A SHORT HISTORY OF ENGLISH LITERATURE

Harry Blamires • Second Edition

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HARRY BLAMIRES

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Contents

Preface vii
Preface to the edition of 1984 viii
1 The fourteenth century 1
2 Fifteenth-century poetry and prose 19
3 The early sixteenth century 31
4 Elizabethan drama 40
5 Jacobean drama 64
6 Elizabethan poetry 81
7 Metaphysical and Cavalier poetry 95
8 Elizabethan and seventeenth-century prose 111
9 Milton to Dryden 125
10 Restoration drama 137
11 Origins of the novel 151
12 The age of Swift and Pope 160
13 The age of Johnson 181
14 The eighteenth-century novel 201
15 The close of the eighteenth century 217
16 Wordsworth and the Romantics 231
17 Scott and contemporary novelists 255
18 Victorian poetry 270
19 The Victorian novel 301
20 Twentieth-century drama 331

21 Twentieth-century poetry 353
22 The twentieth-century novel 383
Chronological table of writers 424
Bibliography 431
Index 447

Preface

This work of introduction is designed to escort the reader through some six centuries of English literature. It begins in the fourteenth century at the point at which the language written in our country is recognizably our own, and ends in the 1950s. It is a compact survey, summing up the substance and quality of the individual achievements that make up our literature. The aim is to leave the reader informed about each writer's main output, sensitive to the special character of his gifts, and aware of his place in the story of our literature as a whole. No artificial schematization is imposed, but a pattern emerges naturally from considering writers in the groupings into which they fall by virtue of their historical context and their special interests.

Chapter headings do not define strict watertight divisions. Each one denotes the central interest of a chapter without being exclusive. The bibliography at the end provides chapter-by-chapter reading lists which guide the reader to a sample of texts, mostly inexpensive, and to a few relevant works of critical, historical, or biographical interest. Very many of the listed books are paperbacks.

I gratefully acknowledge the valuable critical help I have received from Professor Harold F. Brooks, and from my son, Alcuin Blamires. Professor Brooks in particular has been most generous in drawing attention to matters in my manuscript that called for re-consideration; but of course I am myself responsible for anything in the book that is amiss.

Preface to the edition of 1984

My publisher's decision to issue a revised edition of this *History* after ten years has given me the opportunity to update the three chapters dealing with twentieth-century literature. No attempt was made in the first edition to give proper coverage to literature later than that of the 1950s. Updating has therefore involved covering the output of some twenty years during which literary productivity has continued to increase in all fields. The finishing point may now be regarded as the present. I have also taken the opportunity to re-examine the coverage of earlier chapters, taking into account such criticisms as have been made by reviewers and other readers. In particular I have taken pains to meet the just complaint that Irish writers were not as fully represented as they should have been; and I have here and there added other writers who, I now think, were improperly omitted.

I ought to say a belated public thank-you to my son, Fabian, for all his work on the card-index which I used extensively both for this book and for *A Guide to Twentieth-Century Literature in English.*

1 The fourteenth century

The fourteenth century was an age of healthy literary productivity dominated by four major poets – Chaucer, Langland, Gower and the anonymous 'Gawayne-poet'. There were also significant religious writers and the unknown makers of Miracle plays.

Geoffrey Chaucer (*c.*1340–1400) had an important career in public service. He was fighting in France by 1359–60, was taken prisoner and ransomed. No doubt his career benefited from his marriage, for his wife, Philippa, was lady-in-waiting to Queen Philippa. He was early attached to the royal household and went abroad on diplomatic work. His sister-in-law, Catherine, became John of Gaunt's mistress, then his third wife. These influential connections, together with his important civil and diplomatic appointments (including missions to Italy), gave Chaucer a wide knowledge of the world, strangely unrestricted, it would seem, by the limitations of outlook which in later ages social class might well have imposed.

