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HISTORY OF ENGLISH LITERATURE

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Alliterative verse: 8th - 14th century

The story of English literature begins with the Germanic tradition of the Anglo-Saxon settlers. Beowulf stands at its head.

This epic poem of the 8th century is in Anglo-Saxon, now more usually described as Old English. It is incomprehensible to a reader familiar only with modern English. Even so, there is a continuous linguistic development between the two. The most significant turning point, from about 1100, is the development of Middle English - differing from Old English in the addition of a French vocabulary after the Norman conquest. French and Germanic influences subsequently compete for the mainstream role in English literature.

The French poetic tradition inclines to lines of a regular metrical length, usually linked by rhyme into couplets or stanzas. German poetry depends more on rhythm and stress, with repeated consonants (alliteration) to bind the phrases. Elegant or subtle rhymes have a courtly flavour. The hammer blows of alliteration are a type of verbal athleticism more likely to draw applause in a hall full of warriors.

Both traditions achieve a magnificent flowering in England in the late 14th century, towards the end of the Middle English period. Piers Plowman and Sir Gawain are masterpieces which look back to Old English. By contrast Chaucer, a poet of the court, ushers in a new era of English literature.

Piers Plowman and Sir Gawain: 14th century

Of these two great English alliterative poems, the second is entirely anonymous and the first virtually so. The narrator of Piers Plowman calls himself Will; occasional references in the text suggest that his name may be Langland. Nothing else, apart from this poem, is known of him.

Piers Plowman exists in three versions, the longest amounting to more than 7000 lines. It is considered probable that all three are by the same

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author. If so he spends some twenty years, from about 1367, adjusting and refining his epic creation.

Piers the ploughman is one of a group of characters searching for Christian truth in the complex setting of a dream. Though mainly a spiritual quest, the work also has a political element. It contains sharply observed details of a corrupt and materialistic age (Wycliffe is among Langland's English contemporaries).

Where Piers Plowman is tough and gritty, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (dating from the same period) is more polished in its manner and more courtly in its content. The characters derive partly from Arthurian legend.

A mysterious green knight arrives one Christmas at the court of King Arthur. He invites any knight to strike him with an axe and to receive the blow back a year later. Gawain accepts the challenge. He cuts off the head of the green knight, who rides away with it.

The rest of the poem concerns Gawain, a year later, at the green knight's castle. In a tale of love (for the green knight's wife) and subsequent deceit, Gawain emerges with little honour. The green knight spares his life but sends him home to Arthur's court wearing the wife's girdle as a badge of shame.

Geoffrey Chaucer at court: 1367-1400

In 1367 one of four new 'yeomen of the chamber' in the household of Edward III is Geoffrey Chaucer, then aged about twenty-seven. The young man's wife, Philippa, is already a lady-in-waiting to the queen.

A few years later Chaucer becomes one of the king's esquires, with duties which include entertaining the court with stories and music. There can rarely have been a more inspired appointment. Chaucer's poems are designed to be read aloud, in the first instance by himself. Their range, from high romance to bawdy comedy, is well calculated to hold the listeners spellbound. Courtly circles in England are his first audience.

Chaucer's public career is one of almost unbroken success in two consecutive reigns. He undertakes diplomatic missions abroad on behalf of the king; he is given administrative posts, such as controlling the customs, which bring lodgings and handsome stipends. Even occasional

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disasters (such as being robbed twice in four days in 1390 and losing £20 of Richard II's money) do him no lasting harm.

A measure of Chaucer's skill as a courtier is that during the 1390s, when he is in the employment of Richard II, he also receives gifts at Christmas from Richard's rival, Bolingbroke.

When Bolingbroke unseats Richard II in 1399, taking his place on the throne as Henry IV, Chaucer combines diplomacy and wit to secure his position. Having lost his royal appointments, he reminds the new king of his predicament in a poem entitled 'The Complaint of Chaucer to his Empty Purse'. The last line of each verse begs the purse to 'be heavy again, or else must I die'. Henry IV hears the message. The court poet is given a new annuity.

Henry is certainly aware that he is keeping in his royal circle a poet of great distinction. Chaucer's reputation is such that, when he dies in the following year, he is granted the very unusual honour - for a commoner - of being buried in Westminster abbey.

Troilus and Criseyde: 1385

Chaucer's first masterpiece is his subtle account of the wooing of Criseyde by Troilus, with the active encouragement of Criseyde's uncle Pandarus. The tender joys of their love affair are followed by Criseyde's betrayal and Troilus's death in battle.

Chaucer adapts to his own purposes the more conventionally dramatic account of this legendary affair written some fifty years earlier by Boccaccio (probably read by Chaucer when on a mission to Florence in 1373). His own very long poem (8239 lines) is written in the early 1380s and is complete by 1385.

