The Oxford Illustrated History of English Literature

Edited by Pat Rogers

THE OXFORD ILLUSTRATED HISTORY OF ENGLISH LITERATURE

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EDITOR'S FOREWORD

I

'HAPPY the people', wrote Thomas Carlyle, adapting a commonplace, 'whose annals are blank in history-books!' It may be so, but one could not envy a people whose literary annals were vacant. For a nation achieves through art self-recognition, self-awareness, self-definition. In literature a race—which means here in effect a linguistic community—confronts its own aspirations and despairs. Here we shall find its conversation with itself, its quarrel with others, its inner thoughts and its outer experience, its private meditations and its public utterances. But the Englishness of English literature is not just the product of some broad political, social, or cultural influences: it is an artistic fact, a phenomenon to be explored with the help of rhetoric and criticism, just like the nature of tragedy or the essence of the fictive. A main aim of this volume is to help the reader explore the great treasury of English literature in the light of that fact.

There has been a recognizable English language since the Germanic conquests of Celtic Britain, which began during the fifth century AD and were consolidated over the next century and a half. Of course, 'Old English' or Anglo-Saxon underwent drastic changes in structure, syntax, accidence, and vocabulary after the Norman Conquest, and nothing written before the eleventh century could ever be mistaken for anything resembling Modern English. None the less, there is a basic continuity which, in the view of most scholars, overrides these differences. So the story of English literature properly begins with the first written records from the Anglo-Saxon period, which date from c. AD 700. At the other end, we have brought the story as fully up to date as is possible. We have not striven to be unduly fashionable, a sure way to become obsolete within five years, but we have all tried to take account of the most urgent debates and to write in the awareness that the world has changed since the major textbooks were written—and it is still changing.

This volume, then, will trace a measure of linguistic continuity, but also along with the richness and diversity of the literature comes an amazing capacity for self-renewal. Among the main bodies of western literature, perhaps only French rivals the English in this respect. Some of the others started late as what could be termed world powers in the field of art: Russian and, for

obvious reasons, American literature are clear examples. Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese achieved great things in the medieval and Renaissance periods, but have suffered distinct troughs since that phase, whilst a fragmented German nation did not fully make its mark on the European mind until the dawn of the Romantic era. It would be an exaggeration to say that Britain enjoyed total stability in constitutional or social terms over much of its history, but there was enough sense of identity to sustain a continuing native tradition, above all in poetry. For a long time, countries tended to see the possession of a strong literary heritage as the very acme of cultural advancement: on one level this was a mere virility symbol, as pointlessly vain as running one's own national airline, but it did emphasize the centrality of the domain of letters in earlier phases of civilization.

There is one awkward issue which must not be glossed over. In speaking of the 'British' people, we slide easily across into talking about 'English' literature. A demographic dominance, and with it a political hegemony, have ensured that English has been the almost exclusive language of government, law, and most written documents for many centuries. Yet there is in addition a powerful pressure on the fringes of this metropolitan culture, exerted by Scottish and Irish forms of Gaelic and by Welsh. (This is to leave aside, as one realistically must, the tiny and practically defunct languages such as Cornish and Manx.) The Celtic tongues have their own literary tradition, and there have been moments when they made some impact on what may be termed, neutrally and descriptively, the mainstream of English literature. But these were brief and localized events, and we have not thought it either possible or desirable to include these traditions in the present book. For the rest, the groups sometimes known (with varying aptness) as 'Anglo-Irish', 'Anglo-Welsh', or 'Anglo-Scots' are present, because—however important their local roots—writers such as Walter Scott, James Joyce, or Dylan Thomas employ an expressive vocabulary which is in major respects a dialect of the vernacular tongue.

Equally, we have found it necessary to exclude writing in English outside the main geographical centre: there is no attempt to cover American, 'old Commonwealth', Caribbean, or African literature. Up to a generation or so ago, it would have been possible to pretend that Nigerian writing, for example, was a kind of colonial branch-line of the regular network. But this looks increasingly implausible, as well as patronizing, and the same applies very obviously to Australian or Canadian works. American literature is now the most widely read version of English-language writing around the world, and for at least a century has demanded an approach proper to its own distinctive concerns and techniques. Though there are interesting cross-connections to be made between all these groups (and a few ambiguous figures, such as Ezra Pound or Jean Rhys), we can no longer claim that a single frame of reference will hold them all together. Instead, we have devoted the limited space at our

disposal to what could be called, by a reasonable common-sense usage, the literature in English of the British people. It is, literally, an insular definition, but if one has to draw lines somewhere, coastlines are the least arbitrary.

II

Is literary history necessary? In the strictest sense, the answer must be no: it is possible to read books with appreciation and enjoyment without cluttering one's head with dates and movements. And it is demonstrably possible to *write* great literature with little or no sense of one's place in a great tradition. Shakespeare would have had very little idea of his historical bearings, whilst Chaucer would have been bemused by most Old English poetry. Donne would have coped dismally with the 'dating' passages on which infant critics now cut their teeth and learn to nuzzle their way through a text. The truth is that literary history is a relatively modern invention, and so is the automatic sense which a modern writer such as Graham Greene must have of his location in the flow of literary time (whether or not he cares about it—and most writers do, in one way or another).