The Book of the Duchess, Chaucer's earliest work, is an elegy in memory of John of Gaunt's first wife, Blanche, who died in 1369. Its purpose is to praise the deceased and console the bereaved. Chaucer uses the convention of the dream-allegory. The poet falls asleep while reading the very relevant story of 'Ceyx and Alcione', in which Alcione sees her husband in a dream and learns from his own lips of his death at sea. The poet's dream takes him to the countryside on a May morning. There is a hunt in progress; but the poet meets a disconsolate young knight sitting apart, clad all in black and abstracted with grief. The succeeding dialogue between poet and mourner, though its structure owes much to the rhetorical rule-book, is marked by striking touches as the tentativeness, simplicity, and

even obtuseness of the inquiring poet are offset by the deep grief of the widower. For at first the knight distances the presentation of his sorrow in artifice: he is the victim of false Fortune who has bereft him of his queen and checkmated him at chess. But the narrator's probing questions then elicit a full and touching account of his lady's beauty, of her wooing and her winning. The reliving of past happiness seems to enable the knight for the first time to confront the stark fact:

> 'She ys ded!' 'Nay!' 'Yis, be my trouthe!'
> 'Is that youre los? Be God, hyt ys routhe!'

A light counterpoint balances the black grief of the 'man in blak' with the white of the lost one, White in name and white in complexion, white-necked and white-handed, and with the white walls of the hill-castle to which the hunters return at the fading of the dream.

This poem illustrates the way Chaucer blends the conventional literary forms with a lively realism and a psychological subtlety that speak to us across the centuries, making the modern reader feel very close to him. We have to forget our prejudices: we must not think of the stylized medieval framework as fettering the poet's spontaneity. For though Chaucer's work throughout shows him to be a craftsman well versed in all the devices prescribed in the study of rhetoric,[1] it does not give us any sense of an inner impulse striving to break out of a literary strait-jacket. Rather the antithetic balance between formality and vigorous realism is something that Chaucer seems to have relished, and it gives his poetry a peculiar charm and piquancy.

Some poets overpower us with their presence or their passion, but Chaucer worms his way into the hearts of his readers, and one key to his insinuating charm is the delightful self-projection that is effected with amusing self-deprecation, even self-mockery. In *The House of Fame* a comically ironic self-portrait emerges in contrast to the solemn machinery of a love dream enriched with the paraphernalia of classical epic. The poet's dream takes him to the Temple of Venus, where he studies a pictorial representation of the story of Dido and Aeneas from the *Aeneid*. An Eagle, sent from heaven, takes him up to

[1] In the Middle Ages all modes of literary expression were codified in the study of *rhetoric*. The codification included what we now call 'figures of speech' as well as techniques like allegory, devices like digression and illustration, and regulations for presenting material in a clear, comprehensive and interestingly varied way.

the House of Fame, and then to the House of Twigs, where the fortuitousness of earthly fame and fortune is allegorized in the concourse he encounters. The attractiveness of this unfinished poem is enhanced by the comic correspondence between the English poet's guide (the Eagle) and Dante's guide (Virgil) on his parallel ascent in the *Divine Comedy*. There is no depreciative mockery, except of Geoffrey himself. The humour lies in the contrast between the devices of high literature and the fumbling poet at the receiving end of the talkative Eagle's disquisitions.

Chaucer used the form of the love vision again, though with different purpose, in *The Parliament of Fowls*. The narrator is taken to a dream-garden, sees the voluptuous goddess in the Temple of Venus, where paintings display victims of tragic love, and then by contrast comes to the fresh outdoor Court of Nature. Here birds of all kinds are engaged in a St Valentine's Day council to choose their respective mates. Three eagles stake their rival claims to the female eagle. After debate the decision is referred to the female eagle herself, and she calls for a year's deferment for reflection. Topical readings of the poem have been hazarded with reference to contemporary royal love-suits; but the tendency now is to emphasize the thematic interest in the way various views of love are voiced and represented. There is a dream-allegory again as prologue to the stories of nine heroines in *The Legend of Good Women*. The poet is taken to task by the god of love for heresy against the law of love in his translation of the *Romaunt of the Rose* and for representation of feminine misdeeds in *Troilus and Criseyde*. He is charged to write of good women, and the stories follow duly, beginning with that of Cleopatra.

