

SHAKESPEARE— AND THAT CRUSH

Being Angela's Guide to English Literature

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RANGE-FINDER



Let us get into touch with each other, Angela.

LET us get into touch with each other, Angela. We wonder whether it has ever occurred to you to ask yourself why you should study English Literature. The practical value of most of the subjects taught at school is pretty self-evident. For instance, there is arithmetic. Think. The schoolgirl of to-day will be the flapper of to-morrow and, with a bit of luck or management, the matron of the week after next. In this capacity she will be entrusted with the spending of the



She sets out about 10.30



greater part of her husband's income. Will she falter in the task? She will not. Thanks to the lessons learned from the successors of Bishop Colenso, she will feel the utmost confidence in dealing with any and every crisis that can possibly confront the young housewife in the discharge of this pleasant duty. Let us follow her during a typical morning's shopping. Armed with 'a certain sum of money', she sets out about 10.30 with the intention of purchasing 5 pianos, 3 mutton chops, and a soup-strainer, for which her husband (a symmetrically-minded man) has requested her to pay with an equal number of pound notes, half-crowns and threepenny bits. The cost of the chops, however, proves to be 1s. 9½d.,



A symmetrically-minded man



Rapid calculation

and her mathematical training enables her to perceive almost at once that the feat Henry has asked her to accomplish is impossible. Without a moment's hesitation she

decides to spend the whole of the money on eggs. On inquiring their price, she is informed by the grocer

that it is such that if she got 32 eggs less than she actually will get for every 7s. she spends it would be raised by 2d. a dozen. By a second rapid calculation



Post Office

she finds that the eggs cost £16 5s. a hundred and, rightly regarding this price as excessive, she leaves the grocer's and proceeds to the post office, where she finally invests her capital in Government securities

which at 5 per cent. will yield her in 4 years' time a profit of £27 13s. 4d. (Find the amount she started with after making a reasonable allowance for tram fares and a cup of coffee.)

Or take science. As the day draws to a close, Mrs. Henry is walking in her garden when she spies a small, malignant face protruding from the ground at the foot of her favourite lettuce plant. It is that of the detested slug. At once she dashes back,



A small, malignant face

first to the tool-shed and next to the larder, and quickly returns with a spade and a supply of sodium chloride, more widely known,

perhaps, as common salt. The foe has disappeared, but she has marked his lair and a single thrust of her spade brings him to the surface. He glares horribly at her and gnashes his jaws. For a moment her courage fails; then with a rapid encircling movement she gets in his rear and after one or two preliminary feints succeeds in depositing some of her ammunition on his tail. Convulsions shake the slug. He thrashes wildly about, tearing up the soil for several inches around and bubbling with baffled fury. But gradually, as



Returns with a spade



All is over

the insidious poison reaches his brain, his paroxysms grow less violent. In a few minutes all is over. Mrs. Henry's knowledge of the slug-slaughtering properties of sodium chloride has saved her salad. •

Thus mathematics and science may be considered to have a definite bearing on a girl's subsequent activities. The same can

be said, with certain reservations, of geography. That Hollywood is the capital of the U.S.A., that the

chief exports of Ireland are sweepstake-tickets and Clydesiders, that Canterbury, whence the best Scotch mutton so often hails, is not in Kent but in New Zealand—these are facts that should be at every woman's finger-tips. Even history may be useful. The girl who leaves school with a really sound knowledge of the dates of all the English sove-

reigns from Egbert onwards and the names and addresses of the wives of Henry VIII, will at any rate have the satisfaction (whatever it may be worth) of realizing that she can knock historical spots off many an Oxford



Knock historical spots off many an Oxford Don

don; and this may possibly tend to increase her self-respect.

French and German, of course, speak for themselves, or should do, if properly taught.

But what are we to say about English literature? Reflect. Will its study enable you, Angela, to become a more efficient housewife or to command a higher salary as a typist and shorthand-writer? We doubt it. On the contrary, some portions of it may prove positively harmful. How often has a girl's spelling been ruined by her reading of Chaucer! How frequently

have her flirtations with Carlyle merely served to deepen her contempt for English grammar! Has English literature, then, no value? It has, indeed, and a very great one—the value of absolute uselessness for all bread-and-butter purposes. It is a means to nothing, but just an end in itself. For this reason alone it stands above every other subject of the treadmill, because it



Some Idiot

is the only one that will help you to get your eye off the eternal main chance and thus to save your soul. So the next time some idiot raises the usual maddening objection, 'Yes, but what's the *good* of

it?' all you need say is, 'It's no good, and that's why I like it.'

Very well. Now a word about this little book. One of the drawbacks of our literature is that there is so much of it that you cannot hope to study more than parts of it in any detail. Nevertheless, you want a general framework into which to fit your special authors; otherwise you won't view them in proper perspective. This framework we have endeavoured to give you. Whether it will help you to pass your school certificate examination we do not know, but we can

confidently assert that, like the peach melba, it is, if a trifle flimsy in its upper layers, completely sound in the fundamentals.



