THE CAMBRIDGE HISTORY OF
MEDIEVAL ENGLISH LITERATURE

This is the first full-scale history of medieval English literature for nearly a century. Thirty-three distinguished contributors offer a collaborative account of literature composed or transmitted in England, Wales, Ireland and Scotland between the Norman Conquest and the death of Henry VIII. The volume has five sections: 'After the Norman Conquest', 'Writing in the British Isles', 'Institutional Productions', 'After the Black Death' and 'Before the Reformation'. It provides information on a vast range of literary texts and the conditions of their production and reception, which will serve both specialists and general readers, and also contains a chronology, full bibliography and a detailed index. This book offers the most extensive and vibrant account available of the medieval literatures so drastically reconfigured in Tudor England. It will thus prove essential reading for scholars of the Renaissance as well as medievalists, for historians as well as literary specialists.

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THE NEW CAMBRIDGE HISTORY OF
ENGLISH LITERATURE

The New Cambridge History of English Literature is a programme of reference works designed to offer a broad synthesis and contextual survey of the history of English literature through the major periods of its development. The organisation of each volume reflects the particular characteristics of the period covered, within a general commitment to providing an accessible narrative history through a linked sequence of essays by internationally renowned scholars. The History is designed to accommodate the range of insights and fresh perspectives brought by new approaches to the subject, without losing sight of the need for essential exposition and information. The volumes include valuable reference features, in the form of a chronology of literary and political events, extensive primary and secondary bibliographies, and a full index.

The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature
EDITED BY DAVID WALLACE

Also in preparation
The Cambridge History of Early Modern English Literature
EDITED BY DAVID LOEWENSTEIN
AND JANEL MUELLER

THE CAMBRIDGE
HISTORY OF
MEDIEVAL ENGLISH
LITERATURE

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EDITED BY
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General preface

This volume offers a collaborative account of literature composed or trans-
mitted in the British Isles between 1066 and 1547. It may be read selec-
tively (from the Index), but it is designed as a continuous narrative,
extending through thirty-one chapters in five Parts: 'After the Norman
Conquest', 'Writing in the British Isles', 'Institutional productions', 'After
the Black Death' and 'Before the Reformation'. Our framing dates, 1066
and 1547, acknowledge the death of kings – Harold I and Henry VIII – by
way of denoting periods of profound, far-reaching and long-lasting change
for literary cultures. William of Normandy's conquest, extended and reg-
ularized through documentary Latin, erodes the authority of one presti-
gious vernacular – Old English – encourages another – French – and
initiates hybridizations, movements between dialects and experimental
orthographies that make for highly complex manuscript pages. Henry
VIII, in making himself head of the Church of England, inevitably assumes
close and controlling interest in all writings on religion in English, past
and present. The suppression of monasteries, carried out in two waves
between 1525 and 1539, destroys the single most important institutional
framing for the collection, copying and preservation of medieval texts.
Our account of such texts therefore extends forward to the sixteenth cen-
tury: to their disassembly, obliteration or reconfiguration within new cul-
tures of religion, print and nationalism.

This volume is a history, not a handbook: it does not replicate the func-
tion of Severs and Hartung, eds., *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English,
1050–1500*. It does, however, provide basic information on a vast range of
literary texts while developing particular lines of argument. Contributors
sometimes have occasion to question the terms that they have been asked
to work with – early Middle English, romance, mystics, alliterative poetry
– but particular critical and theoretical orientations remain, for the most
part, implicit in the choosing and arrangement (*inventio* and *dispositio*) of
the medieval texts discussed. Such an approach hopes to secure a reason-
able shelf-life for this volume, although it can scarcely hope to outlast its
immediate predecessor: *The Cambridge History of English Literature*, initi-
ated by A. W. Ward and A. R. Waller in 1907, completed twenty years later,
and in print until the 1970s. But it should, we hope, encourage new

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work in neglected areas and on neglected, or still unedited, texts; many discussions in this volume, necessarily abbreviated, suggest or hope for new lines of research.