Troilus and Criseyde, Chaucer's great completed poem, is a much expanded version of Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato*, about two thirds of the work being Chaucer's own additional material. Troilus is the son of Priam, king of Troy. Criseyde is the daughter of Calchas, a Trojan priest who has gone over to the Greeks, leaving her behind in Troy. Troilus falls in love with her and Pandarus brings the two of them together for a night in his home, where their love is consummated. Pandarus, the archetypal go-between, is a great humorous study in knowing contrivance and zestful avuncularity, and he manages the lovers with breathless dexterity. But an exchange of prisoners is arranged by Calchas: his daughter is to be brought over from Troy in

return for an important Trojan prisoner, Antenor. Troilus is heart-broken at the news:

> And as in wynter leves ben bireft
> Ech after other, til the tree be bare,
> So that ther nys but bark and braunche ilaft,
> Lith Troilus, byraft of ech welfare,
> Ibounden in the blake bark of care . . .

Criseyde promises to return soon and passionate vows of fidelity are exchanged; then she departs from Troy under the care of Diomede, and it is Diomede who seduces her. As Troilus gradually realizes what has happened, the slow agony is recounted with unforgettable acuteness:

> The lettres ek that she of olde tyme
> Hadde hym ysent, he wolde allone rede
> An hondred sithe atwixen noon and prime . . .

The pathos is deepened by Chaucer's unerring presentation of Criseyde as a study in weakness rather than falsehood. The frailty of her defences and her resolution is portrayed without rancour. But Troilus's despair is eased only by rushing into battle and eventually meeting death at the hands of Achilles. Chaucer concludes his poem by shifting the viewpoint and urging young people to forsake earthly loves and set their hearts on the love of Christ. The rich personal experience recorded, and the high codes served by it, belong to a world that fades like a flower. The poem ends in prayer.

The first reading of *Troilus and Criseyde* is one of life's great narrative experiences. The subtlety and power of the characterization, the fine penetration revealed in the developing sequence of mood and emotion, and perhaps above all the rapturous tenderness sustained in recording the lovers' joy in each other – these qualities give a rare intensity to the work. It has been called a 'psychological novel', and the words given an accurate suggestion of the reader's close encounter with its personalities. The sustaining of a deeply intimate tone through 1177 stanzas of fluent yet dignified rhyme royal[2] is a remarkable achievement.

The *Canterbury Tales* is Chaucer's most celebrated work. The

[2] *rhyme royal*: a seven-line stanza of decasyllabics, rhyming *ababbcc*.

Prologue establishes the framework by presenting a party of pilgrims who have gathered at the Tabard Inn in Southwark to make their way to the shrine of St Thomas à Becket at Canterbury. It is a motley assembly of men and women, portrayed in the *Prologue* with relish and vitality, though deadly satire is directed at corrupt ecclesiastics. Harry Bailly, the pilgrims' host at the inn, suggests that, to pass the time agreeably, they should each tell stories on the outward journey and on the return journey. He himself will go with them, and he promises a supper to the one who tells the best stories. This vast scheme was not completed. The twenty-nine pilgrims are represented by only twenty-three tales, not all of them finished. Links between the tales do something to give order to the collection by sketching in a continuing interchange of banter and crosstalk between the pilgrims, but the series of links is too incomplete to do more than whet the appetite for an accomplishment unrealized. The incompleteness of the interconnecting material leaves room for doubt in some cases about the order in which the stories should occur and about how they fit into the various stages of the pilgrims' journey.

