



# A Companion to British Literature

Christopher Gillie

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To Cecilia and in memory of Darsie

# Symbols

## References :

\* The asterisk is used in two ways:

1 Following an item, it means that further information is available in the *Reference Section*, eg

T. S. Eliot\* – refers to the entry ‘Eliot, Thomas Stearns’

*Bleak House*\* – refers to the entry ‘*Bleak House*’ (under B)

2 a Before a word or words, it means ‘See (also) the entry in the *Reference Section*. . .’, eg

\*Morality Plays – See the *Reference Section* entry ‘Morality Plays’ (under M)

b Before figures, it means ‘See (also) the *Essay Section*. . .’, eg

\*1.2.4 – See Essay 1, section 2.4

## Dates :

‘Forster, E. M. (1879–1970)’ – dates of birth and death

‘Elizabeth I (1558–1603)’ – dates of the beginning and end of a sovereign’s reign

## Symbols used to indicate the usual British-English pronunciation of the names :

CONSONANT SOUNDS	f as in <i>ship</i>	ʒ as in <i>measure</i>
	tʃ – <i>chin</i>	dʒ – <i>judge</i>
	θ – <i>thin</i>	ð – <i>this</i>
	j – <i>yes</i>	ŋ – <i>long</i>

VOWEL SOUNDS	a as in <i>cat</i>	a: as in <i>far</i>
	i – <i>win</i>	i: – <i>see</i>
	u – <i>put</i>	u: – <i>too</i>
	o – <i>lot</i>	o: – <i>saw</i>
	ə – <i>comma</i>	ɜ: – <i>girl</i>
	e – <i>beg</i>	ʌ – <i>fun</i>

DIPHTHONGS	ai as in <i>buy</i>	au as in <i>how</i>
	ei – <i>day</i>	əu – <i>ago</i>
	oi – <i>boy</i>	
		iə as in <i>here</i>
		eə – <i>fair</i>
		ʊə – <i>sure</i>

## STRESS

(ˈ) is placed before a stressed syllable,

e.g. /ˈsi:zə/ (*Caesar*), /əˈθeləu/ (*Othello*)

## Preface to the New Edition

The function of a Companion is to provide information needed in study. The purpose of this Preface is to make clear, first, the kinds of reader to whom this information is particularly addressed; secondly, the kinds of information that the book seeks to provide; and thirdly, the plan of the book – that is to say, the ways in which the information is provided.

*Readers.* The book is intended for two categories: on the one hand for readers who are studying English Literature in other countries, whether or not their first language is English. It is meant for general readers as well as students, but the kind of reader kept specially in mind is the student whose knowledge of the language is good, and who is approaching or actually engaged in university studies. At the same time, it is felt that readers in Britain will also find a use for the book. Such readers may well feel that some of the information offered is already known to them, but the majority of it is of the sort that every serious reader above a superficial level will require.

*Information.* Because the book is addressed also to foreign readers, it contains more information about the background to literature than is usual in such works of reference. This is the obvious reason for the three essays on English history, society and thought, and for articles in the alphabetical reference section on such subjects as politics, education and places.

In regard to the reference section, it has been assumed that readers will need at least the bare biographical facts about writers, in so far as these are relevant to the character of their works, and an outline of the contents of their main works. However, no Companion can include all writers, still less articles on, or even mention of, all their works. Consequently some principle of selection is required. The principle adopted has been to choose for more extended account those subjects, writers and works which have attracted most interest during the last fifty years of scholastic and critical study. A partial exception has been made in the choice of contemporary writers: many readers have a natural preference for writers of their own day, and consequently the names of living writers have been included more liberally than those of past periods. A very brief bibliography is usually offered at the end of an article on a writer. These bibliographies are not, of course, comprehensive, but give some guidance to the reader who needs extended information.

Dates after the names of people indicate their life spans, except when they follow the names of kings, when they show the length of the reign. Dates after the titles of works indicate the time of writing, and also of publication when these nearly coincide.

Information about American and Commonwealth literature has not been included except when writers such as Henry James and T. S. Eliot have adopted Britain as their place of work, or, as in the instance of Ezra Pound, where a writer has made a strong impact on English literature. The literatures of Commonwealth countries and of the United States proceed from cultures of distinct growth; to include them in English literature merely because they happen to be in the same

language would be misleading. However, brief accounts are included of those foreign writers and literatures which have had a marked influence on English writing.