One immediate effect of this 500-year history may be to help ease the bottleneck that has formed, in literary criticism and in curricular design, around late fourteenth-century England. This was certainly a brilliant phase of literary composition. But in dwelling on the literature of those few decades, to the exclusion of all else, we cannot best serve the understanding even of those decades: longer perspectives are required rightly to assess a particular moment's achievement. And the gestation, composition and transmission of medieval texts is typically not a matter of decades, but of centuries: a historical process that radically alters, with time and place, what texts might come to mean. It is always perilous to isolate details from modern editions of medieval texts, worked loose from their institutional and manuscript contexts, that supposedly 'illustrate' what happened (say) in 1394. Our ideal reader, then, will know that details of particular compositions must be set within longer accounts of historical/textual before and after; such a reader will read the whole book.

Characteristic emphases of this *Cambridge History* may more readily be grasped by considering some of its forebears. *The Cambridge History of the British Empire* gets underway in 1929 (completing its work, in eight volumes, some thirty years later) with resonant words from Thomas Babington Macaulay's celebrated *History of England* (1848–61): 'nothing in the early existence of Britain indicated the greatness which she was destined to attain' (p. v). Having effectively dismissed medieval Britain in its first sentence, however, the *Empire* preface is moved to rehabilitation in its second, acknowledging that 'the seed of England's later imperial power may be found in the unity, the law, the institutions, and the sea instinct, of which she became possessed in the Middle Ages'. None the less (the third sentence declares) it is 'with the Tudor period that this History opens'. Such figuring of the Middle Ages as an origin to be repudiated, commemorated and forgotten again is a characteristic gambit of this and other contemporary histories. One clue to the embarrassments posed by the English Middle Ages to the kind of teleological structure pursued by the *Empire* volumes may be deduced from the striking omission in that second sentence of that most potent of imperial tools: the English language itself, later standardized as the King's English, with its attendant literary cultures. To admit to a plurality of languages in England's medieval centuries is to suggest a culture more colonized than colonizing: not a secure point of origin for imperial history.

Such awkwardness is clearly shared by the editors of the *Cambridge History of English Literature*. The first volume, published in 1907, moves rapidly from 'The Beginnings' in chapter 1 (with the retreat of the Romans) to 'Runes and Manuscripts' in chapter 2 to 'Early National Poetry' in chapter 3. Posited origins of a national poetry are thus planted absurdly early, long before any line of verse actually appears on the page. Citations of Old English verse are in fact given from Stopford Brooke's verse translations, which exert a comfortably dealienating effect. Authors of these early chapters, who comprise something of a philological hall of fame, offer generalized accounts of development and transition that keep philology – sensitive to clashes of linguistic difference, hybridization, creolization – strangely at bay. But if the future comes too early, in this account of national development, the past hangs on remarkably late: volume after volume, in this *History*, returns to capture medieval points of origin. Medieval education is discussed in 'English and Scottish Education. Universities and Public Schools to the Time of Colet' in volume 2, chapter 15. 'Canute Song' (*c.* 1200) also appears after 2.13, the watershed chapter on printing, along with discussion of outlaw ballads, Robin Hood, and the *Hardycanute* of Lady Wardlaw, 'that famous forgery' (2.17, p. 417). Discussion of John Scotus Erigena, Scotus and Ockham is deferred until 4.14, 'The Beginnings of English Philosophy'; Walter of Henly and other medieval estates managers must wait until the following chapter, 'Early Writings on Politics and Economics', which is described as an essay on 'national life as reflected in literature'.

The most striking forward transfer of medieval material in the *Cambridge History of English Literature* comes in volume 5, where three chapters on medieval drama (5.1–3) preface five chapters on Shakespeare (5.8–12). University plays track medieval origins in 6.12, medieval classrooms are briefly glimpsed in an account of 'English Grammar Schools' (7.14) and legal literature moves back to Ethelbert of Kent before moving forward again through Glanvil, Bracton and Fortescue (8.13). Such recursive movement finds its most sustained expression as late as 10.10, a chapter by W. P. Ker on 'The Literary Influence of the Middle Ages'. Earlier chapters, however, also highlight the carrying forward of medieval textual fragments through accounts of antiquarianism (3.15, 7.10, 9.13). Medieval monastic and cathedral libraries are also sighted late, in 4.19, 'The Foundation of Libraries'. The crucial role of these institutions in the housing and ordering of medieval writing is thus downplayed in favour of a developmental narrative leading inexorably to Archbishop Parker and Sir Thomas Bodley. The result of such systematic forward movement of early material, this

archaeologizing of medieval text, is that the Middle Ages becomes something of an emptied or elided space. Linguistic and cultural conflicts that play out through medieval manuscripts – including many moments of polyvocal unintelligibility and scribal confusion – are rendered mute or smoothed away; selective realignments of material lead, through discrete teleological trajectories, to unified accounts of English law, nationhood, education or Shakespeare.

