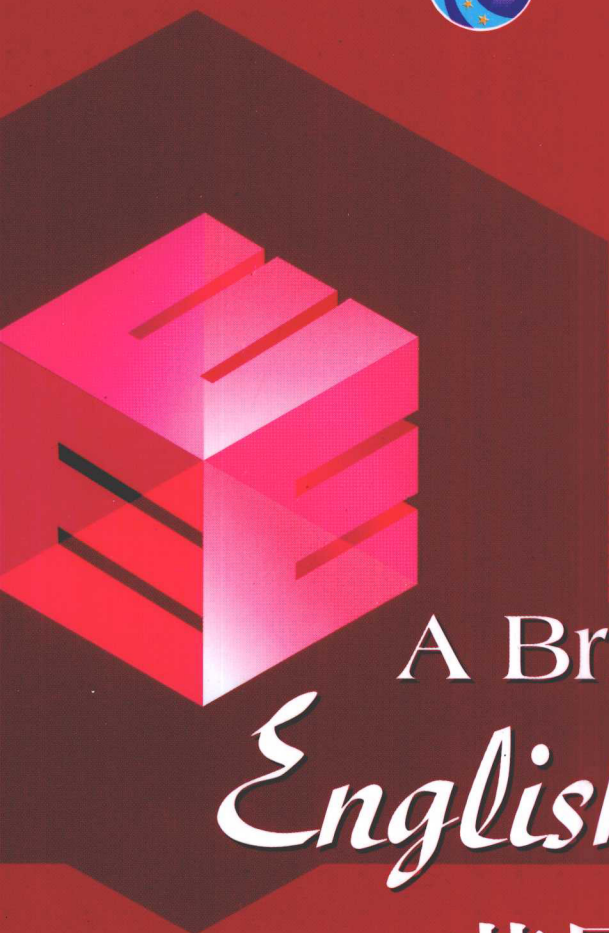




普通高等教育“十一五”国家级规划教材



A Brief History of
English Literature

英国文学简史

□ John Peck and Martin Coyle

□ 导读 王守仁



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总 序

随着全球化进程的加速发展，文化全球化和经济全球化的深入推进，高等教育，特别是英语专业教育在新的历史转型期的文化交融层面肩负着日益重要的社会责任。因此，为了培养具有扎实的英语基本功、相关的专业知识和文化知识、较强的英语综合应用能力和创新思维的人才，为不断深入的大学英语教学改革培养和提供师资，而且立足于中国语境，用全球化的理念和视角进行教材设计，我们策划了“高等院校英语专业立体化系列教材”。

实现这一具有时代意义的战略任务需要广大英语专业教师树立执着的敬业精神，制订科学的、高水平的、切合实际的英语专业教学大纲，编写出版能充分体现大纲要求的有关课程（必修和选修）的配套教材，以及开发为课堂教学和学生自主学习服务的、与新型电子化教学仪器设备配套的教学软件系统。由高等教育出版社策划并陆续出版的“高等院校英语专业立体化系列教材”作为“普通高等教育‘十一五’国家级规划教材”，就是为实现英语专业教学改革这一历史任务服务的。

为实现以上目的和任务，本系列教材注重以下方面：

1. 注重培养学生的跨文化交际能力和文化鉴赏与批判能力。在教材设计时体现“全球视野，中国视角”的理念。这就是说，本系列教材在保持各门课程的思想性和批判性的优良传统外，既向学生提供西方文化背景知识，也引导学生鉴赏和学习我国的优秀传统文化。要让学生在多元文化的背景下，熟悉掌握中外文化的共同点和差异。在这个基础上，培养学生的鉴别和比较能力，启发和诱导学生进行创新思维。

2. 科学安排，系统设计。经过多年来对教学模式改革的探讨，我国英语专业教学已总结出良性的教学规律，一般将4年的教学过程分为两个阶段，即：基础阶段（一年级和二年级）和高年级阶段（三年级和四年级）。按照此教学规律；本系列教材分为基础阶段教材和高年级阶段教材，同时悉心设计基础阶段和高年级阶段的衔接。基础阶段教材的主要任务是传授英语基础知识，对学生进行全面的、严格的基本技能训练，培养学生实际运用语言的能力、良好的学风和正确的学习方法，为进入高年级学习打下扎实的专业基础。高年级阶段教材的主要任务是在继续打好语言基础的同时，学习英语专业知识和相关专业知识，进一步扩大知识面，增强对文化差异的敏感性，提高综合运用英语进行交际的能力。同时，根据《高等学校英语专业英语教学大纲》的课程设置，本系列教材将课程分为英语专业技能课、英语专业知识课和相关专业知识课三种类型。全面培养学生的语言能力、思维能力、终生学习能力，拓宽学生的知识面，同时帮助学生树立正确的人生观和价值观。

