people). Pre-Islamic literature written in the vernacular—including traditional folktales—fell out of favor with the educated elite, and writers of Arabic literature turned away from composing works of imaginative prose to focus instead on poetry and nonfiction.

The appeal of stories
Yet despite the emphasis placed on the “high art” of poetry, there was a continuing public appetite for a good yarn. Although not highly regarded by Arabic scholars, the collection of tales that appeared under various titles over the next few centuries, but which are now

IN CONTEXT
FOCUS
Early Arabic literature

BEFORE
610–632 According to Islamic belief, the Koran (Arabic for “Recitation”) is revealed to Muhammad by God.

8th century A collection of seven pre-Islamic poems, some dating to the 6th century, are written in gold on linen, and are said to have been put up on the walls of the Kaaba at Mecca. They are known as Al-Mu’allaqat (“hung poems”).

AFTER

13th century The Story of Bayad and Riyad, a romance about the love of a merchant’s son for a foreign court lady, is written in Islamic Andalusia.

A Golden Age of Islamic literature

By the mid-8th century, the territory controlled by Muslims stretched from the Middle East across Persia into the Indian subcontinent, and from North Africa into Iberia. Sophisticated urban societies throughout the Islamic world became cultural as well as political centers. This was the beginning of an Islamic golden age, which lasted for about 500 years. Centers of learning, such as the House of Wisdom in Baghdad, attracted polymaths—proficient in science, philosophy, and the arts—as well as scholars of the Islamic holy book, the Koran. The Koran is the word of God, revealed to Muhammad, so it is considered not only a source of religious knowledge, but also the model for Arabic literature. Its style and language greatly influenced the classical Arabic literature that flourished from the 8th century onward, mostly in the form of poetry, which was held in much higher regard than narrative fiction.
known as the One Thousand and One Nights or the Arabian Nights, was perennially popular. The collection came together in a chaotic fashion over several centuries, and no canonical version of the tales exists. Storytellers combined ancient Indian, Persian, and Arabic tales, with more stories being added over the centuries. The oldest Arabic manuscript still in existence is believed to have been put together in Syria in the late 15th century. It is written in everyday language that offers a strong contrast to the classical Arabic of poetry and the Koran.

**Tales within tales**
The structure of the One Thousand and One Nights takes the form of a frame narrative, where one story contains all the others within it. The framing device is the tale of Princess Scheherazade, who faces execution by her husband, Prince Shahryar. After his previous wife’s adultery, the prince believes that all women are deceitful; he has vowed to marry a new bride every day, “abate her maidenhead at night and slay her next morning to make sure of his honor.” The princess averts her fate by withholding the ending of a story she tells on her wedding night, leading Shahryar to delay her execution. After 1,001 such nights, he confesses that she has changed his soul and he pardons her.

The tales told by Scheherazade intermingle fantastic tales set in legendary locations with stories involving historical figures—such as Haroun al Rashid (c.766–809), ruler of the Abbasid Caliphate during the Islamic Golden Age. The diverse nature of the tales is responsible for the wide variety of genres to be found within the collection, from adventure, romance, and fairy tale, to horror and even science fiction.

**Influence in the West**
It was not until the 18th century that the stories became known in Europe, thanks to a retelling by French scholar Antoine Galland in *Les Mille et Une Nuits* (1704–17). The manuscript from which Galland translated was incomplete, falling well short of 1,001 nights worth of stories, so he added the Arabic tales of “Ali Baba,” “Aladdin,” and “Sinbad.” These were never part of the original One Thousand and One Nights, but have since become some of the most well-known stories from the collection in the West.

Galland’s book derived much of its popularity from its exoticism, with its tales of genies and flying carpets, and was an important influence on the folktale-collecting movement taken up by the Brothers Grimm and others in the early 19th century. A translation of the original stories by Sir Richard Burton in 1885 inspired a more serious interest in Islamic culture—but in the Arab world the tales are still regarded as entertaining fantasies rather than literature.
China has a tradition of poetry that can be traced back to the 11th century BCE. While some early poetry was in a lyric style—ci—in the shape of songs and love poems, a more formal style—shi—tackled reflective themes and used stricter structures. During the early Han dynasty, in the 3rd century BCE, a collection of 305 shi poems was compiled, the Book of Odes (Shijing). Considered one of the Five Classics of Chinese literature, it set the standard for subsequent classical Chinese poetry.

Poetic traditions
This shi tradition reached its apex in the Tang era (618–907 CE). In the 8th century in particular a number of brilliant poets emerged. Foremost among them were Li Bai (701–762), also known as Li Po, whose poems included nostalgic meditations on friendship; his friend Du Fu (712–770), known as the “poet-historian”; and the polymath Wang Wei (699–759), whose nature portraits seldom mentioned any human interference.