The present volume, by contrast, resists this impulse to stabilize and homogenize medieval textuality through selective forward transfer. Part 1, in particular, evokes cultural, linguistic and orthographic conditions of dizzying complexity: but later Parts, too, refuse to settle. Compositions after the Black Death, many of them in an English far from Chancery standard, generate meanings that will be changed through the collecting and anthologizing impulses of the fifteenth century, the impact of print, and institutional relocation. Such changes are duly noted: this volume pushes forward *from* the study of medieval textuality as insistently as the earlier volume reaches back. The aim here is to defamiliarize the present, including present accounts of medieval and Renaissance culture, by achieving some sense of the strangeness, the unlikeliness, the historical peculiarity, of medieval compositional processes. Such an approach might be summarized as a challenge to current English Heritage paradigms – clearly derived from teleological proclivities informing the old *Cambridge History* – that would seek to find in the past, first and foremost, a single pathway to the present.

A second striking feature of the *Cambridge History of English Literature* is the generous promotion of writing in Scotland and the neglect or submersion of Ireland and Wales. As early as 2.4 we have a chapter on 'The Scottish Language'; this considers 'southern' (i.e. English), Latin and French contributions to Middle Scots while dismissing Scandinavian influences entirely and miminizing 'alleged contributions from Celtic' (p. 99). The same volume also includes chapters entitled 'The Earliest Scottish Literature' (2.5), 'The Scottish Chaucerians' (2.10) and 'The Middle Scots Anthologies' (2.11); 'English and Scottish Education', we have noted, is the joint subject of 2.15. 'Sir David Lyndsay and the Later Scottish "Makaris"' are the subject of 3.6; the chapter following is devoted to 'Reformation and Renascence in Scotland'. Ireland and Wales are nowhere accorded such independent or free-standing status. Some account of medieval Welsh writing, with heavy emphasis upon the bardic and vatic, may be found in 1.12. The centrality of writing in Wales to this chapter is disguised both by its title, 'The Arthurian Legend', and (disquietingly,

from the perspective of colonial history) by its first running head: 'International Property' (p. 271). Ireland is largely neglected until the sixteenth century. The first indexed reference to Ireland is defective; the second directs us to the notorious colonizing plans of the *Libelle of Englyshe Polycye* (1436–41). The city of Dublin makes its first indexed appearance in 4.8: we are told that Thomas Campion did *not* secure a medical degree there 'some time between 1602 and 1606' (p. 142).

Even if our current volume were to exclude any medieval vernacular that could not in some way be construed as, or adjacent to, 'English', Dublin could not be ignored: for Dublin emerges as a site of considerable importance for the commissioning and copying of Middle English manuscripts (chapter 8). Wales, similarly, cannot be overlooked even from a strictly Anglocentric perspective. England is not an island; writers of Middle English north and south – at Chester and at Berkeley Castle – wrote with an awareness of the differing cultures, linguistic and otherwise, immediately to their west. This volume, however, offers 'free-standing' accounts of writing in Wales, Ireland and Scotland that are written, so to speak, from the inside out; outsiders from England are sometimes resisted as invaders, sometimes glimpsed on a far horizon, sometimes simply not part of a local culture. These chapters lead off our second Part, which addresses the problematics of 'Britain' as an organizational term; Wales comes first, since 'Britain' was originally a Welsh idea, not an English one. There is an awkward gap between the title of this volume, which speaks of 'Medieval English Literature', and that of the second Part ('Writing in the British Isles'). No attempt to bridge or elide this division is offered here; the torque and tension between general and Part titles is surely more instructive, more historically responsible, than any attempted harmonization. The history of medieval English literature cannot be told without reference to Wales, Ireland and Scotland; writings in these territories have histories of their own.

The 'Britain' emerging from this volume will appear far different from the 'Great Britain' conjured into existence by the 1707 Act of Union. Eighteenth-century Britons, Linda Colley has argued, were encouraged to overlook (but not forget) British interregional differences in order to resist the fundamental Otherness of European Catholic cultures. Today, British Protestant isolationism continues to lose historical relevance as common European markets bridge long-standing territorial divides. The concept of 'Great Britain' is thus losing its power to cohere and constrain disparate regional cultures; the looser imagining of 'Britain' typical of the Middle Ages seems, in many respects, more apt for the future than that developed over the last 300 years.

