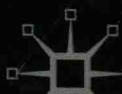
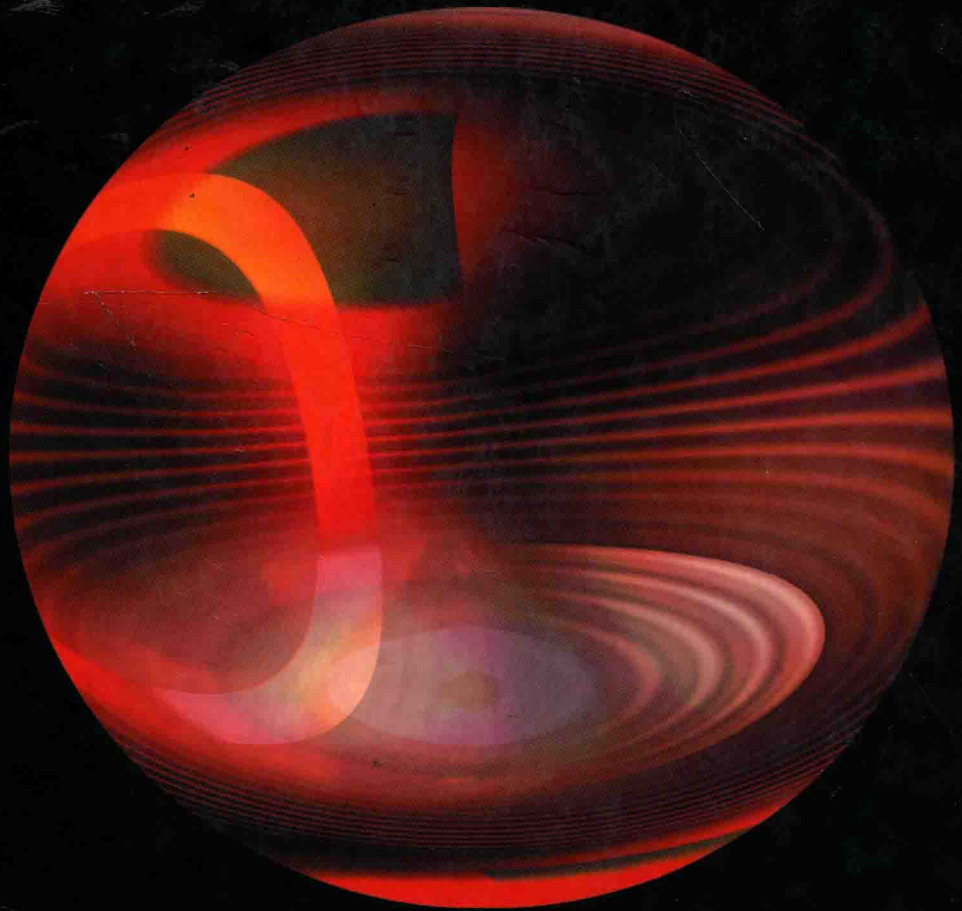


literature in context

edited by rick rylance and judy simons



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First published 2001 by
PALGRAVE
Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS
and
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010
Companies and representatives throughout the world

PALGRAVE is the new global academic imprint of St. Martin's Press LLC Scholarly and Reference Division and Palgrave Publishers Ltd (formerly Macmillan Press Ltd).

ISBN 0-333-80390-6 hardback
ISBN 0-333-80391-4 paperback

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Cataloguing-in-Publication data is available from the Library of Congress

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
10 09 08 07 06 05 04 03 02 01

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Creative Print & Design (Wales), Ebbw Vale

Foreword

Janet White, QCA

As from September 2000, students will be working on new specifications for 'A' and 'AS' level English, and while these build on previous courses of advanced level study, there are changes. Some of these are structural, as for instance the modularisation of courses and the option of a separate 'AS' (Advanced Subsidiary) qualification for those wishing to do some but not all of the full 'A' level. The range of knowledge, skills and understanding to be developed across the course as a whole has been given a new emphasis with the aim of encouraging students to gain a wider sense of the scope of literary study. Thus, while detailed knowledge and understanding of individual texts remains a central aim of all 'A' and 'AS' courses in English Literature, the new syllabuses require students to explore comparisons and connections between texts and to appreciate the significance of cultural and historical influences upon readers and writers.

