MACMILLAN ANTHOLOGIES
OF ENGLISH LITERATURE

THE RENAISSANCE
(1550–1660)

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Edited by
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General Introduction

There can often be a gulf between the restricted reading required by a school, college or university syllabus and the great expanse of English literature which is there to be explored and enjoyed. There are two effective ways of bridging that gulf. One is to be aware of how authors relate or have related to their contemporary situations and their contemporaries, how they accept, develop or react against what has been written by their predecessors or older contemporaries, how, in short, they fit into the long history of English literature. Good histories of literature – and there is a welcome increase of interest in them – serve to place authors in their context, as well as giving a panoptic view of their careers.

The second way is to sample their work, to discover the kind or kinds of writing they have produced. Here is where the anthology contributes to an enjoyment of reading. It conveys the flavour of an author as nothing but reading that author can. And when an author is compared to his or her fellow writers – a thing a good anthology facilitates – the reader gains several extra dimensions, not least an insight into what thoughts, what fears, what delights have occupied writers at different times. To gain such insights is to see, among other things, the relevance of past authors to the present, to the reader. Reading an anthology shows something of the vast range of our literature, its variety of form and outlook, of mood and expression, from black despair to ecstatic happiness; it is an expansive experience widening our horizons, enhancing specialised study, but also conveying its own particular pleasures, the joy of finding familiar pieces among unfamiliar, of reacting to fresh stimuli, of reaching new conclusions about authors, in short, of making literature a part of oneself.

Anthologies also play a part in the life of a literature. If we are the beneficiaries of our literary inheritance, we are also trustees for it, and the maintenance of the inheritance for future generations requires new selections of properly edited texts. The Macmillan Literary Anthologies, which have followed on from the Macmillan Histories of Literature, are designed to present these texts with the essential pertinent information. The selection made of poetry, prose and plays has been wide and inclusive, authors appear in the order of their dates

of birth, texts – with the exception of the Middle English section – are largely modernised and footnotes are kept to a minimum. A broadly representative policy has been the aim of the general editors, who have maintained a similar format and proportion in each volume, though the medieval volume has required more annotation.

ANJ
MJA

Introduction: The English Renaissance

The period of English literature covered by this volume is known to students of literature as the Renaissance, and to students of history as the Early Modern period. These phrases are not merely descriptive, for each term represents an ideological construction of the past. The idea of a renaissance, or rebirth, implies a preceding period of decadence, a period which separates the time of renewal from the exemplary values and achievements of a still earlier period. According to this model, which was invented by the humanist writers of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, the exemplary period was that of classical antiquity, the civilisations of ancient Greece and Rome. The period of decadence was the Middle Ages, which was seen as a time in which the values of antiquity were corrupted. The Renaissance, however, was regarded as a time when the decadence of the Middle Ages was rejected in favour of a revival of the ideals of the ancient world. The upheaval of the Reformation created an ecclesiastical model parallel to the cultural notion of the Renaissance, for the new Protestant church was seen as recovering the purity of the early church from the corruption and superstition of the Middle Ages. The historians' term 'Early Modern' is an attempt to avoid the cultural bias of the term 'Renaissance', but is nonetheless built on the idea of a medieval period followed by a modern period, in the early stages of which are to be found the roots of the present.

The notion of a medieval period of darkness and ignorance stretching from the fall of Rome (or, in the ecclesiastical model, from the official adoption of Christianity as the state religion in the fourth century) to the sixteenth century will seem ridiculous to anyone familiar with the accomplishments of medieval literature, or to anyone who has visited the magnificent cathedrals of the period. The idea of a Renaissance which supersedes the accomplishments of a millenium may seem untenable to the twentieth-century student of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century literature, but because the model was taken seriously at the time, the modern student of Renaissance literature

must take it seriously. According to this model the history of English (and European) culture may be traced to ancient Rome and thence to its roots in ancient Greece, rather than to our barbarian ancestors. The consequences of this view of our cultural history are not only reflected in the literature included in this volume, but continue to be felt in English education up to the present time. The ancient language which has traditionally been taught in English schools is not the Old English of our ancestors but rather the Latin of ancient Rome and the Greek of ancient Athens. The humanists of the Renaissance championed the fiction of a cultural past which linked us to two remote Mediterranean countries and ignored the continuity of English cultural history.