*Plan.* The disadvantage of a work of reference in which all the information is arranged alphabetically is that the reader is not able to see this information in proper perspective; each subject has the appearance of existing independently of its context in contemporary society, and of being isolated from its context in history. To counteract this disadvantage, the following expedients have been used.

1. One quarter of the book consists of essays, divided into sections so that the reader need not feel obliged to read an entire essay to find the information he needs. The essays are intended to present English literature as a unity, and to enable the reader to feel it as constantly related to other aspects of English life and thought.

2. A liberal use of cross-reference has been made. In the essays, names, titles, and topics are frequently marked with an asterisk (\*) to guide the reader to the appropriate article in the reference section for clearer or more detailed explanation. Similarly, many of the articles in the reference section have references to those sections of the essays which deal with the topic, as well as to articles on related topics elsewhere in the reference section.

For this second edition twenty-six entries have been added to the Reference Section and twenty-eight others have been amended or expanded. There are two additional maps, and titles of works by living authors have been updated. Entries referring fictional characters to the works in which they occur have been omitted, unless they contain additional information.

*Acknowledgments.* No work of reference on so large and complex a subject as English Literature can be altogether adequate in the information it provides, particularly when it is the work of a single writer. The present Companion would be much more inadequate than it is without the generous and helpful assistance of the following advisers: Professor J. C. Maxwell, who made many suggestions and corrections; L. G. Alexander, S. H. Burton, A. G. Eyre, Dr Bernard Lott, and D. K. Swan, who gave general advice throughout; and, in their own special fields, J. C. Alldridge, B. A. Richards, D. G. Richards, A. E. Rodway and Dr. A. Ross.

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## The essay section



# Contents

<i>Preface</i>		<i>page v</i>
THE ESSAYS		
1	Political history and institutions of England: 1066–present day	1
2	Society and the arts	43
3	Religion, philosophy and myth: 1350–present day	123
4	Narrative literature from romance to the novel: 1350–present day	183
5	Drama in Britain	223
6	Poetic form since 1350	269
7	The history of English critical thought	323
THE REFERENCE SECTION		373

# I Political history and institutions of England: 1066 – *present day*

## 1.1 1066–1485

### *Introduction*

1.1.1 Judicial and political institutions

1.1.2 Relationship with France

1.1.3 Relationships with Scotland, Ireland, Wales

## 1.2 1485–1603

### *Introduction*

1.2.1 Tudor government

1.2.2 The English Reformation

1.2.3 Political aspects of the English Renaissance

## 1.3 1603–1714

### *Introduction*

1.3.1 Puritanism, the Civil War, and the Protectorate

1.3.2 Republican interlude: the Protectorate

1.3.3 The Restoration and the beginning of party politics

1.3.4 The Revolution of 1688 and the Act of Settlement (1701)

1.3.5 England into Great Britain: the relationship with  
Ireland and Scotland

## 1.4 1714–1815

### *Introduction*

1.4.1. The Whig oligarchy

1.4.2. The revival of Toryism

1.4.3 The French Revolution: the Industrial Revolution: the  
Napoleonic War

## 1.5 1815–present day

### *Introduction*

1.5.1 Political change

1.5.2 The British Empire

1.5.3 Relationship with Ireland

1.5.4 Britain today: the Welfare State



# I . I

1066—1485

## *Introduction*

English people think of their history as having an unusually distinct beginning: the Battle of Hastings, 1066. This was the victory of William\*, Duke of Normandy, Norse by descent and French by culture, over the Anglo-Saxon king, Harold; William went on to conquer the whole of England, though not the rest of Britain (i.e. Scotland\*, Wales\* and Ireland\*). Such a view of the beginning of English history is of course a simplified one; it is not true that all Anglo-Saxon political habits of thought and institutions were extinguished by the Conquest, nor is it true that Anglo-Saxon art and literature, which had been notable, simply expired.

