

## A Short History of English Literature

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A short comprehensive history of the above sort too easily degenerates into a mere catalog. Unimportant, but obviously noteworthy writers, get a few dutiful lines, more important ones get a few more, sometimes much more. In the first category you may look for writers you have not heard of, in the second category you are looking for outspoken opinions and maybe ideally some insight you have never thought of before. Anyway there will not be enough space to develop an argument, and it makes you appreciate the approach taken by Watt<sup>1</sup> where there is a fully extended narrative focusing on just a few protagonists, which can bring in a host of others in supporting roles. A mere historical cavalcade serves only two useful purposes. One hand it reminds the already knowledgeable whether he has forgotten anything obvious, on the other hand it can serve the student of literature as a crib, something to memorize in anticipation of a test. Not very important purposes.

The book is divided (didactically?) into four parts each chronologically presented. The first is on poetry, the second on the play and the stage, the third on the novel, and the fourth on prose, mopping up what has not already been covered, making a case for historians such as Gibbon and Macaulay, and philosophers such as Hobbes, Locke and Hume. Poetry starts almost from Anglo Saxon beginnings, plays a bit later and for novels there is not much to be said before Defoe (the 16th century example is not convincing enough). Poetry marches on steadily, each century having their fair share of talent. Different with the stage. The golden 17th century had its beginning already at the end of the 16th with Marlowe and his *Faustus* and the early plays by Shakespeare. In fact the entire century was of high class, and unfortunately so many of the playwrights, who stood on their own, have been overshadowed by Shakespeare. In fact, one surmises, had there been no Shakespeare, Ben Jonson would have been regarded as a genius. In the 18th century it was a steady decline and the entire 19th century produced nothing of any value, until the very end with Shaw and Wilde. There was a certain resurgence in the 20th and favorable mentions are made of Osborne and T.S. Eliot. The novel on the other hand did not get a footing until the 18th century, but reigned supreme during the 19th with an embarrassment of riches, and with no novelist really dominating, although when comes to popularity, sustainability and profuseness, Dickens stands out with his unique blend of pathos and comedy driven by sheer inventive power. A novelist should of course be inventive, but not necessarily in profusion. Jane Austen stands out as a peak of perfection, never surpassed in her own realm. And indeed, it is noteworthy how many women were successful novelists, especially when compared to music and painting. The putative prejudice they were supposed to be subjected to, should have worked as effectively in writing as in the other arts? But why not? The author does make the general remark but does not follow it up. We have Austen, the sisters Brontë (who owe a lot to the Gothic craze of the 19th century, but did

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<sup>1</sup> In the previous review

transcend it through psychological sincerity in my opinion, it was not just done for effect), George Eliot (who chose a masculine pen-name, but that was an option also available to composers and painters), Gaskell, and a trend to continue into the 20th century. The novel survived into the 20th century but lost much of its vitality and became too eclectic and experimental. The novel was a popular entertainment in the previous century, just as opera, but became more elitist later on. Telling a story was no longer enough it had to be done in a contorted way, starting with Henry James, and then continued by Woolf and ultimately James Joyce, and after that the novel was never the same. Much of the popular appeal of the novel has in the 20th century been taken over by the TV-soaps. In fact the classical 19th century publication in installments in newspapers becoming more accessible and affordable, was for all intents and purposes soaps.

When it comes to prose, there really is not much to be said, or at least not much said by the author. The whole section has the taste of an add-on paying heed to the obvious fact that there is more to writing than to the writing of poetry, plays and novels. That prose has its own power and may come to its full fore only in extended arguments, is not really addressed. But after all this is not a book of ideas but of names.

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