

INTERFACE

LITERATURE,
LANGUAGE
AND CHANGE
From Chaucer to the Present

EDITED AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION
BY

LITERATURE, LANGUAGE AND CHANGE

**From Chaucer to
the Present**

**JOHN STEPHENS and
RUTH WATERHOUSE**



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Series editor's introduction to the Interface series

There have been many books published this century which have been devoted to the interface of language and literary studies. This is the first *series* of books devoted to this area commissioned by a major international publisher; it is the first time a *group* of writers have addressed themselves to issues at the interface of language and literature; and it is the first time an international professional association has worked closely with a publisher to establish such a venture. It is the purpose of this general introduction to the series to outline some of the main guiding principles underlying the books in the series.

The first principle adopted is one of not foreclosing on the many possibilities for the integration of language and literature studies. There are many ways in which the study of language and literature can be combined and many different theoretical, practical and curricular objectives to be realized. Obviously, a close relationship with the aims and methods of descriptive linguistics will play a prominent part, so readers will encounter some detailed analysis of language in places. In keeping with a goal of much work in this field, writers will try to make their analysis sufficiently replicable for other analysts to see how they have arrived at the interpretive decisions they have reached and to allow others to reproduce their methods on the same or on other texts. But linguistic science does not have a monopoly in methodology and description any more than linguists can have sole possession of insights into language and its workings. Some contributors to this series adopt quite rigorous linguistic procedures; others proceed less rigorously but no less revealingly. All are, however, united by a belief that detailed scrutiny of the role of language in literary texts can be mutually enriching to language and literary studies.

Series of books are usually written to an overall formula or design. In the case of the Interface series this was considered to be not entirely appropriate. This is for the reasons given above,

but also because, as the first series of its kind, it would be wrong to suggest that there are formulaic modes by which integration can be achieved. The fact that all the books address themselves to the integration of language and literature in any case imparts a natural and organic unity to the series. Thus, some of the books in this series will provide descriptive overviews; others will offer detailed case studies of a particular topic; others will involve single author studies; and some will be more pedagogically oriented.

This variety of design and procedure means that a wide variety of audiences is envisaged for the series as a whole, though, of course, individual books are necessarily quite specifically targeted. The general level of exposition presumes quite advanced students of language and literature. Approximately, this level covers students of English language and literature (though not exclusively English) at senior high-school/upper sixth form level to university students in their first or second year of study. Many of the books in the series are designed to be *used by students*. Some may serve as course books – these will normally contain exercises and suggestions for further work as well as glossaries and graded bibliographies which point the student towards further reading. Some books are also designed to be used by teachers for their own reading and updating, and to supplement courses; in some cases, specific questions of pedagogic theory, teaching procedure, and methodology at the interface of language and literature are addressed.

From a pedagogic point of view it is the case in many parts of the world that students focus on literary texts, especially in the mother tongue, before undertaking any formal study of the language. With this fact in mind, contributors to the series have attempted to gloss all new technical terms and to assume on the part of their readers little or no previous knowledge of linguistics or formal language studies. They see no merit in not being detailed and explicit about what they describe in the linguistic properties of texts, but they recognize that formal language study can seem forbidding if it is not properly introduced.

A further characteristic of the series is that the authors engage in a direct relationship with their readers. The overall style of writing is informal and there is above all an attempt to lighten the usual style of academic discourse. In some cases this extends to the way in which notes and guidance for further

work are presented. In all cases, the style adopted by authors is judged to be that most appropriate to the mediation of their chosen subject matter.

We now come to two major points of principle which underlie the conceptual scheme for the series. One is that the term 'literature' cannot be defined in isolation from an expression of ideology. In fact, no academic study, and certainly no description of the language of texts, can be neutral and objective, for the socio-cultural positioning of the analyst will mean that the description is unavoidably political. Contributors to the series recognize and, in so far as this accords with the aims of each book, attempt to explore the role of ideology at the interface of language and literature. Secondly, most writers also prefer the term 'literatures' to a singular notion of literature. Some replace 'literature' altogether with the term 'text'. It is for this reason that readers will not find exclusive discussion of the literary language of canonical literary texts; instead, the linguistic heterogeneity of literature and the permeation of many discourses with what is conventionally thought of as poetic or literary language will be a focus. This means that in places as much space can be devoted to examples of word play in jokes, newspaper editorials, advertisements, historical writing or a popular thriller as to a sonnet by Shakespeare or a passage from Jane Austen. It is also important to stress how the term 'literature' itself is historically variable and how different social and cultural assumptions can condition what is regarded as literature. In this respect the role of linguistic and literary theory is vital. It is an aim of the series to be constantly alert to new developments in the description and theory of texts.