I
EARLY DAYS



WE cannot say, Angela, exactly when English literature proper began, nor, unfortunately, can we predict when, if ever, it will end. It is pleasant, however, to be able to state with some certainty that both the Ancient Britons and the early Anglo-Saxons



Hunting or being hunted

were distinctly non-literary folk. The Ancient Britons spent most of their spare time in eating heavy meals and hunting or being hunted by large animals. The Anglo-Saxons, after exterminating the Ancient Britons with care and thoroughness, settled down in isolated village communities as far away from one another as they could, which, considering the kind of people they were, was a very natural thing to do. Here they just stuck to ploughing their farms and beating their wives



Beating their wives like sensible men

like sensible men. The only culture they cared for was agriculture; as for literature, its name was mud. It is true that at the time of their descent on the island one wretched high-brow managed to smuggle through the customs a poem with the pretty name of *Beowulf*, which has very annoyingly been preserved to us

almost entire; but that is really all we have against the early Anglo-Saxons.

After a while, though, the progress of civilization brought its inevitable consequences and a certain



Practised by the Monks

amount of literature crept into the country. At first this was merely Latin, imported from the Continent and (together with celibacy) practised by the monks in the seclusion of the cloister; and it did little harm, because nobody else understood it. Indeed, the rest

of the Anglo-Saxons, realizing that the monks, having no wives to beat, must often find time hang rather heavily on their hands, were quite pleased to allow them this alternative amusement; the only stipulation they made was that no one on any pretext whatever should attempt to teach *them* Latin grammar. And then one day, suddenly and



A man called Caedmon burst into poetry

without the slightest warning,

a man called Caedmon burst into poetry in the native language.

• What was to be done? Well, of course, the simplest thing would have been to put him quietly away with a hatchet; and if only some firm step like this had been taken, much subsequent suffering might have been averted, since it would almost certainly have discouraged the output of literature. Unluckily, in Caedmon's case the attack of poetry took a religious form, and the Anglo-Saxons, who were a superstitious crowd, let him get away with it. It was a fatal mistake. Before long another fellow started—in prose this time—and never stopped till he had perpetrated



Voluble Bede



King Alfred himself set a regrettable example



over forty works, most of them in Latin, but some in Anglo-Saxon. This was the voluble Bede. Nothing could now stem the rising tide, and towards the end of the ninth century King Alfred himself set a regrettable example to all and sundry by translating several Latin



The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle

books into the vernacular. This precocious monarch also founded a periodical called the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, which, though it never had more than a limited circulation, ran, on and off and in and out, for over two hundred years. Some time later another king, Canute the Great Dane, besides encouraging the monks to persevere with their Dog Latin, gave native



Gave native writers several hearty pats on the back

writers several hearty pats on the back, and it is impossible to say how far things might have gone had not the country been saved by the Norman Conquest. This

put the lid on Anglo-Saxon literature for good and all. And here we may remind schoolgirls and students (if the distinction between the two may be pardoned) that they can never sufficiently thank William and his merry men for bringing this period of our literature to a welcome close and thus to some



This put the lid on Anglo-Saxon literature

extent defeating the nefarious enthusiasm of modern examining bodies for setting papers on books which have to be studied with a dictionary.

To illustrate the rugged, unkempt quality of Old English verse, we append a sample taken from the *Beowulf*, its spot poem.

Him oa ge-giredan
Geata leode
Ad on eoroan
Un-wac-licne

Helm-be-hongen
 Hilde-bordu
 Beorhtu byrnu
 Swa he bena waes.

If, Angela, you can induce some hundred-per-cent. he-bass from the back row of your local choir-scrum



*Some hundred-per-cent
 he-bass from the back
 row of your local
 choir-scrum*

to chant these lines to you, you will at once perceive that Old English poetry is a thing to be avoided at all costs by a nice-minded girl. Though the passage is really quite harmless, yet, properly rendered, it sounds like a string of full-blooded curses.

Noting finally that most Old English literature is, for pretty obvious reasons, anonymous, let us without more ado proceed to the slightly brighter story revealed by Plantagenet times.

Of the hundred and thirty-four years after the Norman Conquest we shall say very little—in fact, nothing at all. This is not because we know nothing about them, but because they contain nothing worth recording. We will therefore jump this period and get on at once to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. These we may, if we like, divide as follows:

1200–1300 thirteenth century,
 1300–1400 fourteenth century.

These divisions are, however, quite unimportant, and are inserted merely for the sake of euphony; they should be forgotten as soon as possible. On the other hand, the remainder of the chapter, together with the footnotes, should be learnt by heart.

By 31 December, 1200, Old English, though completely outed as a literary medium, had, contrary to expectations, swallowed Norman French, but during the process had suffered such a severe attack of indigestion that its constitution was permanently impaired—so much so, indeed, that it became changed more or less into English. For which we may be thankful. This more-or-less English is now known as Middle English. The question then arose, which, if any, of the various dialects that were spoken was to be considered standard English. The North, South and Midlands had a long scrap about this, but in the end the East Midland dialect won because London used that particular variety.



*Dismissed with a contemptuous
sniff*

The poetry of the greater part of the period is quite devoid of vim and may be dismissed with a contemptuous sniff. The idea was apparently something like this: a new language was coming into existence—everybody felt that, though nobody could