Nonetheless, the Norman Conquest made a profound break in English political and cultural history. Politically, William I and his successors were able, because of the completeness of the Conquest, to reorganize governing institutions, giving them a pattern which is still visible as the basis of those of the present day. Socially, he removed most of the Anglo-Saxon ruling class, replacing it by his own Norman-French followers, bound together by a Norman-French system of relationships. Culturally, this immense social change meant that England became a three-language nation for at least two centuries: the upper class spoke French, and English was the tongue of the lower classes, while the educated class (the churchmen or 'clerks') used Latin – as elsewhere in Europe – for official business and scholarship.

Another important consequence of the Conquest was that, since the royal families and the nobility were Norman-French or French, England was closely involved in French politics and wars against the kings of France until the middle of the 15th century. In the second half of the period this conflict with France led the Norman-French nobility of England to think of themselves as English rather than French, and in the 14th century they took to English instead of French as their normal speech. Henry IV\* (1399–1413) is reputed to have been the first of the kings since the Conquest to use English as his native tongue; Chaucer\* (1340?–1400) was the first poet of a royal court to write in English.

The period 1066–1485 is what we think of as 'the English Middle Ages' linguistically, as the 'Middle English' period between the Old English of the pre-Conquest Anglo-Saxons and the Modern English speech and writing of the 16th century. It shaped many of the most important political institutions of our own day, and an English culture which is almost as different from the culture of the

\*Indicates mention in the reference section

Anglo-Saxons as it is from the Norman-French culture that succeeded it. Above all, it shaped a sense of nationhood and civilization among the English, a sense of identity which intensified their awareness of the identity of the larger civilization of Europe in which they participated.

### 1.1.1. *Judicial and political institutions*

BECKET: *You forget the barons. Who will not forget  
Constant curbing of petty privilege.*

TEMPTER: *Against the barons  
Is King's cause, churl's cause, Chancellor's cause.*

T. S. Eliot\* – *Murder in the Cathedral*

#### 1.1.1.1 *Feudalism*

The social organization which William the Conqueror established in England was the one known to most of western Europe in the 11th century; historians call it 'the feudal system'. This kind of society had grown up under the later Roman Empire of the West, when organization was breaking down and social order had to be maintained by an appeal to self-interest. By this 'system', a landholder held his land as a 'feudum' or 'fee' from a superior lord; in return for protection by this superior, the landholder rendered him some service, such as work on the superior's land or military service. Feudal relationship had grown up spontaneously as a method by which the relatively weak could find defence against forces of disorder, but in few regions besides England after the Conquest was it in any sense systematic. Even in England, the king's government needed its own centralizing institutions for efficient rule; the barons (i.e. the nobility) recognized no interests except their own, evaded service of the king when they could, and regarded themselves as independent rulers within their own territories.

#### 1.1.1.2 *The King's Council and the Chancellor*

Thus the King's Council (*Curia Regis*) became a central body of professional officials, who, under efficient kings such as Henry I (1100–35) and Henry II (1154–89), worked equally as administrators and as judges ensuring that 'the King's Peace' was kept uniformly throughout the country. The king needed educated men for such tasks, and until the 14th century he found them only among men bred to the Church, such as Thomas à Becket\*, Henry II's Chancellor, and later Archbishop and the king's enemy. The king's Chancellor was his secretary, and the office was at first overshadowed by that of Justiciar, i.e. chief judge. After 1231, however, the office of Justiciar died out, and the Chancellorship became the most important office of state. The Chancellor came to control not only the administrative machine but also the judicial system, since it was he who handled petitions to the king. The modern Lord Chancellor\* is the historical descendant of the medieval chancellors; he is the head of the judicial system (equivalent to a Minister of

Justice) and, though his political importance diminished greatly after the reign of Henry VIII\* (1509–47), he still has high political status as president of the upper house of Parliament, the House of Lords.

### 1.1.1.3 *The Great Council and Parliament*

When he needed the support of his nobles, the king expanded his Curia Regis into the Magnum Concilium (Great Council), of which the modern House of Lords\* is the historical descendant. Now, as then, the reigning king or queen composes it by summoning to it the lords, lay and spiritual, – i.e. the hereditary nobility and the bishops – though the House of Lords also contains other components.

