

A COMPANION TO
BRITISH LITERATURE

VOLUME I
MEDIEVAL LITERATURE
700-1450

EDITED BY **ROBERT DEMARIA, JR.,**
HEESOK CHANG, AND SAMANTHA ZACHER

WILEY Blackwell

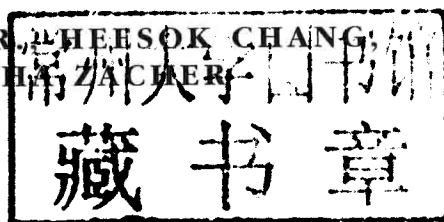
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General Introduction

Robert DeMaria, Jr.

What is British literature? Anyone attempting to answer this question in a serious way must immediately encounter the problem that neither “British” nor “literature” are historically stable terms. Both the words and the concepts have different meanings at different times. What was British in 1150 is different from what it was in 1600 or 1830 or any other date. The peoples and the nations changed geographically and politically over those periods, and the notion of what is British changed and is still changing. The British were a Celtic people inhabiting the North Atlantic archipelago, invaded and occupied by Romans and then, around 449 CE, as the empire crumbled, by Germanic forces speaking a language that came to be called English. British literature is deeply involved in this language, but that hardly gives the term stability because English itself is such a variable concept. It varies in the enormous number of communities speaking it worldwide, and it has almost always varied, even within the British archipelago. This is due, in large part, to the varied political fortunes of its speakers, who were invaded by Norwegians, occupied by the French, imbued with Latin, and later shared with or imposed their polyglot language upon peoples in other countries who developed their own versions of English, at least one of which (American English) for economic and military reasons has become more influential and powerful than the “original” language (i.e., the version of English spoken in south-eastern and central England and enshrined as “standard” by governments, universities, and publishing houses centered there).

Whether we are talking about language or culture or political organizations, the meaning of “British” varies across time. So too does the meaning of “literature.” The early meaning of “literature,” after the Latin *litterae* (letters), comprised almost anything written down in an organized way: scientific treatises; geographical accounts; contributions to jurisprudence; and, yes, poetry, romance, and the other genres of what came much later to be called literature. It is difficult to say when this happened: there

are claimants for the early sixteenth century (see Volume II, Chapter 1), but the process of refinement lasted through the eighteenth century and well into the nineteenth. Literary societies, academic degrees in literature, professorships, prizes, and awards are all indications of the rise of literature as a modern institution in the nineteenth century. For most of the last century literature meant what it meant for Eliot, who played no small role in shaping this common academic understanding: the monumental European works of literary art from Homer to the present. Despite his emphasis on literary monuments, Eliot did not believe these works, or their reception, were written in stone. On the contrary, he understood that the arrival of a vital new work alters our interpretation and appreciation of earlier masterpieces and hence, effectively, alters the earlier works themselves. He certainly would not have condoned how this dynamic notion of the literary canon would, in the decades after his immense cultural authority had waned, broaden that canon to include writers other than straight males of European descent or, in the end, set the very idea of the canon adrift from its institutional moorings. But the hermetically sealed world of Christian (High Church) European letters that Eliot promoted so vigorously was unraveling at the very height of his critical prestige. In the post-World War II period Eliot lived to witness at least the beginnings of large-scale immigration to British cities of peoples from former colonies and territories, national devolution movements within the United Kingdom, the rise of feminism, the gay liberation movement, race riots, and the explosion of British popular music and youth culture. These movements, reaching their full power in the decades after Eliot's death in 1965, nurtured individual talents who would complicate and unsettle Eliot's conservative understanding of literature once and for all.

In the late twentieth century, beginning also in the 1960s, the concept of literature in general, hand in hand with canonicity, began to falter, and some later twentieth-century critics wrote about the "death of literature," just as Roland Barthes famously wrote about the "death of the author." These critical statements are based on a perception that literature is a cultural construction with a beginning in time and probably therefore an end. Such formulations do not imply that people will stop writing or reading but only that the economy of literary production and reception built up over the past three hundred years is giving way to some other arrangement. Late twentieth-century critics suggest that the history of literature promulgated since the seventeenth century – not only in Britain, but also in France and many other countries – was a form of cultural promotion. The golden ages, the "wells of English [or French] undefil'd," the filiations of authors, "our ever-living Shakespeare" (or Molière), the canons, the tastes, and the traditions were all part of a process of apotheosis that has played itself out. The reader does not die in these Jeremiads, but reading itself changes. It shifts in intensity and duration, inflected by mountains of print, and increasingly by text transmitted in bits and bytes, displayed on screens and surrounded by images.