In 1705, the Kangxi emperor (reigned 1661–1722) commissioned the scholar Cao Yin to compile a definitive collection to be known as the Quan Tangshi ("Complete Tang Poems") with almost 50,000 poems by more than 2,000 poets. A shorter anthology was compiled in around 1763 by Sun Zhu, Three Hundred Tang Poems (Tangshi sanbai shou), which, like the Book of Odes, was accorded classic status, and has remained essential reading in China to the present.

We sit together, the mountain and me, until only the mountain remains.
“Alone Looking at the Mountain”
Li Bai

See also: Book of Changes 21 ■ Romance of the Three Kingdoms 66–67 ■ The Narrow Road to the Interior 92

IN CONTEXT

FOCUS
Imperial Chinese poetry

BEFORE

c. 4th century BCE A collection of lyric poems, Songs of Chu (Chu Ci), is compiled, attributed to Qu Yuan, Song Yu, and others.

2nd and 3rd centuries CE Cao Cao, later the Emperor Wu of Wei, and his sons Cao Pi and Cao Zhi, establish the jian’an style of poetry of the later Han dynasty.

AFTER

960–1368 During the Song and Yuan dynasties, the lyric ci style becomes more popular than the Tang formal shi style.

1368–1644 Ming dynasty poetry is dominated by Gao Qi, Li Dongyang, and Yuan Hongdao.

1644 Manchu rulers establish the Qing dynasty, opening a period of scholarship in and publication of Tang literature.
Japanese art and culture flourished in the Heian period (794–1185), when the imperial court was located in Heian-kyō (present-day Kyoto). It was during this period that classical Japanese literature began to emerge, distinct from Chinese language and culture. And although Chinese remained the language of both officialdom and the nobility, the simpler form of the Japanese kana syllabic script increasingly became the national language of literature.

Imperial patronage
Poetry was highly regarded and encouraged by the Heian emperors, who commissioned eight major anthologies of poems in Japanese. At the end of the 10th century, however, works in prose also began to appear, including histories and folktales, such as The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter, and an original story, The Tale of the Lady Ochikubo, thought to have been written by a member of the Heian court.

More significantly, Murasaki Shikibu (973–1014 or 1025), a lady-in-waiting at the court, wrote what is considered to be the first Japanese novel (and what some consider the first ever novel)—The Tale of Genji. In its 54 chapters, it recounts the lives and loves of “Shining Genji”—the disinherited son of a Japanese emperor—and his descendants. Although presented as a sequence of events rather than a true plot, the character portrayals are compelling, giving not only an insight into the life of courtiers at the time, but also their thoughts and motivations, making this arguably a precursor of the modern psychological novel.

Murasaki probably intended The Tale of Genji for a readership of noblewomen, but it won a wider audience and became a classic, appearing in many editions from the 12th century onward. Despite its status, its complex style meant it was not translated into modern Japanese until the 20th century; the text is usually annotated to explain its cultural references.
Although some religious texts appeared in the vernacular Old French as early as the 9th century, literature in French is generally considered to have its beginnings in the epic poems known as chansons de geste (“songs of heroic deeds”) that were recited or sung at court by minstrels or jongleurs. Originally, these narrative poems in verse were part of an oral tradition, but from the end of the 11th century they were increasingly written down.

**Legendary exploits**

The chansons de geste formed the basis for the Matter of France, one of three parts of a wider literary cycle of medieval works, mainly in Old French. The Matter of France featured the exploits of historical figures such as the Frankish king Charlemagne. Neither of the other two literary cycles—the Matter of Rome (the history and mythology of the classical world) and the Matter of Britain (tales of King Arthur and his knights)—was the subject of chansons de geste.

One of the earliest chansons from the Matter of France was The Song of Roland, a version of which was by a poet known as Turold. In some 4,000 lines of verse, it tells of the legendary Battle of Roncevaux (modern Roncesvalles) in 778, during Charlemagne’s reign. In the fight for the Muslim stronghold of Saragossa in Spain, Roland is betrayed by his stepfather and ambushed. Refusing to call for help he puts up a valiant fight, but as his men are massacred he blows a call for revenge on his oliphant (an elephant-tusk horn) with such force that he dies. Charlemagne answers, arriving and defeating the Muslims.

The chansons de geste inspired a tradition of cantar de gesta poetry in Spain, including the Castilian epic Cantar de mio Cid, and many of the poems were retold in German and as the Old Norse Karlamagnús saga. Even after poets from the 12th century developed a preference for writing courtly lyric poetry, the finest chansons de geste, such as The Song of Roland, remained popular until the 15th century.

**See also:** Beowulf 42–43  •  “Under the Linden Tree” 49  •  Lancelot, the Knight of the Cart 50–51  •  The Canterbury Tales 68–71