Chaucer's tone is delicate, subtle, oblique - though this does not prevent him from introducing and gently satirising many vivid details of life at court, as he guides the reader through the long psychological intrigue by which Pandarus eventually delivers Troilus into Criseyde's bed.

The charm and detail of the poem, giving an intimate glimpse of a courtly world, is akin to the delightful miniatures which illustrate books of hours of this period in the style known as International Gothic. Yet this

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delicacy is only one side of Chaucer's abundant talent - as he soon proves in The Canterbury Tales.

The Canterbury Tales: 1387-1400

Collections of tales are a favourite literary convention of the 14th century. Boccaccio's Decameron is the best-known example before Chaucer's time, but Chaucer in The Canterbury Tales outshines his predecessors. He does so in the range and vitality of the stories in his collection, from the courtly tone of 'The Knight's Tale' to the rough and often obscene humour of those known technically as fabliaux.

He does so also in the detail and humour of the framework holding the stories together. His account of the pilgrims as they ride from London to Canterbury, with their constant bickering and rivalry, amounts to a comic masterpiece in its own right.

The pilgrims, thirty of them including Chaucer himself, gather one spring day at the Tabard in Southwark. The host of the inn, Harry Bailly, is a real contemporary of Chaucer's (his name features in historical records). He will act as their guide on the route to Canterbury and he proposes that they pass the time on their journey by telling stories. Each pilgrim is to tell two on the way out and two on the way back. Whoever is judged to have told the best tale will have a free supper at the Tabard on their return.

Of this ambitious total of 120 stories, Chaucer completes only 24 by the time of his death. Even so the collection amounts to some 17,000 lines - mainly of rhyming verse, but with some passages of prose.

The pilgrims represent all sections of society from gentry to humble craftsmen (the only absentees are the labouring poor, unable to afford a pilgrimage of this kind). There are respectable people from the various classes - such as the knight, the parson and the yeoman - but the emphasis falls mainly on characters who are pretentious, scurrilous, mendacious, avaricious or lecherous.

The pilgrims are vividly described, one by one, in Chaucer's Prologue. The relationships between them evolve in the linking passages between the tales, as Harry Bailly arranges who shall speak next.

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The pilgrims for the most part tell tales closely related to their station in life or to their personal character. Sometimes the anecdotes even reflect mutual animosities. The miller gives a scurrilously comic account of a carpenter being cuckolded. Everyone laughs heartily except the reeve, who began his career as a carpenter. The reeve gets his own back with an equally outrageous tale of the seduction of a miller's wife and daughter.

But the pilgrim who has most delighted six centuries of readers is the five-times-married Wife of Bath, taking a lusty pleasure in her own appetites and richly scorning the ideals of celibacy.

Edmund Spenser: 1579-1596

Edmund Spenser, who has the greatest lyric gift of any English poet in the two centuries since Chaucer, is a graduate of Cambridge and by inclination a humanist pedant. His inspiration comes largely from a desire to rival his classical and Renaissance predecessors.

His first important work, *The Shepheardes Calendar* (1579), consists of twelve eclogues - a form deriving from Virgil but imitated by many subsequent writers. With one for each month of the calendar, Spenser's eclogues cover a wide range of subjects in many metres and styles of poetry. But they are skilfully held together to form a convincing single poem within the pastoral framework.

Just as Virgil moved on from the pastoral themes of the *Eclogues* and *Georgics* to the patriotic epic of the *Aeneid*, so Spenser progresses to *The Faerie Queene*. In undertaking this ambitious project (he states in a letter to Walter Raleigh in 1590), his models have been ancient and modern poets alike - Homer and Virgil, Ariosto and Tasso.

The framework of the poem is an allegory in praise of the Faerie Queene or Gloriana (Elizabeth I), in whose interests the Red Cross knight (the Anglican church) fights to protect the virgin Una (the true religion) against the wiles of many hostile characters including the deceitful Duessa (variously the Roman Catholic church or Mary Queen of Scots).

It is evident from these details that the poem is deeply rooted in national politics of the late 16th century, and many of its allusions must have been of far greater interest to contemporary readers than to any generation since. Spenser himself is a close witness of the struggles of the time. From 1580 he is employed in the English government of Ireland. In

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1588 he becomes an 'undertaker' in the first Elizabethan plantation, receiving the forfeited Irish estate of Kilcolman Castle.

Here he is visited in 1589 by Walter Raleigh, who is so impressed by Spenser's readings from *The Faerie Queene* that he persuades the poet to accompany him to London in the hope of interesting the real queen in it.

Publication of the first three books in 1590 is followed by Elizabeth's awarding the poet, in 1591, a pension of £50 a year. Spenser's original scheme is for twelve books, each consisting of an adventure on behalf of Gloriana by one of her knights. In the event he completes only six, the second group of three being published in 1596.

