

English Literature in Context

From medieval to
modern literature
— an essential
student resource



EDITED BY
PAUL POPLAWSKI

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General Editor

VALERIE ALLEN, *Medieval English, 500–1500*

ANDREW HISCOCK, *The Renaissance, 1485–1660*

LEE MORRISSEY, *The Restoration and Eighteenth Century, 1660–1780*

PETER J. KITSON, *The Romantic Period, 1780–1832*

MARIA FRAWLEY, *The Victorian Age, 1832–1901*

PAUL POPLAWSKI, *The Twentieth Century, 1901–1939*

JOHN BRANNIGAN, *The Twentieth Century, 1939–2004*



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Preface

Don't want your drum and trumpet history – no fear . . . Don't want to know who was who's mistress, and why so-and-so devastated such a province; that's bound to be all lies and upsy-down anyhow. Not my affair. Nobody's affair now. Chaps who did it didn't clearly know . . . What I want to know is, in the middle ages Did they Do Anything for Housemaid's Knee? What did they put in their hot baths after jousting, and was the Black Prince – you know the Black Prince – was he enamelled or painted, or what? I think myself, black-leaded – very likely – like pipe-clay – but *did* they use blacking so early?

(H. G. Wells, *Tono-Bungay* (1909), p. 214)

As Edward Ponderevo's rambling comments from Wells's novel humorously illustrate, literature regularly asks questions about history and about the processes by which historical knowledge and understanding are shaped. What is somewhat less common is to see historical questions asked of literature – questions, for example, such as how and why particular types of literature should emerge from particular sets of historical circumstances. The academic study of literature usually takes for granted the idea that literature should function as a critical reflection on people and society in history, and on the ways in which people make historical sense of their lives, but it often glosses over the fact that literature (in both its material and symbolic aspects) is itself always actively part of the historical process and inextricably bound up with its surrounding historical contexts.

There has certainly been a growing trend among critics and scholars in recent years to place increased emphasis on the precise historical contextualisation of literature, and this trend has to some extent been reflected within degree programmes in English. However, it remains the case that undergraduate literature students often have only a fairly limited sense of relevant historical contexts, and this is partly because of the relative dearth of appropriate and accessible study materials within this field. By its very nature, relevant historical information for the whole sweep of English literature tends to be widely scattered in a number of different sources, and, in any case, historical information of itself does not *necessarily* illuminate literary study without further interpretation and contextualisation of its own – and students often need guidance with this. There are many helpful general histories of English literature, of course, and these can go some way towards providing such guidance, but they usually deal mainly with the 'internal' development of literature through the ages and only briefly, if at all, with the broader historical contexts

which have helped to shape that development. At the other end of the spectrum, there are also many useful books of specialised historical literary criticism which deal in close detail with specific periods, and these are certainly valuable resources for a focused historical understanding of literature. However, broad-based books dedicated to introducing students to the systematic study of literature in context, with historical and literary material relevant to all periods of literature, are very few and far between, and it is this particular gap in provision for students that the present book seeks to address.

English Literature in Context has been written and designed specifically for undergraduates to provide a detailed and accessible source of contextual reference material to support the study of English literature from the Middle Ages to the present. The book offers a wide-ranging introduction to the key historical and cultural contexts in which literature has been produced through the ages and it explores the complex interactions between literature and its contexts through focused discussions of particular literary trends, movements, texts and issues within each period. Each chapter of the book provides a comprehensive overview of one broad period of English literature, outlining important historical and literary events and examining the ways in which the diverse social, economic, political and cultural aspects of the period have informed its literary activity. To consolidate and enhance the reader's understanding of the period and its literature, a range of illustrations and 'break-out' textboxes also feature in each chapter.

As indicated above, the book has been written as an introductory text for undergraduates and, in particular, the authors have tried to maintain a clear, lively and accessible style of writing without any assumption of prior specialist knowledge on the part of the reader. At the same time, however, we hope that the book's detailed treatment of particular trends, texts and contexts within each period will make it suitable as a source of reference and stimulus for more advanced study too. It should perhaps be noted that the authors are all experienced teachers of literature with a clear grasp of the learning needs of students as they progress through degree programmes in English, and the book has been designed to cater flexibly for those needs.