Nevertheless, the *Canterbury Tales* leaves the impression of a work unified in spirit as well as diverse in riches. A cluster of varied and vivid personalities and a sequence of delightfully contrasting stories are together put before us, and the mixture is so winningly contrived that the reader forgets the missing machinery and the imperfect fabric. The design seems to be such that groups of tales are concerned with specific human problems and contrasting attitudes are juxtaposed. The Knight, model of chivalry and gentility, as 'meeke as is a mayde' in his bearing, who 'nevere yet no vileynye ne sayde / In al his lyf unto no maner wight', tells a tale of chivalrous rivalry in love, of tournament, tragedy and noble marriage. Its philosophic reflections, like those of *Troilus and Criseyde*, remind us that Chaucer was also the translator of Boethius's *De Consolatione Philosophiae*. In immediate contrast, the brawny thickset Miller, with a wart and a tuft of hairs on the tip of his nose, and a head that could batter any door off its hinges when he took it at a run, tells a tale at a level of earthiness parodic of the Knight's high seriousness. A young Oxford scholar, Nicholas, sets his heart on the wife of a carpenter with whom he is lodging, and induces the carpenter to take precautions against a coming second Flood by suspending tubs in the attic, so that the three of them can safely float. While the carpenter sleeps

in his tub, Nicholas and Alison get out of theirs and go to bed together. But Nicholas pays for his deception. Absalon, the parish clerk, comes to beg a kiss from Alison and she rebuffs him by sticking her bare buttocks out of the window. In revenge Absalon returns with a red-hot iron and asks again for a kiss. This time Nicholas sticks out his buttocks, and he is branded. His shrieks waken the carpenter, who hears the desperate cry, 'Help! water! water!', assumes that the promised Flood is at hand, cuts his tub from the roof so that it can safely float, and comes crashing down.

One of the pilgrims, the Reeve, is himself a carpenter and not unnaturally the story affronts him. He responds with a story at the expense of a miller, exchanging Oxford for Cambridge. Two students deceive a miller by getting into bed with his wife and his daughters in the darkness. This tit-for-tat rejoinder indicates the potential of the whole work. Like the Miller and the Reeve, the Friar and the Summoner, two ecclesiastical rogues who are rivals for money and past masters at turning piety to personal advantage, tell crude yarns at each other's expense.

No person in the company comes more vigorously to life than the Wife of Bath, a bold, showy woman with scarlet complexion and scarlet stockings, a hat as big as a shield and hips of comparable proportions. A hearty chatterbox and a scathing foe of celibacy, she treats her companions to a detailed account of her life with five successive husbands, pointing the forceful moral that woman must wear the trousers in married life. This formidable exponent of medieval Women's Lib tells a tale that drives the lesson home. One of King Arthur's knights is reprieved from the death penalty for rape and given a year to find out what women love most. A hideous hag gives him the answer ('Sovereignty') in return for a pledge of obedience, and then, exacting what is due, requires him to marry her. In bed she offers him two alternatives – shall she remain hideous and faithful, or shall she become beautiful and perhaps unfaithful? Exercising all his faculties at this crucial juncture, the knight asks her to make the choice herself. He is duly rewarded for his acumen: she both becomes beautiful and promises fidelity.

In strong contrast the Clerk of Oxford, an earnest, unworldly and bookish man who does not waste words but is worth listening to when he does speak, tells the story of patient Griselda, whose wifely submissiveness is the antithesis of what the Wife of Bath advocates.

Her virtue and love are tested by harrowing trials, including the supposed loss of her children. A happy ending is miraculously contrived, and the touching beauty of the tale moves even the rugged Host. 'By Goddes bones, / Me were levere than a barel ale / My wyf at hoom had herd this legende ones!' The recurring theme of marriage and fidelity is taken up again by the Merchant. He tells the story of January and May, wintery old husband and fresh young wife who, by a complex contrivance, is helped up into a tree by her husband, there to enjoy her youthful lover. The Franklin ends the marriage controversy on a happy note with a tale that exemplifies married loyalty sustained by generosity of spirit. Dorigen, the loving wife of Arveragus, fobs off the persistent appeals of the devoted squire, Aurelius, with the playful oath that she will succumb to his love only when all the rocks on the coast of Brittany are removed. The strange fulfilment of this condition by magical means produces, at the climax, a delightful interchange of magnanimities. Arveragus will not let his wife break her word: whereupon Aurelius remorsefully releases her from the commitment and in turn is released from his bond to pay the magician who served him.