Spenser, spinning his elaborate allegory in rural Ireland, stands at the end of a long and retrospective poetic tradition - though others will soon develop less archaic versions of the epic (as in *Paradise Lost*). Meanwhile something much newer and more popular is taking place in London. When Spenser is there in 1590, Christopher Marlowe is the new excitement in the city's theatres.

London's theatres:1576-1599

The theatres built in London in the quarter century from 1576 are a notable example of a contribution made by architecture to literature. In previous decades there have been performances of primitive and rumbustious English plays in the courtyards of various London inns, with the audience standing in the yard itself or on the open galleries around the yard giving on to the upper rooms. These are ramshackle settings for what are no doubt fairly ramshackle performances.

In 1576 an actor, James Burbage, builds a permanent playhouse in Shoreditch - just outside the city of London to the north, so as not to require the permission of the puritanical city magistrates.

Burbage gives his building the obvious name, so long as it is the only one of its kind. He calls it the Theatre. It follows the architectural form of an inn yard, with galleries enclosing a yard open to the sky. At one end a stage projects beneath a pavilion-like roof.

In such a setting, custom-built, writers, actors and audience can begin to concentrate on dramatic pleasures. A second playhouse, the Curtain, rises close to the Theatre in 1577. A third, the Rose, opens in 1587 on the

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south bank of the Thames in the area known as Bankside. In that year one of these three theatres puts on a play which reveals how far English playwrights have progressed in a very short while - Tamburlaine, by Christopher Marlowe.

In about 1594 a fourth theatre, the Swan, is built close to the Hope. There are now two theatres to the north of the city and two south of the river. But soon the balance shifts decisively to Bankside.

James Burbage, builder of the original Theatre, dies in 1597. Two years later his two sons dismantle the building and carry the timber over the river to Bankside, where they use it as the basis for a theatre with a new name - the Globe. This name resounds in English theatrical history for two good reasons. It is where Richard, one of the Burbage brothers, develops into one of the first great actors of the English stage. And it is where many of Shakespeare's plays are first presented.

The structure of the Globe and the other London theatres has a significant influence on English drama at its greatest period, because of the audiences which these buildings accommodate. Ordinary Londoners, the groundlings, stand in the open pit to watch plays for a penny. Others pay a second penny to climb to a hard seat in the upper gallery. A third penny gives access to the two lower galleries and a seat with a cushion. A few places in the first gallery, to left and right of the stage, are reserved for gentlemen who can afford a shilling, or twelve pennies.

This is a cross-section of nearly all the people of London, and the audience is vast - with four theatres giving regular performances in a small city.

It has been calculated that during Shakespeare's time one Londoner in eight goes to the theatre each week. A city of 160,000 people is providing a weekly audience of about 21,000. There is only one comparable example of such a high level of attendance at places of entertainment - in cinemas in the 1930s.

The range of Shakespeare's audience is reflected in the plays, which can accommodate vulgar comedy and the heights of tragic poetry. The occasional performances in the Athenian drama festivals must have had something of this effect, involving much of the community in a shared

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artistic experience. In Elizabethan and Jacobean London it happens almost every night.

Marlowe: 1587-1593

The year 1564 sees the birth of two poets, Marlowe and Shakespeare, who between them launch the English theatre into the three decades of its greatest glory. Marlowe makes his mark first, in a meteoric six years (from 1587) in which his life and his writings are equally dramatic.

From his time as a student at Cambridge Marlowe seems to have been involved in the Elizabethan secret service. This dangerous work, combined with a fiery disposition, brings him into frequent clashes with the authorities. He is in prison in 1589 after a street fight. He is deported from the Netherlands in 1592 for the possession of forged gold coins. He is arrested for some unknown reason in London in 1593. And twelve days later he is murdered.

Marlowe is killed in a Deptford tavern by one of a group of colleagues with whom he has spent the day. The official explanation is a row over the tavern bill, but it is possible that the event relates to his secret service activities. What is certain is that when he dies, short of his thirtieth birthday, he is already an extremely popular playwright with the London audience.

Marlowe's first play, acted with great success in 1587, is an event of profound significance in the story of English theatre. Tamburlaine the Great introduces the supple and swaggering strain of blank verse which becomes the medium for all the glories of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama.

Marlowe's Tamburlaine is a character who revels in the power which his conquests bring him, and the verse conveys brilliantly his sense of excitement. Rich words trip off his tongue, relished for their own sakes, in a manner which becomes characteristic of much English poetry. When Tamburlaine defeats the emperor of Persia, and imagines his moment of triumph, even the strange names of his three colleagues are pressed into service to add to the rich brew:

'Is it not passing brave to be a king, Techelles?