3. 时代性。这不仅表现在选材方面能反映当代人民的生活内容，更主要的在于对它的“立体化”要求。21世纪的教材不再拘泥于传统的纸质教材，而是能培养学生多元阅读

能力(multiliteracy)的基于多媒体(multimedia)的多模态(multimodality)教材。本系列教材在建设传统纸质教材的同时启动建设一个开放性、超文本化的网络系列课程,构建全国英语专业英语自主学习体系,使优秀教学资源共享,充分体现“以人为本”的教学理念。这一举措也反映了由于当前英语专业招生人数的不断扩大,英语专业的传统教学模式已不能满足当前专业教学的需要。本系列教材采用立体化配套,将各种多媒体手段运用到教学中来,这是英语专业教学发展的需要,也将为我国英语专业教学改革和发展作出重大贡献。

4. 可教性。在编写过程中,反复强调教材的可教性。在选材上,讲究趣味性,让学生喜欢学。在内容安排上,力争让学生在较少的课时内学到该学的内容,从而体现当代先进的模块化教学思想。在习题设计上,做到有针对性、形式丰富,便于教师和学生课内课外操作。充分体现教学过程以学生为中心的教学理念,通过教师与学生互动、学生之间互动的教学活动,把语言、文学、文化、翻译等方面的教学内容转化成为学生能掌握的技能 and 知识,着力培养学生分析问题和解决问题的能力,传授基本研究方法,增强学生的研究意识和问题意识,同时提高学生的学术素养,提升学生综合素质。

5. 适用性。本系列教材集中全国著名大学的一批专家编写,凝聚了他们多年教学经验的精华,体现了我国英语专业教学的最新理念和先进水平。入选系列教材的初稿均在不同重点高校教学中使用过至少三轮以上,深受学生喜爱,能够真正反映当前英语专业教学改革的思路和教学的实际情况。

综上所述,本系列教材反映了当代新的教学理念。为此,编委会也做出了大量努力。一方面,编写工作中强调协同性:在编写策划层面,出版社与编委会之间、编委会与编写者之间反复协商,制订计划,讨论样章;在使用者层面,充分考虑到师生之间以及学生之间的互动和协作。另一方面,教材致力于构建良好的英语学习平台,为学生的自主性学习、独立思考和创新思维创造条件,同时向作为教学各个环节的咨询者、组织者、监督者的教师提供指导。

多年以来英语专业教材,特别是专业高年级教材的出版比较零散,一直缺乏相对配套完整的系列教材。我们深信本系列教材的出版对于推动英语专业的教学改革和建设,对于进一步提高英语专业人才的培养质量将起到积极的作用。同时,我们衷心希望听取广大师生的意见和建议,使本系列教材的出版日臻完善。

“高等学校英语专业立体化系列教材”编委会

2007年10月

《英国文学简史》导读

2010年高等教育出版社决定从国外引进一本供高校英语专业本科教学使用的英国文学史，委托我从已经出版各类英国文学史中进行挑选。我经过反复比较和仔细斟酌，确定了佩克（John Peck）和科伊尔（Martin Coyle）合著的《英国文学简史》（《A Brief History of English Literature》）。正如两位作者所说：这是一本有新意的英国文学史。他们在《序言》中谈到了撰写该书要达到的三个目的：首先，叙述明晰，脉络清楚，使得读者一口气想要把全书读完；第二，在描写文学史进程中不把社会历史只当作背景来处理，而是展示文学如何参与创造历史，注重文本与时代的互动；第三，对具体作家作品的分析受当代批评思想的影响，体现出当下性。佩克和科伊尔较好地实现了这三个目的，《英国文学简史》记述从古英语时期至21世纪初一千多年间英国文学的发展演变，将文本置于社会、政治和文化语境之中，兼顾经典和非经典作品，视角新颖，评论中肯，信息比较完备，可读性强，无论是对英语专业的学生和教师还是对普通读者来说，都是一本值得阅读或收藏的文学史书。