The fourth chapter of Part II 'Writing history in England', reminds us that history – as it informed the medieval English about the Welsh, Irish, Scots and English – is the written product of particular times and spaces. The chapter which follows, on London, furthers this investigation of specific locales. This chapter must stand in, methodologically, for accounts of other places that have yet to be written, cannot yet be written, or have found no space for inclusion here: Cornwall, East Anglia, York and Yorkshire . . . Such accounts will restore neglected or forgotten texts: for example, the writings and public inscriptions of Jews – excavated from places such as Bristol, Cambridge and Norwich – that formed part of cultural experience in Britain up to and after the expulsions of 1290.

In one important respect, the earlier *Cambridge History* proves prescient of our own concerns and predilections: it takes a broad and inclusive view of what 'literature' might mean. Penitential manuals, Latin chronicles, administrative handbooks, narratives of travel and seafaring, economic treatises and religious tracts, map-making and topography, letters and broadsides all find a place among and between accounts of canonical plays and poems. Such breadth of emphasis narrowed considerably with the advent of New Criticism (in the USA) and Practical Criticism (UK) as medievalists sought to demonstrate that certain early texts met criteria of literary and aesthetic excellence exemplified by later works of genius. Some medieval texts survived such demonstrations and others – most notably edited collections of lyrics – achieved new (albeit short-lived) prominence in print. However, much medieval writing – found lacking in qualities newly defined as constitutive of 'literature' – fell into deeper neglect.

It was during the latter days of such highly formalist approaches that Derek Pearsall wrote the first volume of the Routledge History of English Poetry. *Old English and Middle English Poetry* (1977) marks the most important contribution to the literary history of Middle English since the 1907–27 *Cambridge History*. It is characteristic of the period that Pearsall was asked to write a history of English *poetry*. Pearsall early signals his intention to treat poetry 'as a social phenomenon as well as an artistic one' (p. xi), a dual commitment that extends to duelling Appendices: 'Technical terms, mainly metrical' (pp. 284–90); 'Chronological table' (pp. 291–302). The second Appendix opens out into a pan-European framework of reference (as space allows) while maintaining the crucial distinction between a poem's putative date of composition and its earliest surviving appearance in manuscript. Such concern with the materialities of textual production, preservation and circulation – a determination to 'return poems from the

antiseptic conditions of the modern critical edition to their original contexts in manuscript books' (p. xi) – represents one of Pearsall's most important contributions to the present undertaking. Our Part III, 'Institutional Productions', extends the logic of this enterprise by returning (to invent a prototypical example) a lyric from its modern edition to the medieval manuscript sermon or miscellany from which it was lifted; attempts may then be made to situate this text within the social system that produced it (and which it, in turn, produced). Friaries and monasteries, courts of law, classrooms and sites of confession may thus be studied as knowledge-producing systems with designs on particular human subjects; anti-systemic resistance may also be sought in those who would speak for the 'true commons', English the Bible, embroider narratives of sinful doings or misbehave in class.

The last two Parts of our *History* are organized by explicit divisions of time (1348–99; 1399–1547). This does not imply that concern with temporality is activated only by the approach of 'Renaissance' paradigms; the repertoires of medieval textuality, on the evidence of earlier chapters, are not essentially unchanging. It does imply, or simply recognize, that the density of surviving material in the later period makes it easier to read changes in the greater public sphere, from decade to decade, in association with shifting strategies of writing: from the 1370s to 1380s, 1390s to 1400s, 1530s to 1540s. At the same time (and this is a phenomenon of peculiar importance for studies of literary culture before the Henrician revolution) the accumulated textual corpus of past centuries – recopied, reconfigured, stored and recirculated – continues to exert shaping influence. To say this is not to argue for a *grand* and glacial *récit* of medieval textuality, bearing down to bury the *actualité* of any medieval moment beneath an authoritative weight of prior meaning. It is to acknowledge, rather, that in the transmission of medieval literature much indeed gets lost, but much survives (in new textual configurations, generative of meanings undreamed of at the moment of first composition). All of our first three Parts, then, actively subtend, and often extend into, our last two.