The rise of English literary history is the subject of a brilliant book by René Wellek, and this has been supplemented by an outstanding survey by Lawrence Lipking of the way in which the various arts (literature, painting, music) were 'ordered' and made sense of in the late eighteenth century.* A foreword is not the place to attempt to rival such magisterial studies, and it is enough to pick out a handful of suggestive facts. First of all, it should be recalled that many words with which we casually allocate books and writers to schools or periods entered the lexicon very late in the day. Even 'medieval' and 'Middle Ages', which seem so natural and untendentious today, had to be naturalized into English within the last two hundred years. When Coleridge wrote 'The Ancient Mariner' and Keats wrote 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci', they would not instantly have known what was meant if we had spoken to them of 'medieval' aspects to their work: the word had not arrived on cue, though the Romantic poets certainly benefited from some of the growing antiquarian lore which opened up the literary past.

Second, it is worth remembering that much of what preceded literary history, as now understood, came in the form of catalogues, collective biographies, anthologies, and compendia. Such works tend to be either encylopaedic and thus undiscriminating, or selective in an arbitrary way. None of them makes for an idea of continuity, of evolution or development. One consequence of this impaired historic sense, as it now seems, is described by René Wellek: 'Before the seventeenth century, with a few exceptions, Greece and Rome were

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* R. Wellek, *The Rise of English Literary History* (1941, revised 1966); L. Lipking, *The Ordering of the Arts in Eighteenth-Century England* (1970).

considered as being on the same plane as contemporary England. Virgil and Ovid, Homer and Pindar, were discussed as almost contemporary writers.'

Gradually these things changed. Pope, Gray, and Coleridge all planned (but never wrote) historical schemes ordering their poetic predecessors. The crucial moment of breakthrough is usually identified with the appearance of the *History of English Poetry* by Thomas Warton (1774-81). This is indeed a deeply interesting and important book, confused and digressive though it is. But in another way Samuel Johnson, both in his *Dictionary* (1755), with its choice passages of classic writers illustrating the definitions, and in his *Lives of the Poets* (1779-81), did as much to fix a canon, and the idea of a canon. In the nineteenth century there were many dogged compilers, men of the stamp of Henry Morley who, as the critic John Gross has remarked, seemed to chart literary history with the energy and sense of mission that led other Victorians to plant railway lines around the empire. But perhaps no English work has an effect equal to that of Hippolyte Taine's *Histoire de la littérature anglaise* (1863), which was translated in 1871, and with its vivid generalities and disputable theories of art, put new emphasis on the historical and cultural milieu in which literature is written.

The twentieth century has seen a number of significant new ventures, both individual and collective. Bridging the turn of the century, though emphatically he was the heir of Victorian philological and critical study, comes the work of George Saintsbury, with primers such as *A Short History of English Literature* (1898). On a bigger scale there is the collective *Cambridge History of English Literature* (1907-16). A different plan was adopted for the later Oxford History, which consists of volumes by individual scholars on a given period: particular volumes, notably that of C. S. Lewis, remain unmatched in their insight into a phase of literature, though the plan as a whole is perhaps too loose to make for easy reference use. Meanwhile, single-volume histories of some discernment have been provided by Émile Legouis and Louis Cazamian (English translation, 1926-7), and by a team led by Albert C. Baugh (1948).

In the last decade some scepticism has been expressed about the possibilities and the utility of the form: a demand has grown up for a 'new literary history', a term which can mean a good many things but in general calls for explanation rather than mere narrative. But the narrative of the past is, if properly conducted, a species of explanation, just as a story vividly told makes us understand as well as remember its events. In this volume, strict chronology is disturbed only in the case of Shakespeare, whose unique pre-eminence requires the special attention which he is given in Chapter 3.

A final consideration relates to the way in which literary history came into being. It must be stressed that an important task had to be performed prior to any more sophisticated enterprise in the way of critical revaluation. The basic data simply had to be got right. If that seems a bald statement, consider these facts, immediately relevant to the situation in which Warton published

his book. When Thomas Chatterton produced his forged poems, allegedly the work of a fifteenth-century monk, the best scholars of the day were hopelessly divided and muddled in their efforts to establish their authenticity or otherwise. Then again, it was only in this crucial decade of the 1770s that Thomas Tyrwhitt for the first time discovered the secret of Chaucer's metre (basically, the sounding of a final *e* syllable), and thus showed him to be something other than the crude and unsophisticated technician previously accepted. It was around this time that Oliver Goldsmith described *The Divine Comedy* as 'a strange mixture of good sense and absurdity . . . Dante owes most of his reputation to the obscurity of the times in which he lived'. Linguistic questions were bedevilled by ignorance of any principles of comparative philology (again things changed for the better around 1770), so that John Cleland, author of *Fanny Hill*, could seriously advance the view in 1768 that Welsh was the aboriginal tongue from which all others developed. Lastly, there is the case of James Hurdis, who maintained in 1792 that *Two Gentlemen of Verona* was among the last plays of Shakespeare, whilst the early plays were held to include *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Coriolanus*, *Cymbeline*, *The Tempest*, *Timon of Athens*, and *The Winter's Tale*—though all had been shown in 1778 by Edmond Malone, one of the first great historical scholars, to be late.

