A Brief History of

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Preface

In planning this brief history of English literature, we had three principal objectives in mind. First, and most importantly, we wanted to write an account that a reader with a degree of stamina might wish to read as a whole. It is sometimes the case that histories of literature, aiming for encyclopaedic inclusiveness, overwhelm the reader with detail; almost inevitably, it becomes impossible to see the shape or direction of the material being discussed. What we have sought to present is a clear narrative, with a strong backbone of argument. Not every reader, of course, will want to read the entire book, but we hope that a sense of clarity, design and focus will be apparent to a reader dipping into any of the individual chapters.

Our second objective was to produce a history of literature in which poems, plays, novels and other forms of writing are seen as functioning in history. There was a time when literary critics regarded history as merely a background against which works of literature operated. In the case of a writer such as Dickens, for example, it was as if there was a reality of Victorian London and Dickens's works were seen as reflecting that tangible world. In recent years, however, literary critics have begun to emphasise a rather different view of how literary texts play a role in the society that produced them, and how they intervene in their culture, rather than just passively reflecting values and ideas. Some histories of literature still continue to provide the reader with an outline of events that never really connects with the discussion of the literary works produced in a period or with the texts themselves. We have sought to offer a more dynamic analysis of the interactions between texts and the era of their production.

In adopting this approach, we have been influenced by ways of thinking that characterise literary studies in universities at the present time. This leads us on to the third objective that we had in mind

in writing this book. It is sometimes the case that histories of litera-
ture, as works of assessment and reflection, embody the critical views
of an earlier generation of scholars; they contain a great deal of
extremely useful information, but in terms of their informing
assumptions they look to the past rather than to the present. In the
pages that follow we have endeavoured to provide an account that
reflects current thinking in the subject. It may be, therefore, that stu-
dents of literature, at school, college or university, will find this book
rather more directly relevant than some more traditional histories of
literature. But we also hope that general readers will have their inter-
est caught by the critical ideas that inform the volume.

A sense of what one hoped to achieve in a book is, of course,
always qualified by an awareness of the shortcomings of the finished
product. The major problem we had to face in every chapter was a
practical one: this is a *brief* history of English literature. Many authors
who might have been included were not included, simply because
there was no room for them. But that is not the full explanation. At
an early stage in thinking about the book, we decided that it was
going to prove a lot more useful to provide a reasonably full account
of a few writers in a period rather than offering long lists of names,
or, at the best, a couple of sentences about dozens of writers. The
authors discussed are those that most people would expect to feature
in a history of English literature, but also some of the lesser-known
figures students are likely to encounter on a degree course. By the end
of a chapter in this book we might have failed to mention the partic-
ular writer a reader wants to know about, but the chapter should
have provided a framework of understanding for other authors writ-
ing at that time.

We can probably be forgiven for our failure to discuss a large num-
ber of writers; our omission of certain writers, however, may seem to
some unforgivable. This takes us on to the ideological problems
involved in writing a history of English literature. We have endeav-
oured to write a balanced account, but the account we have pro-
duced inevitably reflects our individual preferences, our cultural
backgrounds and the structures of the system in which we work.
There might have been a time when historians of literature felt they
were offering a true and complete story, but today we are all aware of

the difficulties involved in such a project. These difficulties are apparent in the three words 'history', 'English' and 'literature'.

'History' might be regarded as a narrative that we impose on the past; if, as in the pages that follow, an attempt is made to construct a clear and coherent narrative, then the story that is being told is, inevitably, far too simple and often untrue. By 'English' we mean, for the purposes of this book, works written in Britain rather than works written in English; 'English' is, therefore, stretched to include works written in Scotland, Wales and Ireland (as well as a number of texts from America and the Commonwealth that have been influential in Britain). The inclusion of Irish authors might suggest colonial arrogance in subsuming the works of another nation into Britain's cultural heritage, but that leads us on to a more general problem. There was a time when historians of literature offered a kind of celebration of Englishness; at its best this was nostalgic and amiable, but at its worst it could be insular and arrogant, fuelled by an assumption that everyone shared a common inheritance and that everyone would share a common view of that inheritance. In writing about English literature today, however, we cannot avoid being aware of the many minefields involved in writing about concepts such as England, Englishness and the English tradition.