Distaste for *grand récit* is a distinctive trait of New Historicism, a critical movement originating in the USA which essayed a return to historical study cognizant of developments in literary theory (particularly deconstruction). Renaissance practitioners, most famously Stephen Greenblatt, have preferred thick elaborations of *petites histoires* to the claims of grand narrative. Similar preferences inform *A New History of French Literature*, ed. Denis Hollier (1989). This volume, the most radically innovative literary history of recent years, ostensibly offers the all-inclusive simplicity of a

medieval chronicle. Chapters are organized by dates: '1095. The Epic';
'1123? Manuscripts'; '1127. The Old Provençal Lyric', and so on. The
steady, 1000-page, 1200-year march of these chapters – from '778' to '27
September, 1985' – parodies traditional commitment to historical teleol-
ogy by affecting to retrace it. Through this single act of unfolding, all pos-
sibilities for historical differentiation – that is, periodization – are lost.
(Hollier retreats from the logic of his own organization somewhat by argu-
ing for a *fragmentation* of periodicity, conducted by individual chapters,
that favours brief time-spans and 'nodal points, coincidences, returns,
resurgences', p. xx.) Authors undergo analogous (p. xx) fragmentation
through dispersal to different temporal moments: Proust, for example, is
glimpsed in many different dateline chapters, but has no single-author
chapter, no homepage, of his own.

One of the achievements of this remarkable history – which seems
affiliated with computer rather than with codex technologies – is to activate
its intended audience, 'the general reader' (p. xix). Such a reader, searching
in the Index for specific topics, may find his or her way to a number of
different sites. Each reader may thus customize his or her own personal lit-
erary history by navigating from one site to the next. This *New History* has
its limits: it will not be immediately clear to the general reader, for example,
why early medieval Frenchmen suddenly take such an interest in England.
But many of its strategies – such as the fragmenting of authorly identity –
offer correctives to traditional accounts that prove especially salutary for
medievalists. Our own literary history contains just four single-author
chapters. One of these authors, Langland, is no more than a name (and a
messy manuscript afterlife); another was a mercer and printer who spent
much of his life in Flanders. Medieval theories of authorship were, of
course, immensely sophisticated and of great cultural moment: but they do
not coincide with modern ideas of the literary author *as* personality.

The procedures of Hollier's *New History*, according to David Perkins,
drown literary history as we know it in seas of irony and whimsy. But in *Is
Literary History Possible?* (1992), Perkins finds no way back to conventional
literary history since its totalizing claims cannot any longer be sustained.
He thus falls back on appeals to the immanent value of particular works of
art (pp. 59, 129). Such an impasse may be avoided, I would suggest, by dis-
tinguishing multiple accounts of *longue durée* from a single, totalizing nar-
rative of *grand récit*. It is possible to narrate change over time without
believing such a narrative to be the only account possible. It is possible,
further, to narrate one history while recognizing trajectories moving,
through the same set of occurrences, in opposite directions: the rise of uni-

versities, for example, diminished educational opportunities for women (of a certain social rank) while expanding them for men. The possibilities of such multiple diachronic narration – exploited, we have noted, by the old *Cambridge Histories* under the sheltering canopy of its one big story, the triumph of Britain – are lost to Hollier's *New History* (where each new capsule-chapter can but bang on the windows of its designated timebite). But such possibilities are fully exploited here: indeed, they represent one of the most distinctive features of this volume. Chapters are located where they find their centre of gravity (although, to vex the metaphor, such centres often multiply). Latinitas, for example, comes early by way of recognizing extraordinary achievements in the twelfth century (that establish vital linkages with continental writing). It could have been placed (or be read) later; it might also find a home among 'Institutional Productions'. Similar scenarios may be imagined for other multi-centred, long-reaching chapters: which is to say, for most contributions to this book.

One heading in Hollier's *New History* suggests a striking difference between his volume and ours: '1215, November. The Impact of Christian Doctrine on Medieval Literature' (p. 82). Such a clean distinction between Christian doctrine on the one hand and medieval literature on the other implies a separation of conceptual spheres that, in this volume, proves hard to find. Attempts are made to distinguish, say, saints' lives from secular romances, but such distinctions continually founder as would-be 'genres' bleed into one another. It is possible to separate out specific issues and questions, considered to be of pre-eminent concern for today's readers, from the religion-mindedness pervading the greater medieval textual corpus: such a procedure is articulated by Norman Kretzmann in *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy* (1982). Contributions to our volume are certainly coloured by personal interests: but there is little sense here of a medieval textuality that can withhold itself from, or even pre-exist, the impress of religious consciousness. (There is little sense, conversely, that religious consciousness holds itself wholly apart from 'secular' concern with social hierarchy, degrees of precedence, territorial ambition or commercial calculation.) The jibe that medieval clergy concerned themselves too narrowly with the abstruse and abstract, 'thyngys invysyble', needs to be evaluated as part of sixteenth-century anti-Catholic propaganda (chapter 29). Medieval professional religious, following the broadest imperatives of canon law, show extraordinary ingenuity in entering every imaginative nook and cranny of everyday life. Layfolks are thus interpellated as Christian believers by every textual means available: song, lyric, anecdote, romance, history or epistle.

