

Preface

This book started its life as a series of lectures on English literature that I wrote while I was teaching a first year course in early English literature at the Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Education, Charles University, Prague in Winter 2006. My idea while teaching that course was to use the weekly tutorials to discuss extracts from specific texts with students and provide suitable background information in my lectures, to provide a context for the tutorial discussions. The lectures were written for students in their first year of university study, who might be assumed to have heard of Shakespeare, Chaucer and Swift, and even to have read some of their work, but not to know much about the times in which they were writing or the literary conventions with which they were working. These chapters do discuss specific works of literature, but these discussions were intended primarily to illustrate my comments about their authors or the times in which they were produced. The aim of the lectures is primarily to offer background and contextual information. The discussions of various literary texts in these lectures are not intended to offer students everything they will ever need to know about the texts, but to give them the tools and information they need to start interpreting these works for themselves.

The lectures span a massive time period of over a thousand years. Naturally, then, I could not cover everything. There are plenty of individual works, and even minor genres (satire, Restoration comedy, the eighteenth-century essay), that I have not been able to include. I have instead tried to offer an overview and to pick out the things that are most famous, most influential, most representative, and, in short, the things that students are most likely to be asked about in their exams. I have tried to keep in mind two questions: what do students actually need to know to help them understand their reading; and what might they find interesting? My desire to find interesting areas of discussion has led me to be selective in my approach. In the Chaucer chapter, for example, focusing on the 'Wife of Bath's Tale' alone seemed to me to offer the reader a chance to see Chaucer's techniques of characterization in action and to offer a way to discuss and explore the themes of marriage and mastery that are so important to *The Canterbury Tales*. In a project like this it is always necessary to balance the overview with the details, but it is through the details that one arrives at a sense of the overview. I have, therefore, within the confines of trying to offer an overview of the subject, freely selected texts and areas to focus on and I frequently offer the reader my own opinion and ideas. These lectures are very much my own take on English literature, and I offer them to the reader simply as an introduction and a guide: a tour of the terrain from one who has been there before and enjoyed the trip.

Thanks are due to many people who helped, encouraged and supported me during my year in Prague. All my colleagues at the Department of English, Faculty of Education were welcoming, friendly and helpful. Special thanks are due to Anna Grmelová, Bernie Higgins and Martin Loebel, who all helped me to settle in and looked after me in various ways during my time in Prague. Anna Grmelová further deserves my gratitude as it was her idea to turn this series of lectures into a textbook, and she has been responsible for seeing the final book into print. And finally, of course, I must thank all those students who asked if they could have copies of my lectures, without whom I might never have written up these lectures in the first place.

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