The beginnings of English literature date back to the Medieval period. It is a period within the English history which extends from AD 410 with the fall of the Roman Empire in Britain, to the end of the 15th century with the beginnings of the Renaissance. Specifically, the first literature in English goes back to the Early Medieval period. These are Anglo-Saxon times, a time of wars for Britain, which suffered the invasions of the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes among others. The Late Medieval period starts with the Norman Conquest in 1066, bringing with it French influences on the Old English and having as a result a more modern language. Latin and Scandinavian influences were also important. Nevertheless, the true founders of the English nation were the Germanic invaders, the Anglo-Saxons. They established the tribal dialects that would become the basis for the English dialectology.

The language known as Old English, which dates back to AD 449, is the language of the first literature in English. One of the earliest examples of literature written in Old English, and at the same time, one of the earliest examples of poetry in a Germanic language is Caedmon’s Hymn. His story is known from Bede’s Ecclesiastical History of the English People, which tells how Caedmon, a shepherd in Northumbria, was commanded to sing of “the beginning of things,” while he was asleep. He was believed to be divinely inspired and was proposed to write into verse a portion of sacred history. Like most of poetry of that time, all his poetry was based on “the sacred”.

Although, most of the texts of this period are anonymous, another outstanding name appears: Cynewulf. He is the author of four Old English poems: Elene, The Fates of the Apostles, The Ascension and
Juliana. Cynewulf’s four poems, all religious in tone, celebrate the lives of the saints and other similar topics.

It would also be quite interesting to mention the most famous and longest surviving epic in Old English: Beowulf. It was written c.1000 AD and transcribed in the West-Saxon dialect, although it must have been composed as part of oral tradition two centuries earlier. It is set in Scandinavia and describes in about 3000 lines the deeds of the heroic warrior Beowulf, the first hero in English literature. The heroic text could be divided into two main parts. In the first one, Beowulf helps the King of the Danes since he is suffering the attacks of a terrible monster called Grendel. On the other hand, in the second part Beowulf has to defend his own people against a dragon. After the battle, Beowulf dies as a hero and the poem becomes a statement of heroic values. Far from being forgotten, Beowulf’s story is still present nowadays: Seamus Heaney’s translation on Beowulf in 1999 was awarded with the Whitbread Book of the Year prize. Besides, in 2007 a film adaptation by Robert Zemeckis gave life, once again, to Beowulf’s heroic story.

Furthermore, it is not the only example of literature having its origin in the medieval period and still being alive nowadays: Robin Hood is an outlaw hero of English folklore that appeared in traditional ballads- anonymous narratives songs preserved by oral transmission- before appearing in other types of literature. In the last decades an important number of film productions have also been based on Robin Hood’s story.

Due to the fact that the earliest books were not imaginative writings but histories, a great deal of the information about the medieval period has been recorded. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle is a clear example of this, since it tells the story of England from AD 600 to 1154. The Venerable Bede’s History of the English Church and People and the use of real spoken language by Aelfric contribute to the above mentioned information.

After the Norman Conquest in 1066 and coinciding with the beginning of the Late Medieval period, a new genre of oral tradition was introduced in England: The romance. They were fantastic stories about the marvelous adventures of a chivalrous, heroic knight, often of superhuman ability, who often went on a quest. It introduced the new theme "love". Before the Norman Conquest there is hardly any love poetry in English literature. Maybe, one of the most representative romances of the period is The Arthurian Legend. From the beginnings of the English language there have been legends of great heroes, and King Arthur is one of them. He is perhaps known over all other mythical medieval
figures as a chivalrous knight, powerful warrior and intelligent leader. Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and Le Morte d’Arthur are two remarkable examples of Arthurian romances.

Nevertheless, among the best known names in the English literature is Geoffrey Chaucer (c. 1343 – 1400 AD). Chaucer’s first major work, The Book of the Duchess was an elegy for the death of Blanche, Duchess of Lancaster, and wife of John of Gaunt. Another major work by Chaucer was The House of Fame, a dream poem influenced by Dante. If Chaucer had never written The Canterbury Tales, Troilus and Criseyde would have remained as one of the outstanding poems in European Literature of the Medieval period. Nonetheless, he is best remembered for his unfinished frame narrative The Canterbury Tales. It is a collection of stories written in Middle English, specifically in a dialect associated with London, at the end of the 14th century. Twenty-four stories are told as part of a story-telling contest by a group of pilgrims as they travel together to visit the tomb of Saint Thomas Becket at Canterbury. This narrative frame enables him to bring together for the first time characters belonging to different social classes, attitudes and ways of life. Furthermore, The Canterbury Tales has been considered a mirror of the medieval English society. Finally it should also be highlighted that many literary, stage and film adaptations have been dedicated to this Chaucer’s major work. For example: A Canterbury Tale, a 1944 film written and directed by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, is generally based on the narrative frame of Chaucer’s tales. Apart from this, several recent films do have heavy references to them. It is the case of the 2001 film, A Knight’s Tale, which took its name from "The Knight’s Tale".

Furthermore, drama was also a living genre in medieval times. Predramatic forms such as Folk drama and Liturgical drama gave way to Mystery or Miracle plays. They showed mysterious or miraculous events of the Bible and the saint’s lives to an audience who perhaps could not understand Latin of the Bible. The plays were performed by the businessmen of the city and set in and around the church at festival times. The Second Shepherd’s play and Noah’s Flood are two common mystery plays of the time. Morality plays began to develop at about the same time as Mystery plays. They dealt with the fall and redemption of one person within his lifetime. The Castle of Perseverance, Pride of life and Mankind are some remarkable examples of Morality plays.
Finally, it would be interesting to highlight the major event in literary terms in the 15th century: The invention of printing by Gutenberg. Due to the fact that William Caxton and his assistant Wynken de Worde brought printing to England in 1470’s, most of the above mentioned literary works could be printed as a way of preserving them from time and oblivion. Just as we are at the threshold of a new electronic revolution that redefines our lives, the printing revolution brought also important social and cultural changes, marking a new era in terms or transmission of literature. Thus, a new concept of authorship was developed and the printing process ensured that the same information fell on the same pages. Now, for the first time a broader audience could have access to ancient and medieval texts.

Bibliography:
