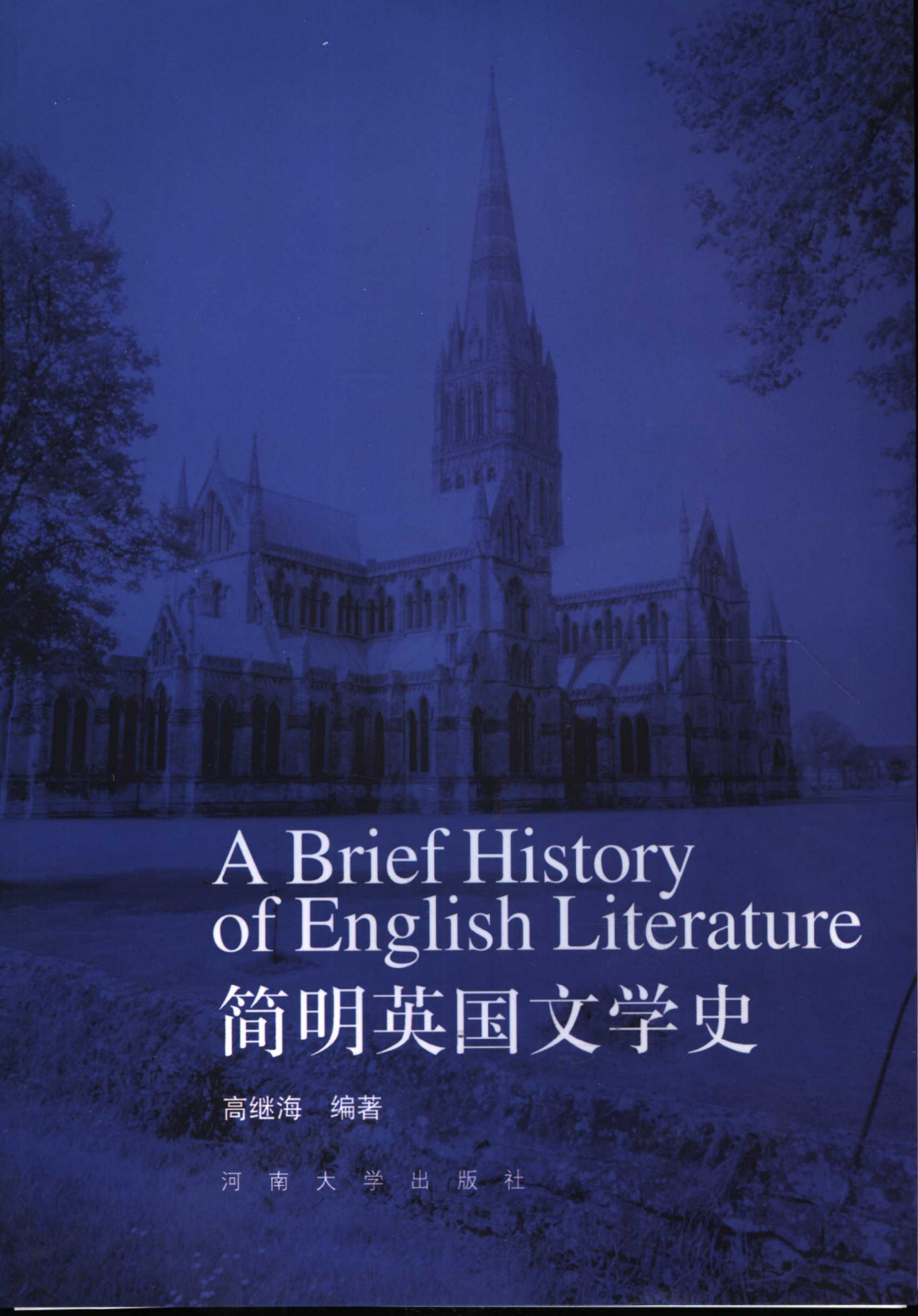

A Brief History of English Literature

简明英国文学史

高继海　编著

河南大学出版社

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江苏工业学院图书馆
藏书章

河南大学出版社

图书在版编目(CIP)数据

简明英国文学史/高继海编著. —开封:河南大学出版社,2006.6
ISBN 7-81041-843-2

Ⅰ.简… Ⅱ.高… Ⅲ.文学史—英国—高等学校—教材—英文 Ⅳ.I561.09

中国版本图书馆 CIP 数据核字(2006)第 036451 号

责任编辑 王超明
封面设计 王四朋

出版发行 河南大学出版社
地址:河南省开封市明伦街 85 号 邮编:475001
电话:0378—2825001(营销部)
网址:www.hupress.com
排 版 河南大学出版社印务公司
印 刷 河南第一新华印刷厂
版 次 2006 年 6 月第 1 版 **印 次** 2006 年 6 月第 1 次印刷
开 本 890mm×1240mm 1/32 **印 张** 12
字 数 323 千字 **印 数** 1—3000 册

ISBN 7—81041—843—2/I·271 **定 价** 26.00 元

(本书如有印装质量问题,请与河南大学出版社营销部联系调换)

编写说明

目前国外有若干种英国文学简史，如阿尼克斯特、桑德斯、埃文斯、布坎、阿尔波特等人编写的英国文学简史。这些简史都很有参考价值，但不适合中国学生阅读。主要原因是，这些作者大多根据自己的个人爱好决定取舍的标准，缺乏公正性和权威性；其次，他们的论述大都建立在读者对英国文学相当熟悉的基础上，因此不适合中国的初学者使用。

国内比较权威的英国文学史当推王佐良先生主编的五卷本《英国文学史》和陈嘉先生的《英国文学史》，但这两部著作内容都过分庞杂，且王先生的文学史又是用中文撰写，不适合英语专业学习英国文学的初学者使用。刘炳善先生的《英国文学简史》多年来一直受到读者的喜爱，但这部著作的一个缺陷是对于20世纪英国文学的叙述和讨论明显不足。前不久(2002年)出版的张定铨的《新编简明英国文学史》弥补了上述著作的不足，但其缺陷也十分明显，即：1. 对于重要作品的分析过于"简明"；2. 由于打破了传统的叙述方式，使得头绪显得混乱，不便于初学者学习和记忆；3. 对20世纪作家作品的选取不够妥切。

鉴于上述情况，考虑到国内广大英语爱好者和大学英语专业的学生学习英国文学的需要，我们决定编写一部英文的《简明英国文学史》，并且编写一部《英国文学选读》与之配套，力图实现以下意图：

1. 史选结合，以史为主，以选为辅。史简单明了，突出重点，容

易记忆；选都是名篇佳作，注释详细准确规范，减少理解难度。

2. 时代背景和作者生平介绍尽量简略，文学流派和重要作家的代表性作品的艺术分析尽量详尽。

3. 以时间为主线安排材料，按作家的重要程度确定其篇幅长短。

4. 全部用英文，语言力求简洁生动，通俗易懂。

5. 简史对每个作家的处理分为：a) 生平及主要作品介绍；b) 重点作品主题和艺术分析；c) 成就和影响。

6. 选读的结构安排为：a) 作者简介；b) 作品题解；c) 选文；d) 注释；e) 思考题。

7. 在作家作品的入选标准上，既尊重多数学者的共识，也显示个人的取舍特色。

《简明英国文学史》分八章。依厚今薄古的原则，16 世纪之前一章，16、17、18 世纪各一章，19、20 世纪各二章。为方便读者，书末附年表和参考文献。

吴雪莉教授仔细审阅了书稿，提出许多修改意见，河南大学出版社外语编辑室王超明同志对本书的出版付出了大量心血，在此一并表示衷心的感谢。

限于水平，书中不当之处，欢迎读者指正。

高继海

2005 年 12 月于河南大学

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Chapter One

Old and Medieval Literature

Old English Literature (450—1066)

Old English literature refers to the literature in the period from 450 to 1066. The year 450 marked the coming of the Anglo-Saxons to England to settle in Wessex, while the year 1066 witnessed William Duke of Normandy conquering England. Old English derived from several West German dialects that were brought to Britain by invaders. In 55 B. C. Julius Caesar landed in Ancient Britain, but in 407 A. D. , the Roman legions were withdrawn to protect Rome. The British king, faced with invasions of Picts, sent for help from the Jutes. The Jutes came and liked what they saw, and soon seized Kent. Other pagan Germanic tribes such as the Angles and the Saxons followed, driving the Celtic inhabitants into Wales, Cornwall and Scotland. The result was that a number of Anglo-Saxon kingdoms emerged, and almost inevitably, this led to military conflicts and shifts in power. In 597 A. D. St Augustine's mission arrived Kent to convert England to Christianity, but in 793 A. D. a further period of disruption was initiated, with Viking incursions that led to the sacking of monasteries. Christian missionaries taught the Eng-

lish to write. The English wrote down their law-codes, and later their poems. Northumbria soon produced Caedmon and Bede. Heroic poetry, of a Christian kind, was the chief legacy of Old English literature, notably *Beowulf* and the Elegies.

Beowulf

Sometime between the year 700 and the year 900 the epic poem *Beowulf* was composed. It tells the story of Beowulf, a warrior prince from Geatland in Sweden, who goes to Denmark and kills the monster Grendel that has been attacking the great hall of Heorot, built by Hrothgar, the Danish king. Grendel's mother, a water-monster, takes revenge by carrying off one of the king's noblemen, but Beowulf dives into the underwater lair in which she lives and kills her, too. Returning home, in due course Beowulf becomes king of the Geats. The poem then moves forward about fifty years. A fire-breathing dragon that burns the royal hall ravages Beowulf's kingdom. Beowulf, aided by a young warrior, Wiglaf, manages to kill the dragon, but is fatally wounded in the course of the fight. He pronounces Wiglaf his successor. The poem ends with Beowulf's burial and a premonition that the kingdom will be overthrown.

As is often the case with a literary text, however, a good deal can actually be determined from a summary alone. Structurally, *Beowulf* is built around three fights. Each of these involves a battle between those who live in the royal hall and a monster; the monsters, it is clear, are dangerous, unpredictable and incomprehensible forces that threaten the security and well being of those in power and the way of life they represent. When we have established this, we have detected a pattern that is spe-

cific to the Anglo-Saxon period, but which also echoes down through the whole history of English literature. Literary texts frequently deal with an idea, or an ideal of order. There is a sense of a well-run state or a settled social order, and for the individual, a feeling of existing within a secure framework: this might be the comfort provided by religious faith, the certainty associated with marriage and economic security, or perhaps just the happiness associated with being in love. In *Beowulf*, a sense of security is linked with the presence of the great hall as a place of refuge and shared values; it is a place for feasting and celebration, providing warmth and protection against whatever might be encountered in the darkness outside.

What we also need to recognize in our critical thinking about the text is that a poem like *Beowulf*, engaging as it does with contemporary concerns, does not spring from nowhere. *Beowulf* belongs to a tradition of heroic or epic poetry, and this tradition can indirectly be traced back to Ancient Greece and Rome, and there is something of a parallel tradition in Scandinavian culture. An epic is a long narrative poem (there are 3182 lines in *Beowulf*) that operates on a grand scale and deals with the deeds of warriors and heroes. Epic poems also interlace the main narrative with myths, legends, folktales and past events; there is a composite effect, the entire culture of a country cohering in the overall experience of the poem. *Beowulf* can properly be called an epic poem in the sense that it celebrates the achievements of a hero in narrative verse. Although it may strike some readers as casually episodic when compared to the tighter narrative structure of Homer and Virgil, the poem is in fact constructed around three encounters with the monsters. *Beowulf* belongs

to the category of oral, as opposed to literary, epic, in that it was composed to be recited; it was only written down much later as the poem that exists today, possibly as late as the year 1000.