Building understanding about the contexts in which texts are written and received is part of the way in which a greater depth of understanding may be achieved. The essays in this volume demonstrate in practical and accessible ways the excitement of reading closely and questioning widely – what was going on, politically, socially, culturally, at the time the text was written? Where does a particular text fit in the life of a writer? Are there differences in the way past and present readers interpret a text? How sure are we that we have the words of the text as originally written? And, crucially, how do our answers to any such questions interact with our own critical reading?

The contributors to this volume offer many approaches to the notion of context but none are in any doubt that lines of enquiry around texts and their reception make for subtle and informed readings. Perhaps what unites all the essays is their integration of textual reference and contextual knowledge. This is not a book which deals with historical facts, literary allusions, or snippets of biographical information as matter separate from the texts under discussion, leaving the student to select and apply at random, or worse, to present 'background' in lieu of analysis. Rather, there is an interaction between questions that arise from reading and those which spring from reflection about the context and circumstances of

writing; it is this interaction which illuminates interpretation and response. As well as providing a number of challenging accounts of texts that range across periods and genres, the book as a whole models a process of reading which is fundamental to the new specifications in 'A' and 'AS' English Literature. On both counts, its contribution to advanced level studies should be of great significance.

Janet White
Professional Officer, English
Qualifications and Curriculum Authority

Preface

This book has emerged from a timely and perhaps unique collaboration. The editors of the volume have worked for a number of years as senior executive officers of the Council for College and University English (CCUE), the national subject association for English in Higher Education, and many of the writers whose chapters comprise it have been involved in similar capacities in the Council's work. Over this period, CCUE has welcomed collaboration with schools, teachers and other bodies with responsibility for English in the secondary sector. Among these has been the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), the government agency charged with the overall development of the national curriculum and framework of qualifications at secondary level, with whom CCUE, and individuals on its Executive, have enjoyed fruitful collaboration. One significant area in this work has been the development of the subject criteria for the new 'AS' and 'A' level qualifications to be introduced in the academic year 2000–2001. From these discussions emerged the idea of this book, and the role of Janet White, Professional Officer for English at QCA, in promoting, advising and helping it forward has been especially important. We are therefore pleased with the book, not just because of the quality of its parts, but because it represents a rare moment of partnership between bodies, and sectors of the education system, whose work should more often inter-connect. Our hope is that, in future, it will.

CCUE is a voluntary organisation with few funds of its own. So there is another collaboration which is important to this book. The editors and contributors, and the officers at QCA, thank Palgrave – and Margaret Bartley, their Publisher, especially – for so readily undertaking a project which, we all hope, will help the teaching of contextual studies in English at both 'AS', 'A' and degree levels. We trust it will also speed the spirit of joint endeavour which is, in large part, what public education is about.

Rick Rylance and Judy Simons

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Acknowledgements

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Introduction: Why Study the Contexts of Literature?

Rick Rylance and Judy Simons

I
What happens when we pick up a book and begin reading? We peruse the words on the page, and these tell us a story, conjure up images, invite us to participate in an imaginative world that is simultaneously very different from and strangely similar to our own. That world mirrors our desires, appeals to our memories and our fantasies, and recreates familiar experiences in ways that make them fresh and arresting. Literature is undeniably a powerful medium with the capacity to convey equally powerful messages. More than this, it helps shape our personal and collective cultural imagination. Consequently, the formal study of literature becomes an activity which is much more complex than passive absorption; it incorporates an enquiry into the influence of the medium itself, into the ways in which words carry authority beyond their isolated dictionary definitions, into the history of ideas and into the mechanisms whereby we, as readers, absorb and make sense of these intersections.