Chaucer's versatility may be further exemplified by the *Nun's Priest's Tale* of Chauntecleer and Pertelote, cock and hen, whose farmyard dialogue brings the domestic situation into new focus within a delicious mock-heroic framework. Chauntecleer has had a bad dream of a fox: Pertelote puts it down to indigestion. Chauntecleer delivers a solemn lecture on dreams, well-documented by reference to the learned authorities. For there *is* a menacing fox; and soon he tricks Chauntecleer and captures him. A lively chase ensues, with shrill shouts reminiscent of 'Jakke Straw and his meynee'. It culminates in a cunning escape on Chauntecleer's part. From the irony and farce of this rollicking earthy fable, one might turn to the opposite extreme of earnestness and pathos, and hear the Prioress, a lady of tender-hearted delicacy who 'wolde wepe, if that she saugh a mous / Kaught in a trappe', tell a tale closely resembling that of St Hugh of Lincoln. A young Christian boy is murdered by Jews for singing a hymn to the Virgin Mary. His body is thrown into a pit, where it miraculously sings still, so that the murder is discovered and the perpetrators are executed.

Chaucer's multifarious diversity puts him among the first three or four English poets. It used to be argued that he had every literary

talent except that of encompassing the tragic and that he was deficient in philosophical profundity. It is doubtful whether these two charges could stand up against a sensitive reading of *Troilus and Criseyde* and a comprehensive grasp of the *Canterbury Tales*.

There can be no question about the profundity and universality of *Piers Plowman*, a deeply religious poem by William Langland (*c.*1332–*c.*1400). Langland came from Malvern to London, took minor orders, acquired a wife and daughter, and seems to have lived by praying for patrons. A man of fervent Christian conviction, Langland was no stained-glass-window figure. He tells us how in old age the 'limb' that his wife loved him for and liked to feel in bed at night could no longer be made to serve her wishes (*Passus* XX). This frank personality sets the opening scene of his great poem in the homely Malvern Hills. There he has a vision of the threefold universe, earth pitched between Heaven and Hell. There is a Field full of Folk, a packed and bustling concourse of worldly rogues, lay and clerical. In their portrayal harsh judgement upon the corrupt is intensified by compassion for the poor. Over against the bitter survey of scoundrels and hypocrites the poet presents those worthy souls who live prayerful lives in love of God; for the moral and social satire is subordinate to a vast allegorical search for Truth. A beautiful lady, Holy Church, comes to help the seeker, proclaiming that God is Love; but first she shows him the world dominated by Falsehood and Flattery. He sees the perverters of justice, servants all of Lady Meed, rich in jewelled robes of scarlet and gold. We watch her, the symbol of worldly gain and corruption, taken before the king and rebuked by Conscience. Then we return to the Field full of Folk to see Reason preaching repentance. Responsive penitents are directed to seek for Saint Truth; and the only guide they can find is the simple plowman, Piers. He can direct the pilgrims to Truth if they will lend a hand with the ploughing. The symbolical significance of ploughing takes in the whole sphere of good works meekly and faithfully performed. Some pilgrims work eagerly and Truth delivers a pardon into Piers's hands for all who help. When the document is opened, it promises eternal life to those who do good and damnation to those who do evil. This rigorous legalism is no true pardon and Piers tears the document to pieces, quoting, 'Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me . . .' His dissatisfaction is apparently over the terms of the Old Law on which salvation is

offered. The gospels teach the love of God and recommend the example of the birds of the air who neither sow nor reap.