Using this book

Each chapter of the book has a common structure of five main sections which move the focus gradually from the general to the particular as they each develop the dialogue between history and literature, contexts and texts. These five sections are as follows:

- i. Historical overview
- ii. Literary overview
- iii. Texts and issues
- iv. Readings
- v. Reference

In each chapter, the 'Historical overview' is preceded by a brief introductory paragraph and a chronology which covers the period in question, listing all major historical and cultural events alongside key literary developments. Among other things, the chronologies are intended to provide a quick reference guide to the literature and history of each period and to enable readers to make some critical observations of their own about the period, both before and after reading the main part of the related chapter. The first two sections then lay narrative foundations for each chapter by broadly surveying the historical and literary trends of the relevant period and by drawing attention to key points of conjunction between the two. The third section, 'Texts and issues', looks more closely at such points of conjunction and expands on the inter-relations between texts and contexts by considering some of the dominant issues or themes which can be seen to permeate the period, both in its literature and in its broader social and cultural contexts. The 'Readings' section then narrows the focus further by providing short contextualised readings of a small group of representative texts from the period. In their attention to textual and contextual detail, these critical readings are intended to draw together specific elements of the preceding historical, literary and thematic overviews while also serving as practical examples of how to discuss individual texts in close relation to their historical contexts. The final 'Reference' section in each chapter provides readers with structured and annotated suggestions for further reading and research, as well as full references for all works cited in the main text.

Within the common broad structure outlined above, there are different types of emphasis from chapter to chapter and many individual variations in how material is organised within each of the five main sections. These variations reflect the different characteristics of each particular period (including their differences in length) as well as the different interests of individual authors – for, while we have aimed at a certain degree of standardisation of style and structure across chapters, we have wanted to avoid a narrow uniformity and have done our best to retain a clear sense of our own individual voices, along with a lively feel for the distinctiveness of our periods.

It should be made clear that the focus of the book is on British literature primarily and that American literature and other literatures in English are not dealt with in any detail here. Having said that, variable historical circumstances over the centuries inevitably mean that authors have had to make their own critical judgements for their specific periods as to how narrowly or broadly to interpret the concept of 'British literature' and how far to trace literary developments and influences beyond Britain at any particular point. Similarly, although several chapters touch on critical questions about how we define and delimit literary periods in the first place, and also about how we decide on what constitutes a relevant historical context, we have not felt it appropriate in a practically oriented book like this to dwell too much on such matters. We certainly want readers to reflect on these things for

themselves, and we have tried in our discussions to retain a degree of flexibility and open-endedness to encourage this, but, equally, in organising our material we have each had to make some clear-cut decisions and selections – and in the main these have been guided by a pragmatic sense of the broad requirements of undergraduate studies in English and of the sorts of literary traditions, periods and texts that are widely taught and studied in universities and colleges around the world. We are aware, of course, that there is no neat consensus on such matters and that English degrees are as many and various as the institutions which offer them, but we hope our coverage is sufficiently broad and balanced to meet the requirements of at least some parts of most degree programmes. It should be stressed, moreover, that much of the discussion in the book (especially in the ‘Texts and issues’ and ‘Readings’ sections) is only intended to be *illustrative* of a general approach to the study of literature in its historical contexts. We are by no means trying to prescribe particular programmes of study of our own, or indeed to narrow the possibilities of analysis and interpretation to the ones presented here. Our hope is simply that we can provide a firm foundation for historically contextualised literary study, along with sufficiently stimulating examples of such study to encourage readers to make their own critical explorations in this field according to their own circumstances and interests.

Sources for all quotations and references are cited in abbreviated form in the main text and full details of such citations can be found in the relevant ‘Reference’ section at the end of each chapter. For ease of orientation within that section, citations are always keyed to its various sub-sections (A, Bi, Cii, etc.) – for example:

Stephen Constantine, *Unemployment in Britain between the Wars*, pp. 1–2 [Bi]

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