This theory of cultural descent was sufficiently powerful to create a literature which reflected its tenets, and in due course theory became fact, for Renaissance literature increasingly came to be based on classical rather than English models. The plays of Shakespeare and his contemporaries, for example, owe comparatively little to the lively tradition of English medieval drama. Instead they are constructed on the model of the five-act play, a form borrowed from the plays of ancient Rome. Similarly, the fact that many Renaissance plays are described on their title-pages as comedies or tragedies testifies to the power of these ancient categories to shape the controlling ideas of the drama of the period. The influence of Roman plays even extends to the values celebrated in Renaissance drama. When Romeo and Juliet commit suicide at the end of Shakespeare's tragedy, for example, the audience did not assume that the lovers had committed a sin which condemned them to eternal torment, despite the fact that the Elizabethan church condemned suicide in these terms; in Shakespearean tragedy the audience is invited to see suicide as a noble act, and this attitude derives from the values of ancient Rome rather than those of Elizabethan England.

The self-conscious influence of the literature and values of the ancient world can be felt throughout the literature of the English Renaissance. The pervasive mythological imagery of the period, for example, is not drawn from the ancient religions of England, but rather from the religions of ancient Greece and Rome. This classical mythology was so powerful a resource for Renaissance writers that it was often used as a code for speaking about the Christian faith. The 'all-judging Jove' of Milton's *Lycidas*, for example, is a thinly disguised all-judging Jehovah. Similarly, the writers of the Renaissance often

chose to cast their works in forms borrowed from classical literature. It would not have been surprising if English Renaissance literature had been largely written in Latin that ancient forms such as epic, pastoral and satire would have been adopted; what is remarkable is that a vernacular language, in this case English, should be turned to the service of these forms. Education in this period, both in the schools and in the universities, was conducted wholly through the medium of Latin. The writers which this educational system produced retained the ancient forms with which they were so familiar, but used them as vessels in which to establish English as a literary language capable of supporting a literature as great as the literature of Greece and Rome. This sense of the competition between English literature and the literature of the ancient world accounts in large measure for the classical texture of so much English Renaissance literature.

The appropriation of an ancient and remote literary tradition as the basis of a new national literature does not of course produce a replica of that ancient literature. Once a literature is freed from the constraints of a classical language, it gradually moves away from its classical base. In drama, for example, early tragedies such as Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy* are markedly Senecan in tone and effect. As English tragedy developed from its neo-classical beginnings, however, it gradually evolved into a form that was only vestigially classical. Characters slowly became more introspective than their counterparts in classical plays; there is, for example, no character as self-questioning as Hamlet in ancient drama. Similarly, the classical ghosts which thump across the stages of early Renaissance plays increasingly become a psychological rather than a physical presence on the stage, and the notion of tragedy involving the demise of a single character slowly evolves into the pervasive corruption of tragedies of late Renaissance dramatists such as Webster.

Renaissance writers turned the vernacular languages to the service of classical forms, but it was of course impossible to ignore the indigenous literary traditions which were already built into those languages. Ironically, it was the common Latin culture of Renaissance Europe which fostered a mutual awareness of the establishment of various vernacular literatures. For English writers the central model was often the literature of Italy, though Italian influences were often mediated through France and the Low Countries, and arrived in England wholly transformed. The gap between the precepts of Machiavelli and the figure of Machiavel on the English stage, for

example, can in some measure be explained by reference to the popular image of Machiavelli in France. Of the great Italian writers, Dante had surprisingly little influence on the literature of the English Renaissance. The fountainhead of European and English literature of the Renaissance was not Dante, but Petrarch, for it was Petrarch and his successors who established the language of love which was inherited by the Renaissance, and which sharply distinguishes the love poetry of the Renaissance from its counterparts in the ancient world. Indeed, it could be argued that Petrarch was responsible for the idea of romantic love which was celebrated in Renaissance poetry and has become an integral part of the western cultural tradition. An emotion which began as a literary attitude in Petrarchan poetry has become a real emotion in modern western culture; in the western world people now fall in love, and marry for love, and this convention separates us from cultures which have not been influenced by this tradition, and therefore encourage marriage by arrangement.