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Is it not passing brave to be a king,

And ride in triumph through Persepolis?

Tamburlaine is so popular that Marlowe adds a second part, staged in 1588. In the remaining five years of his life his plays include *The Jew of Malta* (a melodrama of revenge, in which the Jew indulges in an orgy of killing after his money has been confiscated), *Doctor Faustus* (inspired by a recent biography of Faust, and setting the pattern for later treatments of the subject) and *Edward II* (the first play to dramatise English history as a conflict between real characters, and the predecessor of Shakespeare's great achievements in this genre).

In the first three of these plays the title role is taken by Edward Alleyn, Marlowe's leading actor and the great rival of Shakespeare's Burbage.

The dates of the plays after *Tamburlaine* are uncertain, and the texts of *Doctor Faustus* and *The Jew of Malta* have reached us in very corrupted versions because they are first printed years after Marlowe's death.

What is certain is that when Shakespeare arrives in London, in about 1590, the London stage belongs above all to Marlowe. By the time of Marlowe's death three years later only one of Shakespeare's undeniable masterpieces, *Richard III*, has been produced (with Burbage as the villainous hero). It would be hard to predict at this stage which of the two talented 29-year-olds is the greater genius.

The life of Shakespeare: 1564-1616

The mysterious death of Marlowe, the Cambridge graduate, and the brilliant subsequent career of Shakespeare, the grammar-school boy from Stratford, have caused some to speculate that his secret service activities make it prudent for Marlowe to vanish from the scene - and that he uses the name of a lesser man, Shakespeare, to continue his stage career. Others, similarly inclined to conspiracy theories, have convinced themselves that Shakespeare's plays are the work of the statesman and essayist Francis Bacon.

Snobbery rather than scholarship seems to underpin such arguments. Their proponents find it hard to accept that the unknown boy from

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Stratford should have created the crowning achievement of English literature.

The truth is that William Shakespeare is not such an unknown figure, and the education provided in England's grammar schools of the time is among the best available. Shakespeare's baptism is recorded in Stratford-upon-Avon on 26 April 1564 (this is only three days after St George's Day, making possible the tradition that England's national poet is born, most fortunately, on England's national saint's day).

Shakespeare's father, John, is a leading citizen of the town and for a while a justice of the peace. It is a safe assumption (though there is no evidence) that Shakespeare is educated at Stratford's grammar school.

In 1582, at the age of eighteen, Shakespeare marries Anne Hathaway. Their first child, Susanna, is baptized in 1583, followed by twins, Hamnet and Judith, in 1585.

There is then a gap of several years in the documentary record of Shakespeare's life, but he is involved in the London theatre - as an actor trying his hand also as a playwright - by at least 1592, when he is attacked as an 'upstart crow' in a polemical pamphlet by Robert Greene. In 1593 he publishes a poem, Venus and Adonis, following it in 1594 with The Rape of Lucrece. Meanwhile he has had performed the three parts of Henry VI and, probably in the winter of 1592, Richard III.

The London theatres are closed for fear of the plague during 1592 and 1593 apart from brief midwinter seasons, but in 1594 things return to normal and Shakespeare's career accelerates. He is now a leading member of London's most successful company, run by the Burbage family at the Theatre. Patronage at court gives them at first the title of the Lord Chamberlain's Men. On the accession of James I in 1603 they are granted direct royal favour, after which they are known as the King's Men.

Shakespeare's share in the profits of this company, operating from the Globe on Bankside from 1599, makes him a wealthy man. Most of the subsequent documentary references relate to purchases in his home town of Stratford.

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Ben Jonson: 1606-1616

Ben Jonson, almost as prolific in his works for the stage as Shakespeare, achieves his most distinctive voice in two satirical comedies based on an interplay of characters seen as types. In the earlier of the two, *Volpone* (1606), the characters are even given the Italian names of animals to point up their supposed natures.

Volpone (the fox) pretends to be dying so as to extract gifts from people expecting an inheritance. *Mosca* (the fly) acts as his accomplice. A lawyer, *Voltore* (the vulture), hovers around the supposed death bed. A feeble old man, *Corbaccio* (the crow), is willing to disinherit his son for his own benefit. And a self-righteous *Corvino* (the raven) offers his wife to satisfy *Volpone*'s lust.

Tricks played on the gullible also provide the comedy in *The Alchemist* (1610). *Subtle*, a confidence trickster pretending to be an alchemist, promises his victims whatever they most desire.

A grossly self-indulgent hedonist, *Sir Epicure Mammon*, and two fanatical puritans, *Ananias* and *Tribulation Wholesome*, turn out to share the same longing - to possess the philosopher's stone, with which they will turn base metal into gold. By contrast a simple tobacconist, *Druggier*, wants nothing more than a design for his shop that will bring in customers. *Kastril*, an oaf up from the country, is mainly interested in discovering the fashionable way of being quarrelsome.