《英国文学简史》全书共15章，加上关于21世纪的“补述”，比较全面系统地介绍了英国诗歌、戏剧、小说、散文等各种文学体裁的发轫和成熟。各章内容安排得当，对主要作家、主要作品进行较为深入的分析评论，叙述收放有度，主次分明。

第1章“古英语文学”由四个小节组成，分别为《贝奥武甫》、《水手》和《漫游者》、战争诗歌和《十字架之梦》、古英语，这样的四小节结构也是随后各章所遵循的统一体例。从公元5世纪至1066年诺曼底公爵威廉征服英国，被称之为盎格鲁—撒克逊时期，最重要的作品是英雄史诗《贝奥武甫》。本书作者认为，异教文化与基督教文化的冲突导致《贝奥武甫》文本的“不稳定性”和“不确定性”，这正是该史诗的重要性所在，反映出社会转型期的时代特征。

第2章“中古英语文学”重点介绍了以《高文爵士和绿色骑士》为代表的传奇文学、乔叟的文学创作、兰格伦的《农夫皮尔斯》。诺曼征服之后，法语成为官方语言，法国以及欧洲其他国家的文学相继被介绍到英国来。14世纪中叶，英语的社会地位逐渐提高，为英语本土文学的繁荣创造了条件。乔叟的《坎特伯雷故事》展现了一幅中世纪英国社会各阶层千姿百态生活风貌的画面，人物刻画栩栩如生，语言表达富有活力。从思想内容来看，这部作品面向未来，同时承继过去，在未来与过去的“协商”过程中形成的那种“稳重的保守主义”在随后数百年的英国文化中占据中心位置。

第3章“16世纪的诗歌与散文”首先指出16世纪最为常见的诗歌形式为十四行诗，魏厄特、锡德尼与莎士比亚写出了许多优美诗篇。斯宾塞是一位严肃诗人，他的《仙后》赞颂伊丽莎白女王，以寓言诗的形式，通过骑士冒险故事进行道德教育。斯宾塞充分意识到世界的复杂性，但他笔下的仙后能够从容应对各种危险、威胁和挑战。这一时期重要的散文作品有莫尔的

《乌托邦》、罗利的《世界史》、锡德尼的《阿卡迪亚》。

第4章“莎士比亚”力图将莎士比亚的戏剧创作置于伊丽莎白女王时代的历史语境之下进行讨论。在莎士比亚的喜剧中，社会秩序的美好理念与驱使人行动的复杂情感和欲望之间存在着落差。他的历史剧涉及在治理国家过程中权力的建构与运行，将当时思想和感情的潜流表现出来。他的四大悲剧无一例外地描写了现有秩序的分崩离析，悲剧英雄面对失去控制的世界所产生的困惑对现代人仍然有吸引力。莎士比亚的晚年创作生涯发生了转向，他的传奇剧带有童话和浪漫色彩。在本书作者看来，莎士比亚的戏剧在处理伊丽莎白时代人们的政治焦虑之际传达了对历史时刻的意识，在这世事发生变化的时刻，一个可控、可知的中世纪世界正在让位于令人费解、复杂的现代世界。

第5章“文艺复兴时期与王政复辟时期的戏剧”重点讨论了马洛与琼森。马洛被认为是文艺复兴时期第一位伟大的剧作家，他的帖木儿大帝试图颠覆一切现存秩序，将人的主体性发挥到了极致；浮士德表现出对支配物质世界的知识和权力的渴望，但同时也意识到人的局限性。琼森是一位十分保守但又很创新的剧作家，其名声一度超过莎士比亚。他以创作反映人类本性、揭露中产阶级恶习和蠢行的讽刺喜剧著称，这些剧作有一个基本出发点，即邪恶而不是德行在主导社会。琼森工于技巧，恪守古典的“三一律”。

第6章“17世纪诗歌与散文”第一节讨论玄学派诗人邓恩，他的诗歌创作突破了16世纪抒情诗的正统模式。邓恩广泛使用“奇喻”，善于在不相关的事物之间寻找相似性，建立起别出心裁的联系，造成惊奇突兀的效果。第二节介绍了若干女性作家的诗歌创作，随后讨论散文，指出班扬的《天路历程》在一定程度上预示了18世纪的小说发展。第三节比较全面地论述弥尔顿的生平与创作，提出了自由与选择这一关键性政治问题贯穿《失乐园》始终的观点。第四节简略评述了王政复辟时期代表诗人德莱顿的文学创作及影响。