Changes in literature occur for a great many social and cultural reasons, but changes in the technologies used to produce and receive, store and circulate literature seem to

be of paramount importance. Beginning with the groundbreaking work of Milman Parry and Albert Lord in the first part of the twentieth century, scholars have seriously studied features of “oral literature” and thereby shown the way to understanding the peculiar features of manuscript literature, print literature, and various kinds of screen-oriented literature. In short, these scholars led the way in showing how various media alter the meaning of literature. Their work also had a dramatic effect on the scope of literary study. Parry and Lord’s work on the guslars, the story-telling poets of the Balkans, had repercussions for the study of Homer and other early poets, and these in turn led to reexamination of the work of Anglo-Saxon scopos who performed poems such as *Beowulf* in early Britain. Such reexamination helped bring the earliest surviving British literature into the circuit of study that critics from Dryden to Eliot tended to limit to the fourteenth century and forward. Naturally this widening of the circle ramified our understanding of all literature.

Theorists of orality, such as Walter Ong, have found that features of the earlier technology did not disappear when literacy became more widespread. Rather, orality continued in a secondary form. The medium for the transmission of writing (apart from its display on stone or wood monuments) was handwriting preserved on parchment or paper (which preceded printing by about 200 years in Western Europe and longer elsewhere). Like orality, writing had its own codes and protocols and these distinctive features inflected everything called literature. Like other media, however, handwriting was not homogenous: it varied according to whether it was produced by professional scribes, teams of monks, or individuals. These various forms of production engendered various modes of circulation and various kinds of reading. The professionally produced text, bound, and often chained, on a monastic shelf, required a different kind of reading than the manuscript poem circulated among a coterie of friends and copied into a commonplace book for preservation. And this experience differed in turn from the kind of reading invoked by the magnificently produced and illustrated volumes for the courts of kings. Writers, of course, wrote with these media of publication and their patrons in mind. So, it is impossible to imagine how Chaucer, say, would have written his *Canterbury Tales*, or if he would have written them, if his expectations for production were completely different. It is probably fruitless to ask how he would have written them if he had written them for the printing press, just as it is idle to ask, as some people used to at the dawn of the TV era, how Shakespeare would have written for that medium.

When printing arrived in England in the late fifteenth century, it did not immediately replace the flourishing manuscript culture practiced there. However, gradually, print changed almost everything about literature. In fact, it was instrumental in creating the modern meaning of literature, but it was so in combination with a host of other factors. For example, the meaning of literature that emerged in Britain would have been very different if not for religious changes that were under way at precisely the same time that print was established as the dominant medium of writing. The various kinds of Protestantism that used print to express their teachings in Britain shaped literature as it emerged. Numerous chapters in the following four volumes

trace aspects of how this shaping took place, but to state perhaps the most obvious of them, the English Bible, culminating in the great King James version of 1611 would not have been produced except under specific religious conditions, and only in the context of these conditions has it had the great effect it has had on so much British literature. Needless to say, printing affected the literary cultures of Catholic countries and Catholic parts of the British archipelago differently than it did the Protestant south of England, but other Protestant regions developed differently too. After the Council of Trent and the imposition of the *Index Expurgatorius* in regions under papal authority, a “fertile crescent” (as Elizabeth Eisenstein called it) of publishing flourished in areas just beyond Papal control. Venice, Geneva, Basel, Antwerp, Amsterdam, and London became publishing centers partly in response to papal rules. The propinquity of London to centers of publishing on the Continent had its effect on the development of literature in Britain, as did the constantly changing relations with France, the Netherlands, Spain, the empire, and other European powers.

Within the archipelago, the relations among the publishing centers of London, Dublin, and Edinburgh were constantly shifting and things got more complex when English-language publishing spread to Philadelphia, Boston, and New York, not to mention Calcutta, Mumbai, Pretoria, Melbourne, and Hong Kong. In some cases, particular works had their genesis in the relations among publishers in these places. For example, the *Works of the English Poets*, for which Samuel Johnson wrote *Prefaces Critical and Biographical* (later known as the *Lives of the Poets*) was the work of a collection of London publishers eager to assert their claim to the copyright of important British writers, which they believed was being invaded by Scottish publishers. Examples could be multiplied a hundredfold, and the publishing histories of many books are essential to an understanding of them and their place in the history of literature. This is true, for example, of the works of Shakespeare and of Ben Jonson, to name just the biggest names in the early modern period, and it is true of Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, to name just two of the great books produced in 1922. Often it is not only copyright protection and infringement that condition the production of literature, but other laws, such as those involving censorship. The laws both of copyright and of censorship are still active in making literature now and both are still contested globally. These laws are currently being tried in the realm of digital publishing, but since the new medium seeks to reproduce so many books written and published in earlier periods, the judgments will affect everything we call literature. The complex case law developing around Google Books is only the most visible example of such contestation. How we think of the literature of the past is part of what is at stake in the legal battles of the present. If an image of, say, a particular copy of Shakespeare’s First Folio, is the version of that book that is the most widely circulated and best known in the world, how does that change our understanding of the book? Or, if hundreds of versions of Shakespeare’s works are available free to all, how will teachers and scholars direct their students to versions that they regard as authoritative? Under these circumstances how will publishers afford to commission and produce new versions, reflecting the latest scholarship?