An interest in the study of the contexts of literature is by no means new. As several essays in this book make clear, from time to time – maybe in all periods – literary critics, and cultural and intellectual historians, have been concerned with investigating and establishing the contexts in which works of literature are produced and understood. Although one common critical position has always been that what matters in reading a literary text is ‘the words on the page’, there has always been an opposing pressure. Literary works naturally engage with the worlds that surround them and of which they are a part. Readers too, however engrossed by the micro-world bounded by the page, are people whose lives are enmeshed in social, intellectual, cultural and other circumstances to which they both spontaneously and reflectively relate their reading. So reading literature is essentially a dynamic activity. Of itself it encourages readers to make connections between the diverse aspects of their world, including the

represented worlds they find in their reading. But literature is a dynamic activity in another sense too. Images of readers in paintings and other visual representations often stress the solitariness of reading as an occupation. It is, for instance, striking how frequently the covers of modern editions and critical works feature women in Edwardian costumes alone with a book. But in fact the reading of literature is an intensely public activity involving frequently impassioned discussion of the issues that arise from these representations. Apart from anything else, this goes some way to explaining the immense popularity of literary studies.

The study of English literature and language is still, with mathematics, the largest subject chosen by 'A' level candidates. Over 88 000 candidates, for example, were entered for 'A' level English Literature, English Language and English Literature and Language in 1999, while English remains amongst the most popular subjects chosen in universities and colleges, with around 40 000 students studying English at any one time in Higher Education in the UK. Why should this be so? It is a complicated question. If asked, students might nominate the sheer pleasure of reading as their principal reason for choosing the subject. However, another answer might be that the study of literature allows the opportunity, perhaps uniquely, for discussion of ideas, feelings and values at the intersection of personal and public experience. It enables a centrally important conversation to occur in our culture at exactly that point where the private meets the public, where personal reflection joins general discussion, where the public communication of often intensely private feeling (which is frequently the very business of literature) allows us to maintain an open interest in the way we thrive as human beings in our own particular cultural environments. Not only do the texts of literature invite consideration of their contexts, the very presence of literature in the culture at large demands its appreciation. Literature offers a remarkable perspective on how we function as imaginative and intellectual beings in a society which is itself evolving, and which moreover has an all-consuming interest in re-creating and representing itself in myriad artistic forms. It is exceptional in its exploration of the reverberating effects of language, and of how words interact with their multiple milieux to create meanings that resonate so compellingly with readers. These resonances tell us a good deal about the ways in which we thrive and fail as human beings in particular cultures, both now and in the past.

But what is meant by context? There is still open debate about this issue. Dictionaries define the word variously, but most call attention to two key features. The first is that context is, in one of its root meanings, a matter of language; the second stresses relatedness and interweaving. In *Cham-*

bers *Twentieth-Century Dictionary*, context is defined as: 'the parts of a discourse or treatise which precede and follow a special passage and may fix its true meaning', and by extension refers to the 'associated surroundings, setting'. The related word 'contexture' refers to 'the process or manner of weaving together' in a structure or a fabric. In the *Oxford English Dictionary*, context is 'the connection of parts of a discourse', especially those preceding or succeeding a given passage which 'determine its meaning'. It, too, records the use of the companion word 'contexture' in the textile industry from the 1600s to refer to the 'action of weaving together' of 'a mass of things'. But it also notes the use of the same word from the same date in relation to language: 'contexture' is 'the weaving together of words, sentences, etc. in connected composition; the structure of a literary composition; a connected passage'.