第7章“18世纪”的论述对象是除小说以外的诗歌和散文创作，诗歌方面涉及到蒲柏的讽刺诗和以情感为主题的感伤主义诗歌，探讨了讽刺为什么成为17世纪末至18世纪上半叶诗歌表达主要形式的原因。斯威夫特是作为“奥古斯都时期”（1700-1745）重要的讽刺作家来讨论，而约翰逊作为一代文豪，其思想和性格表现出复杂性，已非“新古典主义者”的称号所能涵盖。

第8章“小说：第一个100年”通过论述笛福、贝恩、理查森、菲尔丁、斯特恩、斯摩莱特、海伍德、玛丽·雪莱、司各特、奥斯丁等人的小说创作，展现了100年间英国小说的兴起和繁荣过程。值得注意的是本书作者对女性小说家给予特别关注，将贝恩的《欧奴诺克》与笛福的《鲁滨逊漂流记》作比较，对笛福是英国第一位小说家的说法提出质疑。

第9章“浪漫主义时期”再次重申了本书的基本观点，即社会处于持续的转型过程之中，文学是旧的思维方式向新的思维方式转变的产物与反思，同时对这种思维进行干预。第一节“革命年代”强调浪漫主义时期的核心事件是法国大革命，受其影响，18世纪末英国政治、社会与文化发生了深刻变化，新思想、新观念层出不穷。第二、第三节结合具体作品分析布莱

克、华兹华斯、柯勒律治、拜伦、雪莱、济慈等六位浪漫主义诗人的创作思想和实践，确立主观想象在浪漫主义文学中的中心地位，并赋予济慈有关自我、性和欲望的意识新的意义和价值。第四节介绍了浪漫主义时期的各种激进声音。

第10、11和12章分别讨论维多利亚时代早期（1837-1857）、中期（1857-1876）、晚期（1876-1901）文学。1837年维多利亚女王登基，同年，狄更斯以小说连载的形式开始发表《雾都孤儿》。狄更斯是最为著名的维多利亚时代小说家，他的小说全方位展现了19世纪英国社会的复杂性，同时显示其中产阶级的本质特性。根据本书作者的分析，夏洛蒂·勃朗特笔下的简爱是中产阶级社会的局外人；萨克雷拒绝接受维多利亚时代的新价值观；盖斯凯尔夫人的小说探讨社会问题，但她提供的解决方式却显得软弱无力。如同其他同时代作家，盖斯凯尔夫人积极参与中产阶级价值观的构建，同时对新价值观持怀疑态度。以丁尼生和布朗宁为代表的维多利亚时代诗歌表达了人们疑惧、焦虑的心声。

乔治·爱略特是维多利亚时代中期重要的作家，她的《米德尔马契》被认为是英国最出色的现实主义小说。爱略特的小说反映了中产阶级的道德与社会话语，同时又对构成这种话语的思维方式进行剖析和解构。柯林斯的奇情小说《白衣女人》和《月亮宝石》对英国侦探小说发展产生很大影响。特罗洛普作为一位中产阶级作家，并非像看上去那样乐观而充满信心，他的《如今的世道》描写金融诈骗，展现一个被贪婪、腐败毁掉的颓废社会，基调灰暗悲观，似乎预示着中产阶级进步和体面叙事的终结。

哈代是维多利亚女王在位最后25年间最为重要的小说家。爱略特置身于社会与文化共识的中心进行写作，哈代与她形成对照，则是从边缘出发，质疑现有的体制和价值。他笔下的人物与社会主流价值观格格不入，并表现出非理性和破坏性倾向，在个人与社会的冲突中不存在和解的可能，小说主人公大都以失败和死亡为结局。这一时期活跃在文坛上的其他小说家有吉辛、摩尔、勃特勒、亨利·詹姆斯、史蒂文森和吉卜林。维多利亚时代晚期出现了戏剧的复兴，代表人物为萧伯纳，他的戏剧创作深受易卜生影响，关注社会问题。王尔德是英国唯美主义运动的主将，他的喜剧充满机智幽默的对白和似非而是的怪论，似乎比萧伯纳更为传统，但实际上描绘了关于生活和社会非常激进和令人不安的图景。