We do not know what the future will bring. Nor do we precisely understand the past. There are too many factors, too much variety, such a welter of conflicting trends that it is hard to know what individuals actually thought or how they read. In the field of literary studies, as in other fields, there is, in Ann Blair's very memorable phrase, "Too Much to Know." In light of this, if one wants to call it light, we do not propose the following four volumes as providing definitive answers to the question "What is British literature?" We present over one hundred essays by a range of scholars spanning the two or three generations of scholars now active in the academy, where aspects of the question are most often discussed and provisional answers to various aspects of it most often proposed. These essays show that answers to the big question vary depending on what period of time and what part of the map one examines. However, although the essays do not provide coverage of the vast, ever-changing subject of British literature, they do provide a great deal of knowledge about it: A reader of this book may not have all the answers, but he or she will learn many of the questions one can ask about British literature, and the myriad contexts in which it was written and read, passed down and recovered. A reader of this book will find a number of ways to talk about literature in the varied approaches taken by contributors; he or she will get a picture of the current state of thinking on many aspects of British literature as well as hints for further research. And, he or she will gather important factual knowledge of the subject. On the whole, these are not facts divorced from acts of interpretation or schemes of comprehension; such facts would not be trivial, but their value would not necessarily be clear. If knowledge is something more than the blunt facts and something less than ingenious interpretation, then knowledge is what this book aims to provide. Producing this knowledge is the work of the one hundred scholars whose essays we have included here. The essays may not cohere to form a complete encyclopedia of the subject, but they contain a great deal of real knowledge of British literature and the contexts of its production and reception. No book will, in this day and age, provide all one needs to know about British literature, but here one will find enough worth knowing to ground any future study of the subject.

As for blunt facts, some more compressed means for gleaning those are provided in the chronologies at the start of each volume. These chronologies join events of general historical significance to those that are germane to literary history in particular. The dates of important wars, treaties, deaths, discoveries, inventions, laws, coronations, and elections run down one column, while down the other run the dates of publication of landmark literary works and other literary events. The emphasis is squarely on British historical and literary events, but some foreign events and achievements of worldwide importance are included. These chronologies are important in the formation of knowledge, and they are striking in light of the ways in which literary works have been joined in interpretive works devoted to genres or modes of writing in the last fifty years or so. It is salutary to recall the chronological order in which these works appeared, and at the same time to understand how scholars and critics have connected them in patterns other than temporal proximity. There is some

latent knowledge surely in finding, for example, that one year, 1611, saw the publication of the King James Bible, Chapman's Homer, Donne's *Anatomy of the World*, and Tourneur's *Atheist's Tragedie*.

Another group of helpful devices provided in these volumes are the lists of references and suggestions for further reading provided in each volume. We gleaned these by collecting the references used in each of the essays but then subtracting those that seemed most specialized while adding many of broader significance that happened not to be mentioned in the essays contained in any one volume. The references are divided into a section for scholarly editions of important texts and a section of historical, interpretive, or critical works. Magnificent electronic resources, such as Early English Books Online, have made available images of the works as they were first published (and then republished in the decades or centuries to follow). These images are obviously important and instructive, but they are no substitute for scholarly editions in which experts have digested the historical record of publication, made tough editorial choices and presented readers with a reliable text – one that reflects a series of choices the consistency and rationale of which the editor has explained in his introduction and notes. First editions and other early editions are important, especially, when they can be seen “in the flesh,” but students of British literature should hasten to take advantage of the thousands of hours of examination and comparison that go into the establishment and annotation of scholarly editions. These editions are one of the principal means through which knowledge of the field advances. The raw facts – the original publications – on which they are based are even more important, but they do not provide knowledge as efficiently as the work of responsible scholarly editors.

Like the essays presented in all four volumes here, the works chosen for the lists of references and further reading contribute importantly to knowledge and in many cases have changed the knowledge of their field. For the most part we have preferred books to articles, but there are certainly many articles that have had a dramatic effect on the way aspects of British literature are viewed. Some of these books and articles represent the original perceptions of a brilliant mind, but in the overwhelming majority of cases they also represent deep research into the primary facts of British literature. Like British literature itself the study of it is always changing. But again like British literature itself, the study of it includes works whose imprint and influence on the field remains for a long time. Criticism may not have, even potentially, the “certainty and stability of science,” as Samuel Johnson once suggested, but it does progress, and it does make permanent contributions to knowledge. In the lists of references and, much more directly, in the following chapters themselves, we have tried to select works that make such contributions.

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