These two plays succeed partly because of the farcical opportunities available as the tricksters struggle to keep their various victims separate and happy. But they also benefit from the vividly realistic detail which gives life to Jonson's verse.

His sharp eye for the everyday scene, and for the amusing quirks of people's behaviour, even enables him to make a viable play out of *Bartholomew Fair* (1614). It has little to hold it together except the context of the famous fair itself. The plot consists only of the adventures and mishaps which befall different groups of visitors.

While writing his comedies for the public theatres, Jonson also provides masques for amateur performance at the court of James I. His first, *The Masque of Blackness* in 1605, is specifically written to

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accommodate the longing of James's queen, Anne of Denmark, to appear in the role of a black African.

A quarrelsome and touchy man, frequently in trouble with the authorities, Jonson is unusual for his time in insisting on the dignity of the craft of playwright. Whereas Shakespeare shows little interest in the survival of the text of his plays, Jonson arranges for his own works to be published in a splendid folio edition of 1616. Three years later, as if taking the point, Oxford university honours him with a degree as master of arts.

England's Metaphysical poets: 17th century

The term Metaphysical has been applied, with no very good reason, to a group of English poets of the early 17th century who share a love of intellectual ingenuity, literary allusion and paradox, and who use language, images and rhythms of a kind not conventionally 'poetic' to startle the reader into thought.

In the 17th and 18th century the term usually implies hostility to what is perceived as these poets' perverse complexity. In the 20th century, after their merits are championed by T.S. Eliot and others, it becomes one of approval.

The earliest of the group (by a generation and more) is John Donne, whose wide range of themes stretches from erotic delights (Love's Progress, or To his Mistress Going to Bed) to the power of a holy sonnet such as the one on death (beginning 'Death be not proud' and ending 'Death, thou shalt die').

Donne becomes dean of St Paul's in 1621. An unscrupulous collector of pluralist church appointments, he is nevertheless a most persuasive preacher. A passage written during a serious illness uses a powerful and frequently quoted sequence of images to involve all humanity: 'No man is an island, entire of itself; ... and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.'

George Herbert, an aristocrat whose mother is a friend and patron of Donne, chooses a quieter life than his somewhat worldly predecessor and settles eventually for an insignificant country parish. He writes only devotional poems. Published just after his death in a single volume, *The Temple* (1633), they convey a mood of simple piety transcending subtle torments of spiritual conflict.

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Several other poets of the period write within a roughly similar idiom, which can be said to share Metaphysical characteristics. One in particular stands out - Andrew Marvell, a generation younger again than Herbert.

In his own lifetime Marvell is known as a minor public figure, linked with prominent leaders during the Commonwealth. He acts as tutor in the families of both Fairfax and Cromwell, and from 1657 serves with Milton in Cromwell's department for foreign affairs.

Marvell's poems are published in 1681, three years after his death. Not until the 20th century are they appreciated, for their subtle and often provocative blending of different levels of perception. In *To His Coy Mistress* Marvell gives the conventional argument of the seducer (to gather rosebuds while we may) a very much darker complexion: 'The grave's a fine and private place, But none I think do there embrace.'

Milton the young poet: 1632-1638

When the collected plays of Shakespeare are reissued in 1632, in the edition known as the Second Folio, the volume contains an Epitaph on Shakespeare. It is not known how the poem has been chosen for this honour, but it is the first published work of John Milton - famous as yet only in the limited circle of Cambridge, where he is a brilliant student.

Milton's other poems from his student days, not published until 1645, include *On the Morning of Christ's Nativity* and a linked pair, *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*, contrasting the active and the contemplative life.

Two years after his departure from Cambridge, Milton's masque *Comus* is performed, in 1634, at a grand ceremonial occasion in Ludlow castle. And in 1637 a personal tragedy, linked with Cambridge, prompts the writing and publication of his first major poem.

A fellow student from his college days, Edward King, dies in a shipwreck in the Irish Sea. A volume of elegies is planned in his memory and Milton is asked to contribute. The result is *Lycidas*, published with the other elegies in 1638. Though written within a formal pastoral convention, the poem is an intensely felt and very personal meditation on mortality (Milton's perhaps as much as Edward King's, who was an acquaintance rather than a close friend).

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Milton the polemicist: 1641-1660

To an observer in the 1640s and 1650s these few but distinguished poems would seem to comprise the full and completed career of Milton the poet, for during this period of crisis in English history he devotes himself to issues of more immediate and practical concern.

In the developing conflict between the Anglican monarchy and puritan parliament, Milton's sympathies are on the side of parliament - in whose endeavours he sees the best hope for his own central concern, that of liberty for the individual citizen. From 1641, the date of his first polemical tract, Milton consciously and with regret sets aside poetry in order to 'embark in a troubled sea of noises and hoarse disputes'.

