

A PELICAN BOOK

A GUIDE TO  
ENGLISH LITERATURE

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I

# The Age of Chaucer

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EDITED BY BORIS FORD

A series of essays on  
the literature and background of the  
period from Chaucer to Spenser  
including a specially edited  
anthology of medieval  
texts



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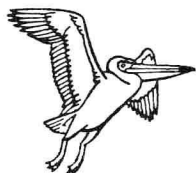
PELICAN BOOKS

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A GUIDE TO ENGLISH LITERATURE

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THE AGE OF CHAUCER







# *The Age of Chaucer*

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VOLUME

I

OF A GUIDE TO ENGLISH LITERATURE

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EDITED BY BORIS FORD

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*With an Anthology of  
Medieval Poems*

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COMPILED BY MARGARET TULB

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## GENERAL INTRODUCTION

A RECENT survey of popular reading habits found itself obliged to interpret the word 'reading' as: 'glancing at the headlines, looking through the pages, looking at the pictures, reading thoroughly, reading in part, or reading a particular item'. *The Shorter Oxford Dictionary*, by way of contrast, is less broad-minded and only gives as its main meanings for 'reading': 'To consider, interpret, discern; To learn by perusal'. Between them, however, these two sets of definitions testify to the fact not only that people have very different reading habits, but also that publishers encourage such differences. For if this is the age of *The Oxford Dictionaries* and of *Pelican Books*, an age of serious reading at various levels and for various purposes, it is also the age of the Digest and the Headline, of the Comic and the Tabloid, of the Bestseller and the Month's Masterpiece. It is the age that has produced on the one hand some Shakespeare scholarship distinguished for its close attention to the very words through which the drama lives; and, on the other, an illustrated 'Comic' version of *Macbeth* which replaces Lady Macbeth's words 'My hands are of your colour; but I shame to wear a heart so white' by 'I fixed everything'.

In considering the function and purpose of *A Guide to English Literature*, it may be useful to remind ourselves at the outset that this is not an age which is altogether sympathetic to such an undertaking. Not that readers of the *Guide* are likely to be 'readers' of illustrated 'Comics'; indeed, they may well feel that the two have little bearing on each other. Yet both are contemporary productions in the sense that they could not have been produced in any other age, and each of them is very much aware of the values for which the other stands. Thus the sponsors of *Famous Authors Illustrated* have found it advisable to include Shakespeare as well as Sabatini and P. C. Wren in their series. And, in its turn, this *Guide* has been compelled to take stock of what L. H. Myers has described as 'the deep-seated spiritual vulgarity that lies at the heart of our civilization'. An age that can solemnly produce this brand of illustrated *Macbeth* is one that is evidently out of sympathy with, indeed is radically hostile to, the kind of imaginative and moral exploration that Shakespeare's work

amounts to. The intimate relation between art and *popular* culture which provided so rich an element in Shakespeare's strength is something that is not possible today, when popular culture has come to have such very different connotations.

It has, of course, always been important that there should be a small number of men and women who are intimate with our literature – with its by-ways as well as its high-ways – and who are prepared to give it a concentrated attention and a good deal of their daily energies. At a time such as the present, it is of more than usual importance that this work should be conducted in a critical spirit. It is in this spirit, during the past twenty-five years, that a small number of writers and critics, of whom Mr T. S. Eliot and Dr F. R. Leavis are among the most notable, have made a determined effort to elicit from literature what is of living value to us today; to re-establish, that is, a sense of literary tradition and to define the high standards that this tradition implies. At the same time it is also important that this feeling for a *living* literature and for the values it embodies should be given as wide a currency as possible, and that literature – both today's literature and yesterday's – should have a real and not merely a nominal existence among a comparatively large number of general readers.

It is to meet this second need that the *Guide* has been planned and produced; and it is the general state of letters and reading today which has determined the shape that it has taken. For this *Guide* has been expressly designed for those thousands of people who might be described as something less than advanced and specialist students of literature, but who are decidedly not attracted by illustrated 'Comics'. They accept with genuine respect what is known as 'our literary heritage'. But for many of them this amounts, in memory, to an unattractive amalgam of set texts and school prizes, and as a result they have come to read only current books – fiction and biography and travel. Though they are probably familiar with such names as Pope, George Eliot, Langland, Marvell, Yeats, Dr Johnson, Hopkins, D. H. Lawrence, they might hesitate to describe their work intimately, or to fit them into any larger pattern of growth and achievement. If this account is a fair one, it seems probable that very many people would be glad of guidance that would help them respond to what is living and contemporary in literature, for like the other arts it has the

power to enrich the imagination and to clarify thought and feeling. Not that one is offering literature as a substitute religion or as providing a philosophy for life. Its satisfactions are of their own kind, though they are satisfactions intimately bound up with the life of each individual reader, and therefore not without their bearing on his attitude to life.