There is no single chapter on religious writing in this volume, then, because religion is everywhere at work. So too with women. A single chapter on medieval women writers might be disproportionately brief, since nothing by a female mendicant or nun (so far as we know for sure) survives in Middle English. The influence and experience of women, none the less, may be discerned throughout the corpus of medieval English writing. Nuns and female disciples often supplied the strongest rationales for the Englishing of religious works (chapters 12, 20). Women often become visible through the commissioning, owning and reading – if not the writing – of particular books; female reading communities, real and imagined, are considered in many chapters here (most intensively, perhaps, in chapter 4). Female figures, such as Albina and her sisters (chapter 4) and Scota (chapters 9, 26) feature prominently in myths of national foundation; female lives are adumbrated through reflections on women's work (chapter 19) or conduct (chapter 11). Feminine aspirations to literacy may be deduced from negative (masculine) prescriptions. Female would-be readers are equated with children (chapter 14) or with husbandmen and labourers (chapter 31); only noblewomen and gentlewomen are permitted, by a 1543 Act of Parliament, to read (and then only to themselves, avoiding all company).

The cross-hatching of gender with class suggested by this last example recurs throughout this volume. Literacy was a masculine near-monopoly from which agricultural workers, the great majority of men, were excluded. And not all men who were literate shared in the powers and privileges that literacy might confer: 80 per cent of medieval clerics were unbeneficed (chapter 19). At critical moments, as in 1381, such men might align with peasants rather than with aristocrats; and even men plainly terrified by the spectacle of a militant peasantry might still critique violent or anti-feminist aspects of knightly schooling (chapters 16, 22). Some men found common cause with women through support of oppositional literacies: Margery Baxter, tried for heresy at Norwich in 1428–9, carried a Lollard preacher's books from Yarmouth to her home village of Martham; Hawisia Mone of Loddon, also tried at Norwich, often opened her house to 'scoles of heresie' (chapters 16, 25).

It is perhaps through resisting the divorce of literature from history in literary history – a divorce implied by tired organizational binomes such as text and context, writer and background – that this volume makes its most distinctive contribution. *The Well Wrought Urn* of Cleanth Brooks (1947, 1968) famously envisioned the literary text as a self-sufficient artefact miraculously riding the currents of history to wash up at our feet. But

medieval compositions, we have noted, do not maintain urn-like integrity in entering the ocean of textual transmission. Medieval literature cannot be understood (does not survive) except as part of transmissive processes – moving through the hands of copyists, owners, readers and institutional authorities – that form part of other and greater histories (social, political, religious and economic).

Divorced from their greater human histories, medieval writings may seem outlandish or deficient when judged by the aesthetic criteria of later centuries; such judgements must understand the social or institutional functioning of medieval textualities. Recourse to poetry, in medieval schoolrooms and pulpits, often served pre-eminently *practical* objectives; even Chaucer, in the course of a *balade* by his fellow-poet Eustache Deschamps, is acclaimed as a master of *pratique* (chapters 14, 21). Bad poetry (bad by post-medieval standards) was written in the interests of biblical paraphrase; poetical tags and fillers fleshed out metres primed for ready memorization. (Artistically brilliant biblical paraphrase, such as that produced by the *Cleanness*-poet, would of course fulfil this practical mandate all the more efficiently, chapter 17.) Romance, to us a purely fictional form, was thought capable of chronicling vital understandings of the past; prose histories and verse romances, sometimes conflated, often shared space in the same manuscript (chapters 10, 26).