He is by no means slavishly on parliament's side. Indeed the best known of his pamphlets, *Areopagitica* (an impassioned plea for freedom of the press, published in 1644), is prompted by parliament's decision to continue censorship laws inherited from the days of the Star Chamber.

Nevertheless Milton's political allegiance is clear, and when the Civil War has been won by parliament he himself enters government. In March 1649 he is appointed Latin secretary to Cromwell's council of state. Latin is the international language, so his post means that he is responsible for the administration of foreign affairs.

Milton is also what would nowadays be called the government's spin doctor, a role in which he is presented at once with a difficult task. The royalists publish, on the day of the executed king's burial in 1649, a powerful propaganda volume called *Eikon Basilike* ('image of a king'). It is a collection of meditations and prayers, supposedly written by the martyred Charles I when held in captivity by parliament. Milton responds with *Eikonoklastes* ('image breaker'), but he can do little to dent the power and immediacy of the opposing volume.

Milton keeps his job until the end of the Commonwealth, in 1660. He has been blind since 1652, but talented assistants (including Marvell) are at his side.

Paradise Lost: 1667

Milton's lack of personal skill in politics is evident from the timing of his last polemical pamphlet. In 1660, the year of the Restoration and just

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two months before the return of Charles II to London, he publishes *The Ready and Easy Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth*.

From his close association with the leading regicides, Milton is in real danger in the early months of the restored monarchy. He goes into hiding when a warrant is posted for his arrest. In the event he is allowed both his life and his liberty - perhaps because his blindness makes him harmless. The change proves immensely beneficial, in the fourteen years of life left to him. He now devotes himself fully to a task which is already under way.

There is evidence that from early in his life Milton has had in mind a grand project on a biblical theme. Since 1658 he has been dictating an epic poem which states in its opening lines that its subject is 'man's first disobedience', and its purpose 'to justify the ways of God to man'.

Paradise Lost (or, in its early draft title, *Adam Unparadized*) uses the first three chapters of *Genesis* as the springboard on which Milton builds mighty edifices describing the fall of Satan and his rebel angels, the struggle between them and the archangels, the promise of redemption through Christ, the innocence and temptation of Adam and Eve, and their expulsion from paradise.

The writing of this great work by the blind poet provides one of the most evocative scenes of English literary history. Milton usually composes his soaring lines during the night and keeps them in his head until the next day. When he is ready 'to be milked', he dictates (often with a leg sprawled over the arm of his chair) to various scribes, including two nephews and one of his daughters.

The poem is published in 1667 (earning its author £10), and is followed in 1671 by *Paradise Regained* (a briefer work, centred on Christ resisting Satan in the desert to undo the harm of Adam and Eve succumbing to him) and *Samson Agonistes* (a poetic drama, treating the final days of Samson with the intensity of Greek tragedy).

Pepys: 1660-1669

At some time during the last weeks of 1659 a 26-year-old Londoner buys himself a handsome leather-bound volume with all its pages blank. He senses that the new decade will be an interesting one in politics (and, he hopes, in his own career). He intends to record it in a diary.

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On 1 January 1660 he begins his first entry: 'Lords day. This morning (we lying lately in the garret) I rose, put on my suit with great skirts, having not lately worn any other clothes but them.' He goes on to describe the sermon which he hears in church and his midday meal at home: 'My wife dressed the remains of a turkey, and in the doing of it she burned her hand.'

Samuel Pepys has launched into the great adventure of recording the minutiae of his daily life. The experiment lasts nine years (until trouble with his eyes brings it to an end), and it bequeaths to the world perhaps the greatest of all diaries.

The word 'diary', in the sense of a personal record, only comes into use in the 17th century. Almost immediately there are two outstanding examples in the journals of Pepys and of John Evelyn. They are very different. Evelyn keeps a spasmodic account of events, mainly of a public kind, over a span of seven decades. Pepys, in a greater number of words, records everything which takes his fancy during just nine years.

Pepys is fortunate that the 1660s in London are so eventful. In starting the diary he anticipates interesting developments as the country adjusts to the ending of the Commonwealth and, as it turns out, to the restoration of the monarchy. But no one can anticipate two of the most newsworthy events in London's history, the Great Plague and the Great Fire, which Pepys is able to record in fascinating detail (see Plague and Fire).

The description on 4 September 1666 of himself and Sir William Penn, together digging a hole in the garden to preserve their wine and parmesan cheese from the advancing flames, makes an extraordinarily vivid historical vignette. The fire stops short of their treasure.