The central theme of English Renaissance literature is love, but that emotion is neither the literary attitude of the Petrarchans nor the emotion which modern students of Renaissance literature may experience in their private lives and may therefore be tempted to impose on Renaissance literature. This literature is not receptive to such an imposition, because it is poised on the point at which poets were struggling to reconcile the artificial Petrarchan language of love which they had inherited with the real erotic impulses which prompted their poetry. The love celebrated in the sonnets and comedies of the period has its origins in a Petrarchan tradition which in turn derived from the courtly poetry of Provence and the literary traditions of the twelfth-century Renaissance in France. From the cult of the Virgin Mary the Petrarchans adopted the veneration of the lady as a figure of spotless purity and virtue; from the neo-Platonic tradition they adopted the idea of love as an ennobling emotion which raised the mind above mere physical attraction. In the closing years of the sixteenth century a third influence, that of Ovidian eroticism, began to colour the literature of love, and poets such as Sir Philip Sidney began to describe their love in frankly voluptuous conceits. In poets such as John Donne this erotic strain co-exists with the tradition of idealising the woman. In the comedies of the English Renaissance love is an emotion (like tragic emotion) experienced only by the upper classes; this convention reflects the origins of romantic love in the courtly love of the Petrarchans. When working-class characters such

as shepherds fall in love in English comedies, their emotions are an object of mirth. When love appears in the tragedies of the period, it becomes a destructive force, just as it had been in the tragedies of classical antiquity. In Shakespeare's tragedies hardened generals such as Othello and Antony are destroyed by the intensity of their love. In Milton's *Paradise Lost*, an epic in which the fall of humankind is presented as a tragedy, the fall of Adam is occasioned by his excessive love of Eve.

The discrepancy between the presentation of love in Renaissance literature and the modern sense of the nature of that emotion is a useful reminder of the gap in values which must be overcome if that literature is properly to be understood. The same may be said of the chief characteristic of Renaissance literature, that of decorum. In the twentieth century we are inclined to value sincerity and naturalness, but these are not values which are celebrated in Renaissance literature. Pastoral poems, in which the poet pretends to be a shepherd, seem to the modern reader artificial. In 'The Passionate Shepherd to his Love', for example, Marlowe speaks with a voice so innocent that we have difficulty reconciling it with the voice of Marlowe the radical playwright. But decorum demands that the voice of the pastoral poet be pure and guileless, and that his love reflect the values of a golden age of eternal summer in which shepherds are freed from the tending of sheep in order to concentrate on the composition of love-songs. Part of the genius of Marlowe's poem is his ability to extirpate utterly the sordidness of the world in which he lived, and instead to present himself as the purest of lovers. The 'Passionate Shepherd' is not extending an invitation to cohabit outside the confines of marriage, but rather to enter into a world in which love is uncontaminated by any worldly or moral concerns.

Similar notions of decorum also govern the comedies and tragedies of the period. Shakespeare's comedies, for example, are not naturalistic and psychologically-plausible accounts of courtship, but rather dramatic expositions of the notion that love can conquer all obstacles. The values which they celebrate are not our values, nor are they necessarily Shakespeare's values: they are the values of the genre, in this case comedy. In the comic view of the world, the most vital characters are female, and Shakespeare's comedies accordingly have at their centres heroines whose intelligence and vitality is unmatched by the comparatively dim-witted men with whom they are paired at

the end of each play. The fact that women dominate these plays, and that the plays celebrate female values, does not make Shakespeare a feminist, but simply a writer of dramatic comedy. When he turns to tragedy his apparent values shift to meet the constraints of decorum in that genre. Tragedy is a male genre; except in the case of tragedies of love, in which a woman must of necessity assume a crucial part, tragedies are dominated by male characters. They also celebrate male values such as strength of character and soundness of judgement; tragic heroes who fail to live up to these standards inevitably fail. The demands of decorum could make Marlowe and Shakespeare celebrants of love when they were writing pastoral or comedy, and exponents of masculine military virtues when they were writing tragedy.