Movements out and away from questions of literary form, narrowly conceived, often facilitate enlightening returns to literary texts hitherto regarded as dull or inert. New historical accounts of fifteenth-century England, for example, accentuate a desperateness in struggles for legitimation – as religious and secular spheres increasingly interpenetrate – that seems *not* to disturb the placid surface of fifteenth-century poetics. But once knowledge of such struggles floods a reading of the fiction – supplies, in rhetorical terms, the circumstances of its social and political performance – such writing seems altogether more compelling, poignant and complex (chapters 24, 26). Irresolvable conflicts that trouble Lancastrian writing (in its struggles to legitimate the illegitimate) eerily portend troubles to come in long and bloody passages of civil war (chapter 24).

This volume amply confirms that 1066 and 1547 represent moments in political history that exert revolutionary effects on all aspects of English writing. But it also argues that the gap between our last two, time-specific Parts – the turn of the fifteenth century – should be re-evaluated as a historiographical watershed of prime importance; it further suggests ways in which literary criticism might participate in such re-evaluation. 1348–99, viewed down the longest retrospect of literary history, emerges as a period

of quite exceptional compositional freedom, formal innovation and specu-
lative audacity. Much of this ends abruptly after 1400; the suddenness of
this change has much less to do with the demoralizing effects of the death
of Chaucer than was once imagined. Amendments to literary practice
symptomatize, intuit, or sometimes effect changes in the greater political
realm. Much energy after 1400 is dedicated to the collection and ordering
of that which has already been written; new religious writing accentuates
affect while downplaying intellect; romance settles into familiar and stabi-
lized forms of narration (chapters 11, 20, 26). Striking shifts occur within
the *longue durée* of literary history: ambitious monastic writers repudiate
their own literary past; King Arthur makes a comeback; romance reorien-
tates itself to please masculine, rather than feminine, readers (chapters 12,
26). All this suggests that unprecedented political initiatives essayed by the
new Lancastrian regime, spearheaded by *De Heretico Comburendo* (1401)
and Arundel's *Constitutiones* of 1407/9, exert profound cultural effects.

In *The Great Arch*, their excellent account of English state formation,
Corrigan and Sayer characterize the reign of Elizabeth I – long celebrated
as a revolutionizing, golden age of literary history – as a phase of steady but
unspectacular consolidation; true revolution, in the long history of state
forms, must be traced back to the time of Elizabeth's father, Henry VIII.
This Henrician revolution, we have noted, certainly effects radical reorder-
ing of the medieval textual cultures that are the subject of this book. And
yet, as chapters here subtly suggest, radical shifts sealed under the two
later Henrys, VII and VIII, might themselves be seen as consolidating ini-
tiatives adumbrated under Henrys IV and V. Royal championing of reli-
gion, which was to make Henry VIII first Defender of the Faith (1521) and
later head of the Church of England (1534), makes powerful headway
under Henry V; royal interest in all things English, oral and especially writ-
ten, might similarly be traced back from Tudors to Lancastrians (an inter-
est sharpened through neo-imperialist expansion into foreign domains).
And if Lollardy is to be considered a premature Reformation, the hereti-
cating apparatus newly developed by the Lancastrians might be viewed as
a premature, or prototypical, form of the state machinery perfected under
Cardinal Wolsey and Thomas Cromwell.

There is, of course, no end to the backward and forward tracings facili-
tated by a genuinely diachronic approach, a historicism that considers
developments over centuries as well as shifting sideways from archival
fragment (for example, *c*. 1381) or parliamentary Act (of 1381) to isolated
moments of literary composition. Such an approach ensures that later lit-
erary histories in this series, as yet unwritten, will continue to extend and

amend the meaning of what is written here. Conversely, we hope that developments recorded here remain in view of later accounts of writing in Britain. Finally, we trust that things written of in this book – unfamiliar voices from medieval texts – will carry forward to trouble and delight our own unfolding present.

Acknowledgements

Abbreviations

ANTS	Anglo-Norman Text Society
CFMA	Classiques français du Moyen Age
EHD	*English Historical Documents*, vol. II: *1042–1189*, ed. David C. Douglas and George W. Greenaway; vol. III: *1189–1327*, ed. Harry Rothwell; vol. IV: *1327–1485*, ed. A. R. Myers. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953–69
EETS	Early English Text Society
	OS (Original Series)
	SS (Supplementary Series)
	ES (Extra Series)
PL	*Patrologiae: Cursus Completus Series Latina*. Ed. J. P. Migne. Paris, 1844–73
SATF	Société des Anciens Textes Français
STS	Scottish Text Society