'Literature' is possibly an even more difficult term, and it is certainly in respect of literature that the practical and ideological difficulties confronted in writing this book have overlapped most. For many years, 'literature' has implied a certain canon of books; these are the books that people considered worthy of study, whereas there are others that they ignored or dismissed. As times change, the canon of approved texts changes; in recent years, for example, literary critics have started to pay far more attention to women writers who have up until now remained unread and even unpublished. In writing this book we have endeavoured to embrace such currents of change without losing sight of or displacing the traditional canon of authors. These are the writers that continue to be the most frequently taught in schools, colleges and universities; they are also the writers that students are expected to know about and that more radical accounts of literary history define themselves against.

Some will judge our approach to be too conventional – a case

could be made, for example, for paying more attention to popular forms of literature, such as crime fiction and children's books, as well as scientific, historical and political texts, and far more attention to authors from Scotland, Wales, Ireland and the Commonwealth – but in order to complete the compact and useful book we set out to produce we have had to strike a balance between an infinite variety of texts and possible approaches. We are aware, then, of the problems that lie at the very heart of the conception and execution of this book. At the same time, because a sense of these issues has been at the front of our minds while we have been writing, we would like to believe that this has energised the narrative we have constructed and the choices we have made. In brief, we hope that this book, both in terms of the range of authors considered and in the way that these authors are discussed, will strike the reader as a fresh and stimulating new history of English literature.

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Acknowledgements

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1 Old English Literature

Beowulf

Sometime between the year 700 and the year 900 the epic poem *Beowulf* was composed. It tells the story of Beowulf, a warrior prince from Geatland in Sweden, who goes to Denmark and kills the monster Grendel that has been attacking the great hall of Heorot, built by Hrothgar, the Danish king. Grendel's mother, a water-monster, takes revenge by carrying off one of the king's noblemen, but Beowulf dives into the underwater lair in which she lives and kills her too. Returning home, in due course Beowulf becomes king of the Geats. The poem then moves forward about fifty years. Beowulf's kingdom is ravaged by a fire-breathing dragon that burns the royal hall. Beowulf, aided by a young warrior, Wiglaf, manages to kill the dragon, but is fatally wounded in the course of the fight. He pronounces Wiglaf his successor. The poem ends with Beowulf's burial and a premonition that the kingdom will be overthrown.

When we read a Shakespeare play, a poem by Wordsworth, a novel by Dickens or most other works of literature, we usually know something about the author, something about the period in which the text was written, and, perhaps most importantly, a good deal about the conventions of the genre that the writer has chosen to employ. It is such knowledge that helps us arrive at conclusions about the meaning and significance of a literary text. In the case of *Beowulf* and other Old English texts, however, we have relatively little information to work from. We know nothing about the author of *Beowulf*, or who transcribed the poem (which exists in just one fire-damaged manuscript copy). Nor do we know the exact date of its composition. There are, too, other problems we face: not only is the text historically remote from us, involving ideas that seem to

bear little resemblance to our own ways of thinking, but it is written in a form of English (sometimes called Anglo-Saxon) that displays little similarity to English today:

> Ða com of more   under misthleoþum
> Grendel gongan.   Godes yrre bær.
> Mynte se manscaða   manna cynnes
> sumne besyrwan   in sele þam hean.

> [Then from the moor under the misty slopes
> Grendel came advancing. God's anger he bore.
> The evil ravager intended to ensnare one
> Of the race of men in that lofty hall.]
> (*Beowulf*, ll. 710–23)

Not surprisingly, most readers are initially going to feel at a loss in trying to establish any kind of hold on *Beowulf*, even if they encounter it in a modern translation.