It would be graceless to sneer too readily at these blunders—Hurdis was duly made Professor of Poetry at Oxford University in 1793. Each age has its particular blind spots, and this volume might well occasion a measure of hilarity in a century or two, should the world and the book survive. And indeed, whilst we have striven to be as accurate as possible, we have not concealed our own vantage-point in the 1980s. The contributors were selected not just because of proven scholarship, but also because they maintain a vital concern with the critical ideas of the present. We do not all agree on every point, and the separate chapters have been written only within broad guidelines, so that there is room for individual emphasis or interpretation. By this means we hope to suggest some of the personal response which the encounter with great literature should always incite. We have had to leave out some figures of interest, either because their main thrust as authors belongs outside creative literature (for example, Cobbett) or because it is too early to assess their standing with posterity. Thus in the final chapter, it has been necessary to exclude many strong candidates for consideration, notably John Betjeman, Malcolm Lowry, Edwin Muir, Barbara Pym, Rebecca West, and Angus Wilson, figures of great contemporary interest who may or may not exert lasting influence. It is, after all, impossible to include everything within one pair of covers.

All the contributors passionately believe in the value of great imaginative literature, and specifically of the process by which language under the pressure of urgent experience is bent and refined in wholly unexpected ways. We have tried to keep this aspect of literature in the forefront all through the book.

This, rather than the demonstration of some abstract principle, or refutation of some academic heresy, points towards our purposes. As was the case with our notable predecessors, what we desire is to make the reading of poems, plays, and novels more satisfying because better informed, and more profound because more comprehending.

1985   PAT ROGERS

PUBLISHER'S
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A NOTE ON THE TEXT

QUOTATIONS from Old and Middle English texts are presented in their original form (glossed where necessary). Later passages are as a rule brought into line with modern spelling, except in a few instances where the meaning would be obscured, or archaic usage was deliberate.

Dates up to 1752 are given according to the Old Style (by that time eleven days behind the New Style in use on the Continent), but the year is taken to begin from 1 January rather than 25 March.

Dates given for plays are those of publication rather than performance or composition (except where specifically noted otherwise).

This volume is conceived as complementary to the *Oxford Companion to English Literature*, edited by Margaret Drabble, and readers are referred to that volume for more detailed information on specific topics.

Dunfermline

Edinburgh

Lindisfarne

Ruthwell

York

Wakefield

R. Humber

Chester

The Wash

Stafford

Leicester

Norwich

Areley Kings

R. Severn

Longthorpe

Wigmore

Bury St Edmunds

Earls Barton

Hereford

Worcester

Monmouth

Eynsham

Oxford

Maldon

R. Thames

London

Bath

Guildford

Canterbury

WESSEX

Winchester

Exeter

Sherborne

0	50	100 km
0	25	50 miles

OLD AND MIDDLE ENGLISH LITERATURE: PLACES OF INTEREST

CONTENTS

LIST OF COLOUR PLATES

1. Old and Middle English

c.700–1485

J. A. BURROW

Introduction

THE periods of English literature assigned to this first chapter are together
more than half as long again as all those covered by the other eight chapters
taken together. They extend from 700 to about 1500, a stretch of roughly eight
hundred years. For this gross disproportion in our History there are three main
reasons. First, the quantities of English verse and prose actually produced
during these centuries were, relatively speaking, small. The population of
England in 1377, the year of the poll tax, was probably something less than
three million—as against more than forty-six million in 1976. Such a great
quantitative difference cannot be ignored, even though the incidence of literary
talent does not rise and fall in any fixed proportion to the general population,
as is sufficiently proved by the example of London in 1377, whose perhaps
forty or fifty thousand inhabitants included Chaucer, Langland, and Gower.
It must also be remembered that the literary efforts of this relatively small
population were by no means confined to the English language. Authors who
aspired to address the larger learned world regularly wrote in Latin; and
Chaucer was perhaps the first Englishman deliberately to write for posterity
in his native tongue. A History of Literature in England would include such
Latin writers as Bede, John of Salisbury, Geoffrey of Monmouth, and Richard
of Bury; but a History of Literature in English must exclude these men, together
with all those subjects of the English Crown who, after the Norman Conquest,
wrote in Anglo-Norman or continental French. It can therefore give only a
partial account of such writers as Chaucer's friend John Gower, who wrote
in all three languages: French (*Mirour de l'Omme*), Latin (*Vox clamantis*), and
English (*Confessio Amantis*).

A second consideration, also quantitative in character, concerns lost literature.
The amount of this can never be determined, but it is certainly much greater
than in later periods. A literary work in a medieval vernacular might never get
written down at all, or else, if it did, the copies may have been lost. Admittedly,
one should not draw too sharp or simple a distinction between the age of