In 1295 Edward I\*, following the example of Simon de Montfort, who had ruled England during part of the previous reign of Henry III\*, expanded the Great Council by adding to it the Commons\*, i.e. elected representatives of the towns and Knights of the Shire\* from the provincial districts now known as counties. The king was not making a very early experiment in liberal democracy when he formed this Model Parliament; he was merely continuing the policy of previous Norman\* and Plantagenet\* kings of extending the effectiveness of their central administration. The great administrative problem for governments in the 12th and 13th centuries, when communications were bad, administrators few, and the nobility had not learned public spirit, was to establish effective relationships with the people. When the king needed to raise money by taxation, he could not rely on his officials to collect it against the wishes of local interests, until he found means to deal directly with these interests through their elected representatives. Thus the system of government through elected representatives, which by the end of the 19th century was the main instrument of democracy, was in the 14th century an instrument of monarchy, exercised by kings who never imagined that one day the people would take possession of it and use it against monarchical rule. The process by which this came about was gradual: already in the 14th century the Commons presented ‘petitions’ to the king, which he often found it expedient to grant in order to secure their agreement to taxation more readily; in the 15th century this petition became a ‘bill’ which, when accepted by the king, was called an ‘act’ or ‘statute’ and became a law of the land; in the 17th century Parliament secured that laws were made in no other way, and in the 18th century the king’s assent was becoming what it is today – a mere formality concluding a procedure initiated by Parliament\*.

### 1.1.1.4 *Trial by jury*

The use of elected representatives to assist government did not originate with the transformation of the Great Council into Parliament by the addition of the Commons. It was already a habit of the Curia Regis to send for representative Knights of the Shire to give evidence in difficult cases that came before it, and the annual shire courts, presided over by sheriffs (‘shire reeves’), were attended by repre-



sentatives from the subdivisions ('hundreds') of the shires. More important, because it was as central to the development of justice as representatives of the Commons were to the development of government, was the election of 'sworn men' or 'juries'\* (from French *juré*) to meet judges (Justices of Assize) sent out from the Curia Regis to the shires. These judges tried cases which were too serious for the powers of the local shire courts. In criminal cases, it was at first the main function of the juries to present to the royal judges such men as were accused of serious crimes; the actual trial of criminal cases in the 11th and 12th centuries was often conducted by some sort of 'ordeal' undergone by the accused man, who was judged guilty or otherwise in accordance with his ability to survive it. 'Trial by ordeal' was supposed to reveal the judgement of Heaven which would not allow an innocent man to perish; not until the 13th century did public opinion come to accept the judgement of a jury, selected from among neighbours, as a superior means of arriving at the truth. In 'civil cases' of disputes between neighbours, the jury was at first a panel of witnesses who declared the facts (e.g. about the ownership of land) as they knew them. But like the elected representatives of the Commons summoned by the kings to Parliament, the jury began as an instrument to secure efficient government, and by the 17th century it was being used by opponents of the king's government as a safeguard to private liberty.

#### 1.1.1.5 *Local government: Sheriffs and Justices of the Peace*

The office of Sheriff, who stood for the king's interests in every shire, was important in the Middle Ages and still survives, but it began to lose most of its importance in the 16th century. He was the principal local authority for law and order; however, he was not a professional official like the members of the king's court, but a local landholder of importance, who occasionally succeeded in making the office hereditary in his family. Justices of the Peace (first known as Guardians of the Peace and nowadays called Magistrates\*) began obscurely in the 12th and 13th centuries and only became supremely important in the 16th century. Like the sheriff, they have never been professional, but were until the 19th century members of the middle range of landowner. Nowadays they are commonly drawn from all classes, trades and professions, and their authority is restricted to trial (without jury, but with a professional lawyer called the Clerk to advise them) of petty offences and the examination of more serious charges. At the height of their power (16th–19th centuries) they were the principal local authorities. Sometimes, like Justice Shallow in Shakespeare's *Henry IV*\*, they held office more because of their status in their localities than because of their competence for the work; equally often, they were responsible men who constituted a very important link between the government and society. The 18th-century novelist, Henry Fielding\*, himself an admirable representative of the class of magistrates, depicts a worthy and an unworthy example in Squire Allworthy and Squire Western, characters in his novel, *Tom Jones*\*.