Pepys's genius as a diarist is that he records everything which interests him. The diary is for himself and about himself (it is not published, even in abbreviated form, until 1825). His concerns, to the delight of modern readers, frequently centre on his sexual exploits. We even share with him the anticipation. He records on 19 December 1664 that he feels a little guilty, lying in bed with his wife, because his mind keeps running on what he hopes to do tomorrow with the wife of a certain Bagwell. The next day we learn that he has succeeded.

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Pepys even lapses into foreign doggerel in case his wife reads the diary. 'Et ego did baisier her bouche.' But can Mrs Pepys really not work out that her husband has kissed someone on the mouth?

The Pilgrim's Progress: 1678

The persecution of Nonconformists causes one of England's best loved works of literature to be written. In many households in the 18th century there is only one book other than the Bible. It is *The Pilgrim's Progress*, much of it probably written when its author John Bunyan is in Bedford gaol.

His offence, in the harsh Anglican reaction of the 1660s, is merely to preach without a licence - meaning outside the authorized confines of the Church of England. Bunyan is a leading member of a community of Baptists in Bedford. Committed to the county gaol in 1661, he remains there for eleven years until released in 1672 as a result of Charles II's Declaration of Indulgence.

Bunyan's spiritual autobiography, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, is published during his years in gaol (in 1666). It gives him an added literary reputation when he returns to his preaching during the 1670s. This perhaps encourages him to undertake (or maybe just to complete) a more popular work when he finds himself back in Bedford gaol for another spell of six months in 1677.

The Pilgrim's Progress from this world, to that which is to come is published in 1678, followed by a second part in 1684. In a sense it covers the same territory as his autobiography, telling of a guilt-ridden quest for salvation. But the material is now given fictional form.

The immediate popularity of *The Pilgrim's Progress* in solemn English households is easy to understand. While unmistakably an improving religious work, it has the excitement of a folk tale and the rich characters of a novel.

In Part 1 the pilgrim, Christian, sets off with his burden of sins upon his back to make his way to the Celestial City. His path takes him through the Slough of Despond, past the tempting delights of Vanity Fair, and into temporary imprisonment by Giant Despair in Doubting Castle. In Part 2 Christian is followed on the journey by his wife, Christiana, with their

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children. Every virtuous family in England can identify with these characters and their adventures.

In 1597 Shakespeare pays £60 for a large house and garden, New Place in Chapel Street. By 1602 he has enough money to purchase an estate of 107 acres just outside Stratford, and he continues over the next few years to make investments in and around the town. In about 1610 he begins to spend less time in London and more in New Place, where he dies in 1616. He is buried in the chancel of the Stratford parish church.

Shakespeare has shown little interest in publishing his plays, for like others of his time he probably regards them as scripts for performance rather than literature. After his death two of his colleagues, John Heminge and Henry Condell, gather the texts of thirty-six plays which they publish in 1623 in the edition known now as the First Folio.

The plays before 1601

By 1600 Shakespeare has conclusively demonstrated his genius in every kind of play except tragedy. In dramatizing English history he has progressed from the fumbling beginnings of the three parts of Henry VI (1590-92) to the magnificent melodrama of Richard III (1592), the subtle character study of Richard II (1595), the jingoistic glories of Henry V (1600) and, most successful of all, the superb pair of plays about Henry IV and his wayward son Prince Hal.

Henry IV, Parts 1 and 2 (1597-8) present a rich panorama of English life, from court and battlefield to tavern and rustic retreat. They also introduce, in Falstaff, the most rounded and unforgettable comic character in English literature.

Meanwhile Shakespeare has developed a sweet and delicate strain of romantic poetry, seen first in the tragic romance of Romeo and Juliet (1595) and then in the comic romances A Midsummer Night's Dream (1596) and As You Like It (1599). And he has shown his skill in a more knock-about vein of comedy, with The Taming of the Shrew (1593) and The Merry Wives of Windsor (1600).

All these dates are approximate, to within a year or two, because there is in most cases no firm evidence of the date of first production.

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After 1600 there is one more play which combines broad comedy (in the antics of Toby Belch and Andrew Aguecheek) and enchantingly romantic poetry (as in the very first line, 'If music be the food of love, play on'). This is Twelfth Night, and its first production possibly occurs less than a week into 1601. There is evidence that Shakespeare probably writes it as part of the festivities for Twelfth Night (or January 6) at Elizabeth's court in this particular year.

In general, though, Shakespeare's palette darkens with the new century. The next few years see some much less sunny comedies and his four great tragedies.

Tragedies and dark comedies: 1601-1608

Shakespeare's first attempt at full-scale tragedy, in 1601, brings to the stage a character, Hamlet, whose nature and weaknesses have prompted more discussion than any other Shakespearean creation. His prevailing characteristics of self-doubt and self-dramatization hardly seem promising material for a tragic hero, but Shakespeare uses them to create an intensely personal drama. Each opportunity for action prompts the young prince to indulge in another soul-searching soliloquy, each missed opportunity makes disaster more inevitable.