For many modern readers the aspect of Renaissance literature which alienates more than any other is the pervasive presence of religion. In the case of allusions to the gods of ancient Greece and Rome, the twentieth-century reader is likely to be merely puzzled, but such puzzles can usually be resolved by reference to the explanatory footnotes which gloss such references in volumes like this one. Allusions to Christianity constitute a more difficult problem, for the modern secular reader is tempted to see Renaissance literature as representative of our superstitious past, and the modern religious reader is likely to think many of the Christian allusions blasphemous. In Donne's sonnet 'Batter my heart', for example, the poet assumes the voice of a Petrarchan lady, God is described as a male Petrarchan lover, and Satan is portrayed as the despised other man in an adulterous Petrarchan triangle. The poem ends with a plea on the part of the lady to be ravished by God. Such an analogy, though common in early literature, would no longer be considered in many Christian circles as an appropriate way of describing the nature of the relationship between a believer and her god. What must be appreciated is that in the early seventeenth century Christians were so soaked in the traditions of neo-platonism that they assumed that the love of man and woman was an earthly reflection of the love of God and his believers for each other. This analogy even extended to the sexual aspect of human love, so that, for example, the ecstasy of joining God in the moment of death is assumed to be analogous to human sexual ecstasy; this analogy often manifests itself in the infamous pun on 'die', which in some contexts refers to both physical death and sexual consummation. Such analogies now seem strange and strained, but it must be appreciated that they permeate Renaissance literature. In Ben

Jonson's poem on the death of his first son, Jonson proposes an analogy between the creation of a child and the creation of a poem. Again, the analogy may seem to the modern reader to skate on the edge of blasphemy, but to Renaissance poets such analogies were commonplace; they inhabited a world which was deemed in all respects to reflect the divine order of things.

The preoccupation with analogies between earthly affairs and God's relationship to his creation is a marked characteristic of the religious writing of the period. The other striking feature is a preoccupation with death which may seem to the modern reader excessively morbid. Daily life, however, was more often marred by death than is the case now. Pregnancy was often a death sentence for the mother, and most infants died young. The plague regularly cut swathes through the population; violent deaths and public judicial executions were commonplace. It is now possible for an individual to live for many years without experiencing the death of a close contemporary or a member of his family; such was not the case in the Renaissance, and the regular encounters with death which were a common feature of life encouraged a more pressing awareness of mortality than is now the case. This awareness manifested itself not only in memorial poems, but also in literature not directly concerned with death. Shakespeare's sonnets, or Ralegh's lyrics, for example, are often preoccupied with the classical notion of time as a force which devours beauty and life itself. Many lyrics of the period expound the theme of *carpe diem*, a Latin phrase which literally means 'seize the day'. *Carpe diem* poems encourage the snatching of the pleasures of the moment. Herrick's 'Gather ye rosebuds while ye may' and Marvell's 'To his Coy Mistress' are both centred on the *carpe diem* motif, as is Feste's 'O mistress mine' in *Twelfth Night*:

> What is love? 'Tis not hereafter;
> Present mirth hath present laughter
> What's to come is still unsure.
> In delay there lies no plenty –
> Then come kiss me, sweet and twenty,
> Youth's a stuff will not endure.

The notion that love can offer solace in the face of the uncertainties of life is a central concern of Renaissance literature. Happily it is one of the threads which connects the literature of the Renaissance to our own time. The modern reader of Renaissance literature retains an

awareness of the historical distance between our own time and the Renaissance, but the stronger impression is of a continuity which enables us to read and study that literature with an immediacy which affords enormous pleasure.

GC

Note on Annotation and Glossing

An asterisk * at the end of a word indicates that such words are glossed in the margin.

A dagger † at the end of a word or phrase indicates that the word or phrase is annotated, or given a longer gloss, at the foot of the page.

Note on Dates

Where dates appear at the end of extracts, that on the left denotes the date of composition, that on the right, the date of publication.

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