At any rate, it is in this spirit that the *Guide* is offered to the general reader. For this reason it does not set out to compete with the standard Histories of Literature, which inevitably tend to have a take-it-or-leave-it attitude about them. This is not a *Bradshaw* or a *Whitaker's Almanack* of English Literature. Nor is it a digest or potted-version, nor again a portrait-gallery of the Great. Works such as these already abound and there is no need to add to the number. What this work sets out to offer is, by contrast, a guide to the history and traditions of English Literature, a contour-map of the literary scene. It attempts, that is, to draw up an ordered account of literature that is concerned, first and foremost, with value for the present, and this as a direct encouragement to people to read for themselves. Thus the success of this *Guide* will depend not on the number of people who buy it in order to read *about* literature, but on the degree to which it stimulates and helps people to read widely in an informed way.

The *Guide* will consist of seven volumes, as follows:

1. *The Age of Chaucer*
2. *The Age of Shakespeare*
3. *From Donne to Marvell*
4. *From Dryden to Johnson*
5. *From Blake to Byron*
6. *From Dickens to Hardy*
7. *The Present Age*

The boundaries between the separate volumes cannot be sharply drawn, and in many instances there will be an overlap. Far from being a disadvantage, however, this should help to make the *Guide* a single work rather than seven distinct works. Each separate volume, with the exception of the last, has been named after those writers who dominate or stand conveniently at either end of the period, and who also indicate between them the strength of the age in literature.

Though the *Guide* has been designed as a single work, in the sense that it attempts to provide a coherent and developing account of the tradition of English literature, each separate volume exists in its own right. Thus each volume sets out to provide the reader with four kinds of related material:

(i) An account of the social context of literature in each period, attempting to answer such questions as 'Why did the literature of this period deal with *this* rather than *that* kind of problem?', 'What factors tended to encourage the play rather than the novel, prose rather than verse, in this period?', 'What was the relationship between writer and public?', 'What was the reading public like in its tastes and make-up?' This section of each volume provides an account of contemporary society at its points of contact with literature.

(ii) A literary survey of the period, describing the general characteristics of the period's literature in such a way as to enable the reader to trace its growth and to keep his bearings. The aim of this section is to answer such questions as 'What *kind* of literature was written in this period?', 'Which authors matter most?', 'Where does the strength of the period lie?'. In this volume there are two such surveys, one on the poetry and the other on the prose of the period.

(iii) Detailed studies of some of the chief writers and works in the period. Coming after the general surveys, the aim of this section is to convey a sense of what it means to read closely and with perception, and also to suggest how the literature of a given period is most profitably read, i.e. with what assumptions, and with what kind of attention. This section also includes an account of whichever one of the other arts particularly flourished at the time, as perhaps throwing a helpful if indirect light on the literature itself.

(iv) An appendix of essential facts for reference purposes, such as authors' biographies (in miniature), bibliographies, books for further study, and so on.

(v) In this first volume, an anthology of verse is also included, since many medieval texts are virtually inaccessible to the general reader. (This anthology, which makes this a unique volume, is described at greater length in the separate Introduction on pp. 255-8.)

Thus each volume of the *Guide* has been planned as a whole, and the contributors have been chosen as writers who would be inclined and willing to fit themselves together into this common pattern.

## GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Moreover, this has meant that they are people whose approach to literature is based on common assumptions, for it was essential that the *Guide* should have cohesion and should reveal some collaborative agreements. What this approach amounts to has been roughly indicated in this Introduction. In conclusion it need only be added that the contributors agreed on the need for rigorous standards, and that they have felt it essential to take no reputations for granted, but rather to examine once again, and often in close detail, the strength and weaknesses of our literary heritage.

BORIS FORD

## NOTES

In this volume, three kinds of notes are provided. Numbered notes (1, 2, 3) provide glossaries of words and phrases and are placed either at the foot of the page or immediately beneath a passage of quotation. Notes denoted by symbols (\*, †) are also placed at the foot of the page and provide clarification or guidance to the reader. Lettered notes (a, b, c) are placed at the end of each chapter and provide references for further study or of contrary opinions, etc.



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# PART

## I



