

THE NORMAN CONQUEST OF 1066  
:ITS INFLUENCE IN HISTORICAL  
PERSPECTIVE

The conquest of England in 1066 by William of Normandy at the battle of Hastings was destined to exert a profound influence not only upon the economy and political system of the country, but upon the language and literature as well of the time. The English language hitherto had been more or less a pure tongue with a sprinkling of Latin, Celtic and Danish elements. But henceforth it became quite definitely a hybrid language. In fact, William, the Conqueror's accession to the throne of England was attended by almost all the predictable consequences of a conquest of one people in the mighty hands of another.

The imposition of Norman laws and administration apart, the Normans imported into England a new literary tradition and a wealth of cultural values which were essentially French. To all intents and purposes,

\* Normans: People from Normandy in Northern France.

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the Normans became the rulers, and the English, the ruled. In the face of the supremacy and superiority of the rulers, the language of the ruled could not but draw back into the shadows. While French and Latin became the literary language used by the Norman court and the highest social classes, English was relegated to the language of the ordinary masses. In truth, the development of the English language was arrested for nearly two hundred years following the conquest.

Prior to the conquest, English was used in almost all spheres of life, except that divine worship was largely conducted in Latin. But after the year 1066, Latin primarily and French secondarily took the place of Old English in private as well as public written business. Latin, too, came to be drawn upon for more than it had been done before in all religious affairs.

Ecclesiastical matters. While French became the chief medium for amusement as also for edification of the new aristocracy, English became merely the unrecorded speech of the ordinary subjects.

During the Anglo-Saxon times, literature would have flourished in the households of the English noblemen. But after the Norman conquest, these English households were broken up and handed over to the Norman barons. With the displacement of the English aristocrats from power, the vernacular literature received a serious setback. They could no longer encourage the growth of English literature.

The English language as a vehicle for English literature began to gain momentum only at the end of the 12th century. This body of literature, known popularly as Middle English literature, carried the mark of popular English

culture and English social values. The English language, which at long last ousted French, was, however, a language changed in many noticeable respects. Thus, for example, it lost the age-old Anglo-Saxon inflections and enriched its vocabulary <sup>itself</sup> with a plethora of French elements. Notwithstanding the pervasive influence of French, the English language and literature did not altogether lose touch with the Old English traditions. There is, in fact, a greater continuity between Anglo-Saxon literature and Middle English literature than a casual reader (of both) might think of.