As is often the case with a literary text, however, a good deal can actually be determined from a summary alone. Structurally, *Beowulf* is built around three fights. Each of these involves a battle between those who live in the royal hall and a monster; the monsters, it is clear, are dangerous, unpredictable and incomprehensible forces that threaten the security and well-being of those in power and the way of life they represent. When we have established this much, we have detected a pattern that is specific to the Anglo-Saxon period, but which also echoes down through the whole history of English literature. Time and time again, literary texts deal with an idea, or perhaps just an ideal, of order. There is a sense of a well-run state or a settled social order, and, for the individual, a feeling of existing within a secure framework; this might be the comfort provided by religious faith, the certainty associated with marriage and economic security, or perhaps just the happiness associated with being in love. In *Beowulf*, a sense of security is linked with the presence of the great hall as a place of refuge and shared values; it is a place for feasting and celebrations, providing warmth and protection against whatever might be encountered in the darkness outside. Over and over again, however, literary texts focus on threats to such a feeling of security and confidence. There might be an external threat, such as a monster or a

foreign enemy, or an enemy within, such as the rebellious noblemen in Shakespeare's history plays who challenge the authority of the king. But the threat might be more insidious; for example, in a number of eighteenth-century works, there is a sense of chaos overtaking society, and the collapse of established standards of behaviour. Or there might be, as is the case in nineteenth- and twentieth-century texts, a feeling that the world is moving so fast and changing so much that all steady points of reference have been lost. In short, we can say that the most common pattern in literature is one which sets the desire for order and coherence against an awareness of the inevitability of disorder, confusion and chaos.

This recurrent pattern is, as might be expected, felt and expressed in different ways as time passes, the world changes, and people face fresh problems. In the four or five hundred years before the Norman Conquest of 1066, England was a sparsely populated country that had experienced successive waves of invasion. The invaders included, between the late fourth and seventh centuries, different groups of Germanic peoples whose descendants came to be known as Anglo-Saxons. The history of this period is documented by the historian Bede (673–735), a monk whose Latin work *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* (*Ecclesiastical History of the English People*), completed in 731, provides us with much information about the era. Thanks to Bede and a number of other sources, we know a surprising amount about the government, administration and legal system of Anglo-Saxon England. The impression is of sophisticated mechanisms of social organisation, primarily associated with the king. But the monasteries were also important in this period, in particular as centres of learning; the texts in Old English that survive from Anglo-Saxon England were all probably transcribed during the tenth century by monks, who were both establishing and preserving a native literary culture. Government, administration, a legal system and a literary culture: all these things suggest a regulated, well-ordered and peaceful society. But this is only half of the story.

In 55 BC Julius Caesar landed in Ancient Britain. Colonisation and Christianity followed as Britain became part of the Roman empire. In 407, however, the Roman legions were withdrawn to protect Rome. Meanwhile, Picts invaded Roman Britain from the north. The British

king Vortigern, like Hrothgar in *Beowulf*, sent for help, but the Jutes who came soon seized Kent. Other pagan Germanic tribes, the Angles and the Saxons, followed, driving the Celtic inhabitants into Wales, Cornwall and Scotland. The result was that a number of Anglo-Saxon kingdoms emerged, and, almost inevitably, this led to military conflicts and shifts in power. During the sixth century, it is important to note, a process of re-Christianization began, but in 793 a further period of disruption was initiated, with Viking incursions that led, amongst other things, to the sacking of monasteries.

What becomes apparent from this brief summary is that in this period we are dealing with what is essentially a warrior society, a tribal community with people clustering together in forts and settlements, fearing attack. The land is farmed, and there are centres of learning, but the overwhelming fact of life is invasion by outside forces. It should be becoming clear by now that *Beowulf* reflects and expresses the anxieties that would have dominated such a society, but it also offers a sense of something positive. We know from historical evidence that Anglo-Saxon kings such as Alfred (871–99), Athelstan (924–39) and Edgar (959–75) contributed to the forging of one people and one state. This is echoed in the way that Beowulf, as a warrior, stands as a beacon, unselfishly going to the aid of the Danish king and then later, as king, facing the dragon in order to win its treasure for his people. And although he dies without an heir, there is also something impressive in the way that the baton of command is passed on to his successor, Wiglaf. The period before the Norman Conquest used to be referred to as the Dark Ages; the term clearly does less than justice to the achievements of this society, but, if we do accept the description for a moment, we can see how a poem such as *Beowulf*, with its ideas about leadership and loyalty, stands as a source of illumination in the darkness.