This primary understanding of context as a matter of relationships within language is emphasised by more specialist definitions in modern dictionaries of critical terms (see, for example, Abrams, Baldick, Fowler, Gray and Hawthorn). Indeed a powerful school of twentieth-century critical opinion has primarily understood context in a way that goes to the heart of a continuing, fundamental debate in literary studies. Should critical attention be primarily aimed at the appreciation – in the widest sense – of textual detail, focused on the particular words to be found in particular works? Or should it enlarge the frame of attention by placing literary works in wider contextual relationships? The answer, of course, is that it should do neither *exclusively*. A criticism which is not in confident possession of a text's detail is unlikely to be convincing when it moves to assessing its relationship to context. By the same token, a commentary which is ill-informed about the contexts in which works are written and received seems wilfully to deny those important parts of literary works which make strong connections with the world that surrounds them.

Yet a powerful body of opinion in the twentieth century has opposed the making of these enlarged connections in critical work. Whilst the extant texts of English literature go back to Anglo-Saxon times, the study of English literature as a recognised academic discipline is relatively new. It was only introduced as a subject thought suitable to be taught in British schools and universities in anything like a modern form in the late nineteenth century. One of the arguments that was made to establish its academic credentials was that – in an early version of an accelerating information-based economy increasingly dependent upon written information – the close study of verbal detail created skilled, discriminating and independent readers. This sort of argument for the subject is still often made, and remains largely true. It was not, by any means, the only

justification launched for English, but it was an important one. The discipline, it is often claimed, developed strongly from the point at which it settled, during the first three decades or so of the twentieth century, on a distinctive method and approach based upon the intensive, detailed scrutiny of texts. This approach – as successful in America as in the UK – was variously called ‘practical criticism’ or ‘close reading’, and as a method it had many advantages. It was coherent and relatively easy to teach. It was, theoretically, equally comfortable with different kinds of material from different periods (though, in practice, it tended to set aside differences in style and period). And it was exceptionally efficient in terms of teaching resources. It required the text (perhaps from an anthology), the student and the teacher; and this trio – in uninspired versions – invited intensive concentration on the words on the page, rarely lifting the eyes in other directions.

Some leading theorists, indeed, pointedly discouraged wider thinking. Murray Kreiger, a leading member of what became known as the American ‘New Criticism’ which influentially adapted and consolidated British initiatives, defined ‘Contextual Criticism’ as the study of ‘the tight, compelling, finally closed context’ of the words on the page, and this prevents ‘our escape to the world of reference and action beyond’ (quoted in Abrams, *Glossary*, 224). The assessment practices favoured by this method often – though never entirely – enforced what was, in Kreiger’s own metaphor, an imprisoning regimen. In critical practice, most teachers of English will be familiar with an old style of question known as the ‘context question’ which became a familiar, indeed in many places dominant (though never exclusive), part of ‘A’ level and higher education examinations in English. In this type of question, candidates would be offered a passage from a larger work, and invited, first, to reflect upon the meaning and significance of individual words and phrases in the local context of their usage in the passage cited, and then, in one way or another, to place the whole extract in the context of the work from which it was taken. The method of assessment at least had the advantage of stocking candidates’ minds with detailed memories of what came where in a five-act play by Shakespeare or the ‘Prologue’ to *The Canterbury Tales*, but too often it was used simply to test whether candidates had got the plot straight and learnt a few archaisms. In some respects, this kind of context paradoxically *disengaged* the words from the page. Expecting candidates to construe exactly the meanings of ‘Your wisdom is consumed in confidence’ from *Julius Caesar*, or ‘a gipoun / al besmotered with his haubergeoun’ from *The Canterbury Tales* seems a textual exercise some distance from significant usage, and implies a pedagogy with some muddled priorities.

These methods have, largely, now fallen into disuse, but in highlighting their limitations we should not imply either that detailed textual knowledge is unimportant, or that the continuing argument in criticism between text-centred and context-centred approaches has been settled. The dangers of an over-emphatic methodological outlook, and the shortcomings of a particular assessment method, do not diminish the crucial importance of alert, informed, detailed reading. Without skills of this kind, and the corresponding ability to relate local detail to broader pictures, contextual thinking in a larger framework is merely a short cut to superficial generalisation. The particular, prized skill in contextual work – which will be rewarded at all levels – is the ability to connect the detail to the pattern, the nuance to the generalisation, and the ability to recognise what is exceptional as well as what is typical in the works under consideration.