20世纪的文学也分三个时期叙述，即早期（第13章）、两次大战期间（第14章）、第二次世界大战至上世纪末（第15章）。康拉德是20世纪第一位主要英语作家，他的小说描写了西方文明秩序的脆弱以及生活在冷漠、残酷的世界中个人的无根、无助状态。如果说现实主义小说在19世纪末不太景气，到了20世纪初则注入了新的活力。本涅特与威尔斯是当时受人欢迎的现实主义小说家，福斯特的小说揭示了英国文化中存在的缺失，劳伦斯试图填补现代生活中的空虚并寻找新的发展方向。第一次世界大战（1914-1918）从根本上改变了人们思维和写作的方式，乔治时代诗人笔下的田园风光被与战争有关的哀歌所替代。叶芝是爱尔兰文学复兴的关键人物，他的早期诗歌融合了浪漫主义、民族理想主义、爱尔兰神话与神秘主义，战后他成为现代主义诗人。

两次世界大战间的重要作家有T.S.艾略特、乔伊斯、伍尔芙，他们创作了英国现代主义文学的经典作品。现代主义文学在思想内容和艺术形式上都力图摆脱传统的束缚，刻意进行实验，寻找新的方式来表征变化的世界。在以危机和战争为时代特征的1930年代，具有左翼倾向的奥登、依修伍德、奥威尔等人关注当代政治和社会问题。赫胥黎的反乌托邦小说将科学幻想与社会讽刺结合在一起，表达了对丧失个人自由的疑惧，这种疑惧源于对现代国家利益与个人利益不相容性的认识，其意义超越了时代。

第二次世界大战结束之后，大英帝国风光不再，英国国力下降，勉强维持住其大国地位。战后英国政治、经济、社会发生的巨大变化在文学作品中得以反映出来。本书作者按照戏剧、小说、诗歌的顺序介绍20世纪下半叶英国文学的发展状况，结合具体作品重点讨论的剧作家有贝克特、奥斯本、品特、斯托帕特、邦德、丘吉尔等，小说家有莱辛、戈尔丁、福尔斯、斯维夫特、马丁·艾米斯、西利托、卡特、奈保尔、石黑一雄等，诗人有拉金、休斯、达菲、托马斯、穆顿等。

“补述”部分对21世纪文学发展趋势进行了展望。本书作者预测，在未来20年间，伟大的英语文学作家不大可能在英国本土产生。阿克罗伊德、巴恩斯、塞尔夫等小说家很有趣，但不会像当年乔伊斯那样提供小说发展的新方向，而来自印度次大陆的拉什迪充分利用印度文学传统和英语文学传统，得以开辟新的路径，写出像《子夜的孩子》那样故事精彩、语言独特的小说。非裔和亚裔等少数族裔作家异军突起，他们的作品提供了不同的文化视角，应该引起重视。世纪之交英国文学的另一个特点是对历史表现出浓厚兴趣，拜厄特的《占有》、阿克罗伊德的小说和历史人物传记都力图在过去与现在之间建立起联系。来自北爱尔兰的诗人希尼重新翻译古英语英雄史诗《贝奥武甫》，获得极大成功。他的诗歌创作通过对历史的挖掘来确立爱尔兰的民族性，同时展现了他与英语文学传统的复杂关系。

本书正文后面的“大事年表”记载了自公元407至2001年间的重大历史事件及文学活动。

“进一步阅读书目”列出了若干英国诗歌、小说等文学体裁史以及重要的文学文化批评理论专著，这份书单不长，但所列书目都经过精心挑选，可以有效指导学生的专业阅读。

长期以来，国内一直缺乏一本适合英语专业本科教学的英文版英国文学史。《英国文学简史》篇幅适中，语言简练，可以作为优质教学内容，配合英国文学选读教材使用。我相信，《英国文学简史》在中国出版后，文学史和文学选读相得益彰，互为补充，将有助于我们学习和认识英国文学与英国文化，提高我国高校英语专业英国文学课程的教学质量。

王守仁

2010年6月于南京大学

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 literature, 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 students 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 interest 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

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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 particular writer a reader wants to know about, but the chapter should have provided a framework of understanding for other authors writing at that time.

We can probably be forgiven for our failure to discuss a large number 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 endeavoured to write a balanced account, but the account we have produced 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.

John Peck and Martin Coyle

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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)