The problem thus posed provides the substance of the second part of the poem, which pursues the quest of doing good and so attaining salvation. The quest becomes a three-fold one, the stages of spiritual progress being to Do Well, Do Bet(ter) and Do Best. There is argument on sin and salvation, on faith and works, on the spiritual importance of learning and the function of grace; then Faith (Abraham), Hope (Moses) and Love (the Good Samaritan) are introduced and in culmination the dreamer has visions of the Crucifixion, the Harrowing of Hell, the Resurrection, the Ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit. The suffering and redeeming Christ is seen wearing the humanity of Piers himself, to whom the power of absolution is granted and on whom the onus is laid for construction on earth of the house of Unity. Correspondences thus build into the figure of Piers (Peter, the rock) the symbolism of Incarnation and the Church of Christ, for the house of 'Unité, holicherche on [in] Englisshe' is a barn where harvested Christian souls are to be garnered. But the attack of Antichrist and the Seven Sins wreaks devastation among 'the crop of treuthe', and at the end of the poem Conscience turns pilgrim, to walk the world in search again of the saving Piers Plowman. Langland thus completed, in a style of extraordinary imaginative vigour and clarity, the one great comprehensive poem of the age containing a profound consideration of the good life and of a man's religious vocation.

To John Gower (*c.*1330–1408) also goes the credit for having realized a massive conception in verse. His great English poem is *Confessio Amantis* (The Lover's Confession) in which he presents a comprehensive vision of life within the framework of a dramatic sequence in the Courtly Love tradition. Gower's connecting theme is the confession of an ageing lover afflicted with a passion, humble and devout, for a beautiful but unresponsive young lady, sympathetic enough to be tantalizing to him, but restrained enough to throw him into despair. His confessor, Genius, is at once a minister of Love able to direct him in the way of her service, and a moral priest who can broaden the particular lesson for a lover into a principle for all mankind. The scheme takes us through the Seven Deadly Sins: the confessor probes the lover's conscience, examines each sin under five different heads, and proceeds to a twofold analysis of each sin within

the moral code and within the love code respectively. In each case separate stories are told to illustrate moral and amatory instruction. By this means Gower fulfils his design, stated at the beginning of the prologue, to write a book which mixes pleasure with instruction ('Somewhat of lust, somewhat of lore').

Gower succeeds in presenting a lover moved by real emotion and responding to it in little acts that are unforgettable. He is delighted to be able to help his beloved on to her horse or accompany her to church. He reads the Tale of Troilus to her and recalls gazing on her slender white fingers as she busied herself with her embroidery. He delays his partings from her, returns on makeshift excuses, and always finds himself unable to utter in her presence the fine things he intended to say to her. The persisting dialogue with the lover is not without its touches of wry humour when he bemoans his ineffectiveness; but the work as a whole is too formalized to catch fire. Thirty thousand lines in octosyllabic couplets strain the reader's sensitivity for all their fluency. Nevertheless, through the stories themselves, the poet's high seriousness does acquire imaginative and emotional vigour in its expression. Not that Gower has technical subtlety in presentation; for his strength as a story-teller is not that of narrating events with notable dramatic effect. Rather he pinpoints emotions and dilemmas of the characters so as to moralize their experience humanely and wisely. The direct style is unexcitingly serviceable, but Gower's eye for detail can delight, as when he records Jason's toilet after gaining the Golden Fleece:

> And Jason was unarmed sone
> And dide as it befell to done;
> Into his bathe he went anone
> And wisshe him clene as any bone,
> He toke a soppe and out he cam
> And on his best array he nam
> And kempt his hede when he was clad . . .

The story of Medea is told under the general heading of Avarice to illustrate False Witness and Perjury. The stories of Ulysses's return and of the Wise and Foolish Virgins are told under the general heading of Sloth to illustrate the dangers of Delay. It was the lengthy story of Apollonius of Tyre (Book XVIII) from which Shakespeare drew the plot of *Pericles, Prince of Tyre.*