What we also need to recognise in our critical thinking about the text, however, is that a poem like *Beowulf*, engaging as it does with contemporary concerns, does not spring from nowhere. *Beowulf* belongs to a tradition of heroic or epic poetry; this tradition can, indirectly, be traced back to Ancient Greece and Rome, and there is something of a parallel tradition in Scandinavian culture. An epic is a long narrative poem (there are 3,182 lines in *Beowulf*) that operates on

a grand scale and deals with the deeds of warriors and heroes. As is the case in *Beowulf*, while focusing on the deeds of one man, epic poems also interlace the main narrative with myths, legends, folk tales and past events; there is a composite effect, the entire culture of a country cohering in the overall experience of the poem. *Beowulf* belongs to the category of oral, as opposed to literary, epic, in that it was composed to be recited; it was only written down much later as the poem that exists today, possibly as late as the year 1000.

In epic poetry there are always threats and dangers that have to be confronted, but even more important is the sense of a hero who embodies the qualities that are necessary in a leader in a hierarchical, masculine, warrior society; the text is concerned with the qualities that constitute his greatness, the poem as a whole amounting to what we might regard as a debate about the nature of the society and its values. Central to those values is the idea of loyalty to one's lord: the lord provides food and protection in return for service. He is the 'giver of rings' and rewards, and the worst of crimes is betrayal. This impression of a larger purpose in *Beowulf* is underlined by the inclusion of decorous speeches and passages of moral reflection, and by the inclusion of quasi-historical stories of feuds and wars that echo and support the main narrative. The fact that *Beowulf* exists within a literary tradition is also apparent in its use of the alliterative metre, which is the most notable feature of Germanic prosody; in *Beowulf*, as in Old English verse generally, there are two or three alliterating stressed syllables in each line, reflecting the pattern of speech and so appropriate for oral performance. The effect is to link the two halves of the lines into rich interweaving patterns of vocabulary and idea. The convention may seem strange to the modern reader, but in its distinctive way it serves, like rhyme, to reinforce the poem's theme of the search for order in a chaotic world.

In the end, however, it is not a simple opposition of the desire for order and the threat of disorder that makes *Beowulf* such an impressive poem. Indeed, if we talk about order versus disorder, the formulation might suggest that literature can convey a static and unchanging ideal of order. But this is never the case. A society is always in a state of transformation. One thing that we know about the period in which *Beowulf* was produced, and which is apparent in

the poem, is that pagan values were in conflict with, and gradually yielding to, Christian values. Values and ideas are constantly changing, but the most interesting works of literature are those produced at times when there is a dramatic shift between one way of thinking about the world and a new way of thinking about the world. The most obvious example of this is found in the works of Shakespeare, who was writing at a time when the medieval world was becoming the modern world; part of Shakespeare's greatness, many would argue, is explicable in terms of how his poems and plays reflect this enormous historical shift. In the case of *Beowulf*, we can sense a conflict between a way of looking at the world that focuses on the heroic warrior and, on the other hand, a Christian perspective that is not entirely at ease with some of the implications of the warrior code.

Even from a non-Christian perspective, there are reservations that might be voiced about the heroic life; for example, joy, youth and life will inevitably give way to sorrow, age and death, leaving past glories behind. And there can seem something slightly absurd about the quest for glory; even the greatest warriors might strike us as vainglorious, and as fighting for no real purpose. But the added level of complication that can be sensed in *Beowulf* is the possibility that there is a Christian critique of heroism implicit in the poem. We may well feel that values in the poem that are remote from modern experience – things such as blood-feuds and the celebration of violence in what professes to be an elite society – combine rather awkwardly with a story that might be regarded as a Christian allegory of salvation. In the same way, we may be struck by a gap between the Christian elements in the poem and the stress on a pagan fate that determines human affairs. It is, however, just such instability and indeterminacy in the poem that makes it an important work of literature, for this is how texts function in the period of their production, expressing conflicting and contradictory impulses in a culture. The kind of complication that characterises the best-known literary texts is a matter of how they not only reflect but are also the embodiment of a society caught up in a process of transformation and alteration, of collapse and formation, and of old and new ideas.