Finally, as series editor, I have to underline the partnership and co-operation of the whole enterprise of the Interface series and acknowledge the advice and assistance received at many stages from the PALA Committee and from Wendy Morris at Routledge. In turn, we are all fortunate to have the benefit of three associate editors with considerable collective depth of experience in this field in different parts of the world: Professor Roger Fowler, Professor Mary Louise Pratt, Professor Michael Halliday. In spite of their own individual orientations, I am sure that all concerned with the series would want to endorse the statement by Roman Jakobson made over twenty-five years ago but which is no less relevant today.

A linguist deaf to the poetic function of language and a literary scholar indifferent to linguistic problems and unacquainted with linguistic methods, are equally flagrant anachronisms.

In their contribution to this series Ruth Waterhouse and John Stephens provide a necessary and often neglected historical perspective on literary language which is simultaneously attentive to linguistic and literary issues. They do so by means of a theoretical framework grounded in a distinction between syntagmatic and paradigmatic features of language organization – a framework which is clear and enabling and allows systematic appraisal of the evolution of literary language(s) from Chaucer to the present day. The language focus is not however predominant and in a range of examples the authors demonstrate the interrelationship between views of language, language change and historical and cultural context. Additionally, Ruth Waterhouse and John Stephens are continually alert to recent developments in literary theory. Their study is thus more than a survey, however useful a survey it is. They have provided a modern textbook which is of equal service to the interests of students of language and literature as to the growing body of scholars who would use the evidence of this book to demonstrate that there are no easy divisions between the two.

Ronald Carter

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1 Approaches to decoding the language of literature

My two fears are distortion and inaccuracy, or rather the kind of inaccuracy produced by too dogmatic a generality and too positivistic a localized focus.

(Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, p. 8)

Introduction

In the context of the recent proliferation of theories about culture, about literature, and about textuality, it has become increasingly difficult to write an account of the language of literature in the last six hundred years. When the hegemony of the white, middle-class male critic created the illusion of a monolithic literary culture, it was possible to approach a given text, or group of texts, in a spirit of empiricism, describing 'what was there' and then drawing conclusions from the description with which any educated reader might be expected, in general, to concur. This is no longer possible. Even approaches which are explicitly textualist – that is, which are concerned to ground interpretation in the linguistic structures of the text – now differ widely in their understandings of what constitutes textuality.

An immediate challenge to 'merely textualist' approaches issues from the conjunction of two important tenets widespread in late twentieth-century literary critical discourse: on the one hand, there is substantial doubt that empiricist textual studies can achieve a very high level of general validity (see, for example, Carroll, 1975); on the other hand, it has been extensively argued by poststructuralist and feminist critics that the concept of a literary 'canon' is a localized socio-historical phenomenon, so that any grouping of texts as 'central' or 'important' is ultimately an *ad hoc* grouping made, consciously or not, to serve or reflect the purposes of a particular sub-culture in a particular time and place.

Any attempt to present a detailed and practical account of the

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differences in the nature of texts between periods and between authors can no longer make easy assumptions about which texts are representative, and it would seem an act of folly to propose any texts as essential. It is for these reasons that we have quoted Said's warning to himself as the epigraph for this chapter. The fabric of literary discourse is thick and rich, and any study of it which pretends to include detailed analyses of specific texts will be compelled to inspect that fabric at certain points and to try to suggest how these relate to the whole. Our approach, however, is not empiricist, and we hope that its underpinning method will avoid the pitfalls both of dogmatic generalization and of positivism. While concentrating our discussion on the analysis of particular texts, we will be using a methodology which incorporates many elements: a theory of how texts signify; an awareness of the socio-linguistic dimension of signification; a sense of the importance of intertextuality in literary meaning. We will also from time to time draw examples from authors who, from some points of view, might seem 'minor', or 'regional', or 'marginal'. The aim of this first chapter is to describe the elements of our method.

Any undertaking to offer an historical overview of texts from the time of Chaucer to the present must face the problem that there is a plurality of theories of meaning, since the history that gets written will already be predetermined by the writer's presuppositions and assumptions about culture and language. Implicit in most contemporary theories is the assumption that, given the arbitrary relationship between verbal sign and referent, an important aspect of signification lies in what happens in the space between sign and thing. To one theory, the very arbitrariness of the relationship questions the possibility of any stable meaning; to others, the covert attitudes which culture implants within the transaction between sign and thing are the proper focus of attention, so that to read a text is to examine the culture which produced that text. The role of the author (and in another way, the role of the reader) in the transaction has become problematized, since s/he must use (or receive) a language already culturally coded and one which can therefore be analysed from perspectives possibly inimical to the author's own assumptions about what s/he was doing. Culture becomes an implicit co-author and co-reader of the text.