

THE PELICAN GUIDES TO EUROPEAN LITERATURE

THE CONTINENTAL RENAISSANCE



1500-1600

PELICAN BOOKS

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As editor of this volume I take sole responsibility for its overall plan and approach, subject to the publisher's original directives regarding length and so on. Any criticism on that score applies to me alone. The three colleagues who agreed to help me accepted my scheme and then the four of us together drew up the detailed plan for the various sections. While each of us remains responsible for his own contribution, we have all treated the whole work as a common enterprise. It is a pleasure and a privilege to express my gratitude to my three collaborators, two of whom I had not even met before, for their unfailing kindness and support throughout this rewarding but often very arduous task. Setbacks caused by illness, student unrest, heavy teaching and administrative commitments and much else did not delay our agreed programme nor disrupt the almost preternatural harmony of our quartet. I for one regard this as an academic achievement worthy of record, and hardly less important than our finished product.

A.J.K.

Introduction

It is self-evidently impossible to produce a comprehensive account of the European literature written in five languages (including Latin) from 1500 to 1600 within the compass of the present volume, and even if it were possible such an account would probably be unreadable. Our aim has been at once more modest and more difficult: more modest because we have made no attempt at completeness, more difficult because the rigorous editorial demands of selection and compression are not easily reconciled with justice to the subject or to the reader. In the event the compromise on which we have agreed is presented by the title *Guide*. The map, so to speak, is composed of six divisions, very unequal in size but treated more or less similarly, and within each of these divisions there are further divisions, usually national and linguistic, the purpose of such an arrangement being to juxtapose like with like and thus facilitate comparisons and contrasts. The six primary divisions are devoted to the four principal genres of literature, with a separate section on popular literature and an introductory section on the cultural, intellectual and historical background to which the works of literature constantly allude. The omission from this volume of English literature is regrettable, but inevitable, if only for reasons of space, and that of other literature, particularly in Portuguese, Dutch and the Scandinavian languages, became inevitable once the broad outlines of the book took shape. To avoid scrappiness as far as possible we have excluded mere mentions of authors and works and have tried to be more informative about those we have included and, hardest of all, we have had to apply a self-denying ordinance of length to such giants as Ariosto, Rabelais and Luther. Our hope is that there is enough information about all the main figures and a representative selection of minor ones to give the most inexperienced explorer coordinates with which to plot further excursions into unknown territory. We have tried too to make the narrative as continuous as possible, so that specialists in

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Montaigne or Marguerite de Navarre, were of independent means, and could write to please themselves, but they were the exceptions.

A whole series of consequences flows from these facts. The enormous prestige of Classical literature, and the similar prestige of Petrarch, encouraged, when it did not oblige, sixteenth-century writers to return incessantly to the same sources. Not only allusions to Classical mythology and so on, but actual imitations of Classical (or Petrarchan) models were the rule rather than the exception in poetry, drama, satire and other ancient genres. Originality in the sense of doing something completely new, and sincerity, in a simple autobiographical sense, are irrelevant concepts for most of the literature under discussion. Variations on a theme and the ability to express emotion within the strict conventions of style are Renaissance norms. Clearly this does not preclude genuine artistic originality, let alone spontaneity, any more than, say, Mozart writing on a theme by some minor composer. If it were only possible to come to Renaissance literature direct instead of through accumulated sediment of later ages one could see these qualities in all their freshness.

From imitation to plagiarism is only a step, that from following a model to wholesale borrowing, often from contemporaries. It is not sufficiently realized how modern is the idea of literary ownership, of the integrity of a text, and how inappropriate to the Renaissance. There was, of course, no copyright law, and the 'privileges' (a kind of royal *imprimatur*) simply gave authors a brief monopoly and authorization to sell their work, that is, censorship clearance, but more to the point texts were pirated, falsely attributed, cut, distorted or enlarged with total unconcern by rival authors, editors (especially of posthumous publications) and printer-publishers. Anonymous works, especially in the sensitive fields of religion and politics, were numerous, and naturally treated with complete freedom by anyone wishing to use them for his own ends. This is equally the case whether the works were designed as propaganda, entertainment, erudition or poetry.

The distribution between the various sections illustrates the great difference in priorities between the sixteenth and the present century. Poetry, with which it is proper to include most drama, was the only artistic form of literature, whether it be epic, lyric, pastoral or what you will. From being a craftsman, a maker of verse, the poet became a seer, inspired by the Muses (or God) with visions vouchsafed only

to a privileged few. In Italy this development had taken place long before 1500, but in France and Spain the century was well under way before it became generally accepted. In Germany it had to wait until the eighteenth century, and that is why the only German poetry discussed in this volume comes into the section on popular literature. Poetry was seen as the ultimate test of the vernaculars, and thus the element of national and linguistic prestige was always important. Even when composed for some court entertainment, or for musical accompaniment, poetry (as distinct from mere verse or song) aimed at dignity and elegance, even elevation. In this respect tragedy manifestly belongs with poetry, while comedy, for all its ostensibly moral purpose, must be bracketed with lighter entertainment.

Fiction was purely for entertainment, and though the genre could not wholly escape the didactic zeal of the century, it was classed as reading matter rather than as literature. In this connection it must be emphasized that poetry, drama and fiction were commonly read aloud, and that both socially and stylistically the spoken word delivered to an audience remained throughout the period at least as important as the written word read privately (and it is a moot point how far silent reading was practised). Popular literature, addressed to partly or mainly illiterate audiences, remained a primarily oral phenomenon.

An exception to what has just been said, and perhaps the most striking feature of our distribution, is the literature of ideas, whose importance is grossly understated in terms of the pages here devoted to it. Scholars are by definition well read, but the gloss and commentary of the Scholastics had been designed purely for specialist consumption. The essays, dialogues, satires, histories and so on of the Renaissance humanists were directed at all, men and women, who were interested in culture for its own sake. The visionary element of poetry is inappropriate to these prose works, which all have a lesson to impart, often, indeed usually, buttressed by Classical or biblical authority. Sometimes they are propaganda for religious or political ideas, either expounded directly or in satirical form, sometimes they are repositories of assorted facts and wisdom, sometimes they are mainly concerned with teaching a moral lesson, but they are all books to be read, re-read and consulted. The borderline between treatise and literature is largely artificial, and perhaps the best cri-