But the idea of literary context also entails what one recent glossary definition calls the 'other, more open-ended part of criticism [which] involves relating literary works themselves to their relevant psychological, social, and historical contexts' (Fowler, *Dictionary*, 41). For many contemporary critics, the idea of context has come to acquire a sense somewhat opposed to what many perceive as a narrow and confined scrutiny of verbal detail and concentration on the single text. Modern contextual studies open out the perspective and shade more towards the second dictionary definition of context, that associated with 'contexture': the mingling and weaving of different strands. In such approaches, the individual text, or groups of texts, are understood in a wider framework, often specifically in relation to other art forms, or movements of ideas, or broader developments in the society of their times or that of their readers. The splendid, 1200-page *Encyclopedia of Literature and Criticism*, edited by Martin Coyle, Peter Garside, Malcolm Kelsall and John Peck in 1990, provides an excellent, wide-ranging source for contextual ideas. In its section on 'Contexts' it includes essays on literature's relationship to the history of ideas, the Bible, the classics, folk literature, the visual arts, popular culture and science, as well as a chapter on 'Literature and Language'.

But what looms largest in the background of the development of modern contextual criticism is the change in the information economy that has occurred so rapidly over the past two decades. There is, simply put, much more information, and many more resources, available to teachers and students at all levels, and this presents radically different possibilities from those made available by the 'low-spec' publishing practices and printing technologies of even two decades ago. The spectacular, unfathomed – and as yet unclear – impact of the internet and other sorts of electronic data

storage and transmission is clearly the headline news in these developments. But we should not underestimate other aspects. There is the impact of 'in-house' reprographic technologies such as photocopying which can transmit good, affordable packages of contextual material for educational use inhibited only by the just claims of copyright holders. At the same time, the depth, sophistication and extent of modern scholarship on the literature of all historical periods has increased enormously. We now know immeasurably more about more things in the subject than we did. We also have more and better editions of literary texts themselves, and a much more alert sense of the impact of editorial practices on the literature we read (as Thomas Healy's essay in this volume amply demonstrates). Cheaper, computer-based printing technologies nowadays, and alterations in the economics of publishing, have led not just to the beneficial supply of cheap editions of often-studied 'classic' texts, but also to the availability of very much more of the writing of the past in general, and this has altered our sense of the relations between literary works. The work of publishers specialising in women's literature is a case in point. The circulation of this material, and scholarly work on it, has, alongside the growth of feminist awareness in literary studies generally, very profoundly corrected older views of literary and cultural history. Its impact is fundamental to the readings of history in this collection by, amongst others, Judy Simons on *Persuasion*, Heather Glen on *Jane Eyre* and Marion Shaw on *Mrs Dalloway*. This general increase in the range of work available seems unlikely to decline in the shift to on-line and other electronic mechanisms. Altogether, these developments constitute in themselves a significant context for the revival of interest in contextual studies in recent critical and educational work.

These infrastructural developments have been accompanied by significant changes of outlook in the overall academic community across a number of disciplines which have advanced contextual studies in all fields. At the core of this is what most commentators agree has been a significant alteration in our sense of truth or value. Social and natural scientists, as well as commentators in the humanities, are aware that an observation cannot be separated from the context in which it is made, and that the stance and values of the observer will influence what is seen. Does a phenomenon occur in the same way in laboratory as 'real world' conditions? Have the biases of a social observer skewed his or her perceptions? Do the values we hold in our culture make us blind to the different beliefs, traditions and assumptions of other cultures? All of these examples invite consideration of the role of contextual factors in judgements and analysis. In the social sphere, this is intimately connected to our awareness of