

THE STORY OF
ENGLISH LITERATURE

EDMUND KEMPER BROADUS
{PH.D., HARVARD}

PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND
LITERATURE IN THE UNIVERSITY OF
ALBERTA, EDMONTON, CANADA

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Set up and electrotyped. School Edition published December, 1931.

To

E. H. B.

PREFACE

You will find in these pages no formal lists of “works,” few references to minor authors, and but little biography. I believe that the function of an Introduction to English Literature is to interest the student in the content and spirit of great books and in their relation to their times and to one another. To re-create in some measure — especially in the earlier chapters — the historical and social background; to describe as simply as possible the movements of literature — the flux of moods and modes; to forego inclusiveness for the sake of amplitude; to justify praise or blame by ample quotation; to share enthusiasms; to write, not didactically, but in the spirit of friendly talk — that is what I have aimed at. I cannot hope that I have always hit the mark. But after many years of teaching, I find my pedagogical notions reduced to a very simple *credo*: that the only thing that really matters is to persuade the student to go on a voyage of discovery for himself with his own aroused curiosity at the helm.

I am under great obligation to my wife, and to Mr. Joseph Fisher of the department of English of the University of Alberta, for reading the proof and for many helpful suggestions; for suggestions no less helpful, to Professors R. K. Gordon of the department of English and W. N. Alexander and W. G. Hardy of the department of Classics, of the University of Alberta; and to Miss Olive I. Carter of The Macmillan Company for coöperation remarkably efficient, cordial — and patient!

E. K. B.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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from *Collected Poems of Thomas Hardy*, published by The Macmillan Company, New York, and for selections from the works of Alfred, Lord Tennyson and Matthew Arnold.

For selections from *Gawain and the Green Knight* by Jessie L. Weston, published by New Amsterdam Book Company, New York.

For selections from *The Vision of Piers the Plowman*, translated into modern prose by Kate M. Warren, published by Edward Arnold, London.

“The images of men’s wits and knowledge remain
in books, exempted from the wrong of time and
capable of perpetual renovation.”

BACON, *The Advancement of Learning*

When I would know thee, Goodyere, my thought looks
Upon thy well-made choice of friends and books;
Then do I love thee, and behold thy ends
In making thy friends books, and thy books friends.

BEN JONSON, *Epigrams*



Courtesy of the British Museum

THE TOWER OF LONDON

From a manuscript of poems by Charles, Duke of Orléans, Flemish illumination. Charles's ballades and rondels, many of which were written while he was a prisoner in the Tower, were much read in England in the fifteenth century.

Upon this scene Chaucer looked as he made his "rekinings" as Controller of the Customs of the port of London. He gives us a glimpse of his work and of his leisure in *The Hous of Fame*, II, 641-660.



Courtesy of the British Museum

SCENES FROM THE LIFE OF CHRIST

From the Psalter of Robert de Lisle, English (East Anglian) illumination, early 14th century.



The National Gallery of British Art, Milbank

“FOLKSTONE FROM THE SEA”

One of the most successful of the series of drawings by Turner entitled *The Rivers and Ports of England*.

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THE STORY OF ENGLISH LITERATURE

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I

THE BEGINNINGS OF LITERATURE IN ENGLAND

There is nothing strange or forbidding about Literature. It is not so much a "subject" to be studied, as a thing to be enjoyed. We enjoy interesting talk. Nothing is more delightful than a good story well told. If it is so well told that every sentence is clear in itself and fits naturally into its place; if it is so well told that the characters in it become real to us; if it is so well told that we are keen to know how the story is coming out, and, at the end, are moved to pleasure or sympathy or a feeling that we have lived with the people in it, then that story is the material of literature. It will be written down — so that we may enjoy it again. It will be printed — so that many may enjoy it. But printing and putting it between the covers of a book do not change it into a solemn affair invented by taskmasters. Printing it merely keeps it alive.

If, again, the good talk to which we are listening turns upon some book which we have read, or our general ideas about people and things, or if the talker is merely telling us about himself, his own habits and tastes and ways of thinking — that, too, if it is well done, is the material of literature. It too will be written down and printed and read. When we see it in print, we shall call it an Essay. But it will not have changed or become something strange to us.

It will still be just as natural, just as much a part of us, as if the talker-writer were there in person talking it over with us.

Even poetry itself, which may seem to us a kind of word-puzzle to be laboriously “worked out” in school, is after all only a special sort of good talk. The words will be arranged in ordered groups or lines, sometimes but not always of even length. In some poems there will be rhymes or renewals of the same vowel sound to bind the lines together and make music to the ear. But poetry does not have to rhyme. All that it really needs to make it different from prose is, first, a sort of *measure* — a *flow* of sound which, though it varies from line to line, yet renews itself in such a way that the ear welcomes it and expects its return; and second, in its subject matter, what we call Imagination — the power of the teller to make us see beauty or truth or grace or joy which we could not see for ourselves. We do not readily think of this as just a special sort of good talk, because we are so accustomed to seeing the lines of poetry all arranged and blocked off on the printed page; and yet there was a time, long before the art of printing was invented, when our ancestors were constantly *bearing* poetry without ever even writing it down — much less reading it in a book. It is with these early ancestors of ours that the story of English literature begins.

Our ancestors — we call them Anglo-Saxons — were scattered tribes, Angles and Saxons and Jutes, living along the northwestern coast of Europe from the mouth of the Rhine to the peninsula of Jutland. They spoke a language somewhat like modern Dutch. Back of their little settlements were almost impenetrable forests. In front of them was the stormy northern ocean. Much of their lives was spent on the sea in their long-oared boats, fishing or ex-