Othello is the next of the major tragedies, in about 1603, with the 'green-eyed monster' jealousy now the driving force on the path to destruction.

King Lear, in about 1605, is the most elemental of the tragedies, with the old king's sanity buffeted by storms upon an open heath as much as by his treatment at the hands of his unfeeling daughters. Macbeth, a year or so later, makes guilt itself the stuff of tragedy after ruthless ambition has set events upon their course.

These plays are tragic in that each has a central character whose actions drive the events and whose flaws make the conclusion unavoidable. Others written during these years may not be tragedies in this fullest sense, but they have a bitter flavour far removed from comedy. An example is Troilus and Cressida (1602), with its caustic view of the world enunciated by Thersites.

Even the plays of this period which are literally comedies, in the simple sense that they end happily, are in mood closer to tragedy.

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Examples are All's Well that Ends Well (1603) and Measure for Measure (1604).

In the years after Macbeth Shakespeare tackles two Roman themes. In Antony and Cleopatra (1607) the facts of history carry his two famous lovers to their tragic fates. In Coriolanus (1608) it is the arrogance of the central character which creates the drama - resolved only when his duty as a son, in response to the pleading of his aged mother, results in his own death.

The last plays: 1608-1611

Shakespeare's last four plays, beginning with Pericles, Prince of Tyre in about 1608, share a pattern of rupture, retirement, renewal and reconciliation. Rather like the natural rhythm of winter, followed by hibernation and emergence into spring, the plots begin with violently evil deeds. The good characters somehow escape to safety and a new life, often with a new identity. Years pass and children grow up, until eventually all is resolved.

In Pericles the events supposedly occur in ancient Tyre. In Cymbeline (1609) the tormented family is that of the historic Cunobelin, king of a Celtic British tribe. The Winter's Tale (1611), set in undefined classical times, takes place in the kingdoms of Sicily and Bohemia.

The Tempest (also 1611) is set in a much more suitable context for any story of this kind, half real and half magic: 'The scene, an uninhabited island'. For the past twelve years the island has been home to a victim of political skulduggery - Prospero, duke of Milan, accompanied by his young daughter Miranda. They share the place with a subhuman inhabitant, Caliban, and a spirit who has been trapped here, Ariel.

Since this is an island, and Prospero has magic powers, shipwreck provides an easy way of delivering the evil characters who were responsible for Prospero's exile.

With their arrival, the ingredients are in place for a fantasy playing on many of life's most significant contrasts. The ways of the world, both good and bad, are seen in a fresh light through the innocent eyes of Miranda, to whom everything is new. The benevolent wisdom of Prospero outwits the scheming wiles of his opponents. Drunken crew members have a natural

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affinity with the discontented Caliban. And the island, as a magical place, can spring its own surprises.

At the end of the play, when Prospero has brought the main characters together in reconciliation, he renounces his magic powers in a farewell epilogue.

Prospero's final speech has often been seen as Shakespeare's own farewell to his theatrical career, relinquishing the magic with which he has conjured so many stories and characters into life on the stage.

It may be so. But he is part author of one more play, Henry VIII (1613), and an event during one of its performances certainly puts the seal on his retirement. A spark from a stage cannon sets fire to the thatched roof of the Globe, which burns to the ground. The theatre is rebuilt, reopening in 1614 with a tiled roof. But the event is likely to confirm Shakespeare in his full-time withdrawal to his properties in Stratford, where he dies in 1616.

The sonnets: 1595-1598

If Shakespeare had written not a single play, he would still rank among England's leading poets because of the 154 sonnets which he writes during the 1590s (they are not published until 1609). The beauty of the individual sonnets, many of them among the best loved poems in the English language, is enhanced by the mysterious personal relationships of which they give tantalizing hints.

The volume of 1609 is dedicated 'to the onlie begetter of these insuing sonnets Mr W.H.' Many of the sonnets are addressed to a young man, and the assumption that the loved one is himself W.H. has prompted endless speculation as to who he might be. William Herbert (earl of Pembroke) and Henry Wriothesley (earl of Southampton) have been leading contenders.

In the early poems (1-17) the poet urges the young man to achieve immortality by marrying and having children, but nos 18-25 suggest that he will be immortal anyway through these sonnets addressed to him (as indeed, in his anonymous way, he has proved). The poems up to 126 dwell on the relationship with the young man, sometimes offering pained hints that he is being unfaithful with a woman.

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If she is the woman to whom the final sequence of sonnets is addressed, then her identity has stimulated as much fruitless research as that of W.H. Famous only as the dark lady of the sonnets, she is dark physically, dark in the turmoil she creates for her lover, and dark now in escaping the limelight.

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