Other Poems

Caedmon poems

Besides *Beowulf* there are other poems. First, we have the Caedmon poems. According to the historian Bede (676—735), who wrote *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (731), Caedmon was a herdsman at Whitby while the Abbess Hilda was in office—that is, between the years 658 and 680. By means of a vision he was inspired to compose poetry of a religious nature. For a long time his poems were lost; but in 1651 a number of pieces were discovered and ascribed to him. They are poetical paraphrases of Biblical stories such as Genesis, Exodus, and Daniel. It is now believed that these poems are not those of Caedmon, but the work of several unknown compilers. *Caedmon's Hymn* is the earliest surviving record of oral Anglo-Saxon poetry. English is a stressed language, and the Old English verse line is a balance of two-stress phrases linked by alliteration, the linking of words by use of the same initial letter. In Old English all vowels alliterate.

Cynewulf poems

Second, we have the Cynewulf poems. Cynewulf may have lived about the year 730. We know next to nothing about Cynewulf except that a mysterious signature of his appears in three poems, *Christ*, *Juliana*, and *Elene*. Other poems ascribed to him are *The Phoenix* and *The Dream of the Rood*. The dreamer in the

latter poem, a lord, sees at midnight a glorious cross rise to fill the sky, worshiped by all of creation. The cross is covered with gold and jewels, but at other times covered with blood. The Cross of the crucifixion was sought by knights in medieval ages, which constitutes source of many legendary and heroic stories. Other poems that we can only mention are *The Battle of Brunanburgh*, describing an event which took place in 937; one on the Battle of Maldon (993); and a piece on the Fight at Finnesburgh, the date of which is not known.

Bede (676—735)

Bede is one of the five early English poets whose name are known: Aldhelm, Bede, Caedmon, Alfred—two saints, a cowman and a king—and Cynewulf who signed his poems but is otherwise unknown. Bede's works survive in manuscripts across Europe and in Russia. The modern way of dating years A. D. — Anno Domini, "the Year of Our Lord", was established, if not devised, by Bede. Bede employed this system in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, instead of dating by the regal years. His example led to its general adoption.

The most striking early English poems are the elegies, poems written in dramatic monologues whose speaker is unnamed and whose situation is implied rather than specified, complaining on the hardships of life, mourning for the death of a beloved, lamenting over a specific tragic event in the past, or over war and loss, etc. The most important elegies are *The Seafarer* and *The Wanderer*. The former is a complaint in the first person on separation and isolation while the latter conveys an idea of exile and loneliness. Both poems are elegies dwelling on death, war and

loss. Both are passionate, eloquent and self-explanatory. Fate and the elements seem to conspire against the solitary human figure. They appeal to the reader because they read like dramatic soliloquies of a kind familiar from Romantic literature, in which the reader can identify with the self-expression of the speaker. Like *Beowulf*, *The Seafarer* conveys a characteristic Anglo-Saxon view of life. There is a sense of melancholy that suffuses the poem, a sense of life as difficult and subject to suffering; and that, however much one displays strength, courage and fortitude, time passes and one grows old. There is, too, a stoical resignation in the poem; the kind of response one might expect to encounter in a hard, masculine culture.

Prose

Prose of this period both in bulk and importance is inferior to the poetry. Only a few works may be mentioned here. First, King Alfred (848—900). Besides being a soldier and statesman, Alfred tried to play the part of a literary reformer. For that purpose he translated four Latin works into English, the most important being *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People* by Bede. He wrote careful prose. It was in his reign that the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* began, the only vernacular history from so early a period in Europe. Alfred's thoughtfulness is evident in his two famous prefaces to the *Pastoral Care* and the *Soliloquies*. His resolute and practical character was combined with a respect for wisdom and its rewards. Second, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. This famous compilation begins with the reign of King Alfred and continues till about the year 1150. There are many gaps in the narrative, and as a literary production, it varies greatly in

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