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**A HISTORY OF LITERATURE IN THE IRISH
LANGUAGE**

Declan Kiberd

MACMILLAN HISTORY OF LITERATURE

ENGLISH
GOTHIC
LITERATURE

Derek Brewer

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Editor's preface

THE study of literature requires knowledge of contexts as well as of texts. What kind of person wrote the poem, the play, the novel, the essay? What forces acted upon them as they wrote? What was the historical, the political, the philosophical, the economic, the cultural background? Was the writer accepting or rejecting the literary conventions of the time or developing them, or creating entirely new kinds of literary expression? Are there interactions between literature and the art, music or architecture of its period? Was the writer affected by contemporaries or isolated?

Such questions stress the need for students to go beyond the reading of set texts, to extend their knowledge by developing a sense of chronology, of action and reaction, and of the varying relationships between writers and society.

Histories of literature can encourage students to make comparisons, can aid in understanding the purposes of individual authors and in assessing the totality of their achievements. Their development can be better understood and appreciated with some knowledge of the background of their time. And histories of literature, apart from their valuable function as reference books, can demonstrate the great wealth of writing in English that is there to be enjoyed. They can guide the reader who wishes to explore it more fully and to gain in the process deeper insights into the rich diversity not only of literature but of human life itself.

A. NORMAN JEFFARES

Preface

My story is told differently from other histories of earlier English literature already available. I assume no specialist knowledge in the reader and describe in detail a relatively few outstanding or exemplary texts so that the reader may gain some direct feeling of actual medieval works, and not be encumbered with lists or mere opinion. This emphasis inevitably leads to the omission of or only very brief reference to a number of interesting texts. The book is designed as a readable unit and not as a reference manual.

In the medieval period, literacy develops, and even some literalism. There is a strong growth in the concept of the individual as set against the archaic collective social group. Notions of religious and secular love take on special configurations. Medieval works of literary art are based on manuscripts which are intrinsically variable and are related to the nature of what is heard and spoken in a group; they are therefore different in style and attitude from the literature with which the modern world is familiar through the medium of print, for print disperses multiple identical copies of a text to isolated solitary readers largely unknown to each other or the author. Hence the different feeling of medieval literature. Medieval rhetoric, also, though bookish, is more closely related to natural speech, to the devices of folk-tale and traditional narrative, than it is to print-culture. Folk tradition is important, as well as the learned tradition. This historical amalgam, developing from the twelfth to the sixteenth century, is not unreasonably summed up as 'Gothic'.

We are paradoxically now in a more favourable position to understand medieval 'Gothic' literature, than we have been for a long time. Contemporary non-naturalistic developments

in literature and the visual arts, the popularity of song and dance on radio and television, enable us to see and respond to many 'Gothic' or traditional, non-realistic oral characteristics in our own culture that were often misunderstood from the seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries. At the same time we can still respond, as all centuries have, to the remarkable continuity of English literature, to the humanity, love, pathos and comedy of many medieval texts.

There is no such thing as 'progress' in works of art. Homer, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Dickens and James Joyce cannot be put on a scale of progressive improvement. On the other hand, there may be progress in general literary *culture*, in the wider spread of literacy, in greater learning, in the range and depth of literary education. The medieval period, besides producing great works of art, was also one of great general progress in literary culture as in society as a whole. The Norman Conquest had dealt an almost mortal blow to English, the most advanced vernacular culture in Europe, at the beginning of our period. By the end of the medieval period the general state of England, and the achievement of English literary culture, were vastly improved. During the medieval period the main structures of the national culture were formed; they maintained themselves for many centuries after and not all are yet passed away. The history of English medieval culture is a remarkable success story which culminates in the sixteenth century.

Part of this story is the history of the English language, whose vicissitudes in the medieval period were crucial to its present supremacy as a world-language and cannot be understood in separation from the facts of language. The passage of time, as with all things, has much changed the language. For this reason the language of medieval English literature is sometimes difficult. Readers may therefore have to exert some energy and patience at first when they explore medieval literature further, though they will not find anything in medieval English as difficult as some modern English texts. Since my story is of literature the history of the language occupies a subsidiary place, but its fundamental importance must not be neglected. The passage of time, the various

disasters which occurred, all cause the language of medieval English literature on first acquaintance to appear strange in spelling, vocabulary and, sometimes, grammar. But the strangeness disappears with a little familiarity, and the language soon reveals its special beauty and interest.

In the present book when quoting texts I have as often as possible gone back to the manuscripts or in some cases facsimiles. In order to minimise the apparent quaintness of the first appearance of these texts, which may give a new reader a misleading impression that the literature is quaint or naïve, I have regularly modernised such obsolete letters as 'thorn' (representing *th*), and 'yogh' (which I transcribe as *y* or *gh* or *s* as appropriate). I follow modern usage of *i/j*, *u/v*, and modern capitalisation and punctuation. In a few instances spelling is clarified, as for example by transcribing *the* as *thee* where necessary. I have sometimes supplied final *-e* where required by the metre, and made minor emendations without note. These are the conventions of most editions of Chaucer. For quotations from Chaucer I use F. N. Robinson's second edition (London: O.U.P., 1957).

The reader unacquainted with the pronunciation of Middle English can achieve a very rough approximation by pronouncing the vowel letters as in modern Western European languages and by pronouncing all the consonants. A more correct pronunciation is worth attaining since the purity of most Middle English vowels and the strength of the consonants make the language more musical than Modern English.

Verse varies in metre. Alliterative metre broadly speaking follows the normal stress patterns of modern English and is therefore not difficult. Other metrical verse often scans regularly, and Chaucer in particular does so. As in all such metrical verse in English there is an interplay between the underlying regular metrical beat and the normal pattern of speech-stress as dictated by meaning, so that the resultant rhythm is not monotonous. In order to achieve metrical regularity it may be necessary to sound final *-e* at the end of a noun, or inflexions of the plural, as *-es*, or of verbs, as *-eth*. Some verse may be less polished than Chaucer's, partly because of faulty transcription by scribes, but non-alliterative verse normally has an underlying regular metrical beat.

In writing literary history much has to be explained that is only preliminary to literature, and much more of great interest has to be omitted for lack of space. I conclude with Chaucer's Knight's words:

But al that thyng I moot as now forbere,
I have, God woot, a largè feeld to ere plough
And waykè been the oxen in my plough, weak
The remenaunt of the tale is long ynough.

(*Canterbury Tales* I, 885–8)

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