Outstanding among the substantial fourteenth-century poems of unknown authorship is *Sir Gawayne and the Green Knight.* A chivalrous romance written in vigorous alliterative verse, it is a carefully structured narrative, vividly conceived and sharply visualized. King Arthur and his knights are feasting at Camelot in the Christmas season: there is meat and mirth, exchanging of gifts and of salutations, blaring of trumpets and leaping of hearts. Queen Guinevere sits on a richly canopied dais, Agravayne and Gawayne on either side of her. A massive, fearsome intruder rides in, clad in green: everything about him is green, even the horse's mane and his own shoulder-length hair. Chatter and minstrelsy are hushed. The brawny warrior arrogantly challenges one of the company to take his own mighty axe and give him a blow on the neck, then to meet him a year hence and receive a return blow. This is the Beheading Test, a test of knightly courage. Sir Gawayne rises to it, decapitates the knight and buries the axe in the floor of the hall. The body gropes and picks up the severed head by the hair: its lips repeat the pledge of an appointment at the Green Chapel in a year's time: then body and head ride away. The seasons pass and the time comes for Gawayne to ride out to his appointment. He goes towards North Wales and, as Christmas approaches, he is warmly received at a castle where a lady even lovelier than Guinevere is his hostess. Here the second phase in the knight's quest for honour begins – the Chastity Test. The lord of the castle tells Gawayne that the Green Chapel is near at hand, and requests him to stay. Tomorrow the lord is to go hunting and he pledges whatever quarry falls to him as a gift to Gawayne. In return Gawyne promises to his host anything he himself wins. There follow on successive days three attempts on Gawayne's chastity by his hostess, and Gawayne is placed in a testing dilemma where the demands of courtesy and chastity seem to conflict. On the first return the host puts a deer at Gawayne's feet, on the second presents him with a boar, and on the third day brings back only a fox. On each occasion Gawayne keeps his pledge by giving kisses to the lord which he has accepted from the lady; but a green girdle, given to him on the third day to make him invulnerable, he does not hand over. The poem does not flag for a moment, in spirit or technique, throughout these events. The vitality of the outdoor hunting scenes is matched by the tensely sensuous blend of verbal and physical seductiveness to which Gawayne is submitted indoors. The interlacing of these two motifs

represents literary craftsmanship unsurpassed in the age. Moreover the blended interdependence of the beheading game and the chastity test makes a comprehensive trial of Gawayne's virtues. And the climax of the poem fulfils all expectations. Gawayne sets out to keep his tryst at the Green Chapel and rides through the desolate countryside on a wintry morning:

> Mist muged on the mor, malt on the mountes,
> Uch hille hade a hatte, a myst-hakel huge.
> Brokes byled and breke bi bonkkes aboute,
> Schyre schaterande on schores, ther they doun schowved.

The Green Knight arrives true to his word. He wounds Gawayne and then reveals himself as his host. Host and hostess have conspired to submit Gawayne to the tests. Through failing to hand over the girdle Gawayne has suffered a wound: otherwise he has come honourably through the trial. But Gawayne's pride is wounded too. In shame he flings down the girdle which has reduced him to the act of breaking his knightly compact. But the Green Knight restores it to him, for confession has put all to rights. In Gawayne's eyes his weakness has linked him with Adam, David, Samson and Solomon as men tricked by feminine guile: but his reacceptance of the girdle seems to crown the tests of courage and chastity with the due humbling of that pride which aspiration to knightly perfection builds into the chivalric code. The sign of the humbling becomes the badge of his glory on his return to Camelot, for when he has recounted his story, the knights all bind green baldricks on their own breasts.

If, as is considered likely, the author of *Sir Gawayne and the Green Knight* is also the author of the three other poems contained in the same manuscript (*Pearl, Patience* and *Purity*), then indeed he is a poet of outstanding imaginative power and technical skill. *Pearl* is an intricately constructed poem and plainly the work of a writer highly sensitive to the potentialities of words. Stanzas are linked in groups, and groups themselves related, by the forceful reiteration of keywords with subtly modulated connotative emphases. The virtuosity with which both rhyme and alliteration are exploited in twelve-line octosyllabic stanzas is closely congruous with the organized complexity of the thought and feeling conveyed. The lost pearl the poet laments is symbol of a lost daughter and perhaps of lost spiritual grace. As he mourns the young girl, he falls asleep on her grave and is

granted a vision. He sees a river bordering Paradise and on the other side Pearl herself. She is adorned with bright raiment ornamented with pearls. She comforts him, for she is now in blessedness as the bride of the Lamb. He is given a lavish glimpse of the New Jerusalem, and the city is suddenly filled with maidens all dressed and crowned like his own beloved, decked with pearls and each with a pearl at her breast. The sight of these, and of the Elders, the angels and the Lamb Himself, makes him desperate to join them:

> Delyt me drof in yye and ere;
> My manes mynde to maddyng malte;
> Quen I sey my frely, I wolde be there,
> Byyonde the water thagh ho were walte.

But he is recalled to the realization that it is not the Prince's will that he should cross, and he awakes consoled.

In *Pearl* we are near to the spirit of those contemporary contemplative writers who produced mystical treatises. It is refreshing to turn from the satire of ecclesiastical rogues in Chaucer and Langland to this evidence of a strong and persistent current of sincere spirituality within the Church. The anonymous *Cloud of Unknowing* is a specialized call to the life of the spirit. It accepts that to penetrate the cloud that separates man from God something more than intellectual understanding is required. The disciplines of the contemplative are demandingly defined; but there is a clarity and concreteness in the thinking that confirms the impression of a writer with his feet on the ground. Richard Rolle of Hampole (1295–1349, so-called because he spent the last years of his life at Hampole Priory in Yorkshire) forsook home to live as a hermit and excited eager discipleship. It is understandable that he should have done so, for the emotional and rhetorical quality of his English work (he wrote in Latin too), such as the *Meditation of the Passion*, probes the feelings disturbingly. Correspondingly his lyrical vein when describing experiences of spiritual exaltation is rich in imagery. The soul in ecstasy is 'like a burning fire or like a nightingale that delights in love, song, and melody, and faints from excess of love'[3] (*The Form of Loving*). Walter Hilton (d.1396) is a lively and clear-headed teacher whose study, *The Scale of Perfection*, traces the spiritual pilgrimage through detachment from earthly

[3] Quotations from Richard Rolle and Walter Hilton have been modernized.

interests to the true knowledge of God, a knowledge that cannot be separated from true knowledge of the self which He made. Hilton is sober and orderly in instruction, and has a gift for apt imagery. 'Sweep your soul clean with a broom of the fear of God', he writes, 'and wash it with your tears, and so you shall find your coin, Jesus.'

Perhaps the most fascinating personality in this group of mystical writers is Julian of Norwich (b.1342). She eventually lived as an anchoress in a cell at Norwich but the mystical experiences recorded in *Revelations of Divine Love* took place at an earlier date (1373) and the book is a mature reflection on these visions. There is a remarkable blend in her work of simplicity with sharpness of intellect, of imaginative sensitivity with hard-headed logicality. She records fifteen revelations, or 'Shewings', and meditates reflectively on what they mean. In this way she provides guidance not only to those seeking to practise the art of prayer and to grow in faith, but also to those grappling with the problem of evil. She is forceful when dwelling on the physical sufferings of Christ on the cross ('The skin of the flesh . . . was small-wrinkled with a tanned colour, like a dry board when it is skinned') yet inspiringly jubilant when she discerns evil as a perversion that is wholly offset by God's goodness and love:

> One time our good Lord said: 'All thing shall be well;' and another time he said: 'Thou shalt see thyself that all *manner* thing shall be well:' and in these two sayings the soul took sundry understandings. (Chapter 36)

The drama is our next consideration – a consideration which cannot be contained strictly within the compass set by our chapter heading, for the Miracle plays belong as much to the fifteenth as to the fourteenth century. They were performed by various guilds, like Glovers, Tanners, Dyers, Grocers, Shearers and Tailors, Shipwrights and Tile-thatchers, who (at least at York and Chester) presented them on wagons at strategic points of their town. Summer festivals, especially that of Corpus Christi, saw connected sequences of such performances on Old and New Testament themes. In subject the plays were essentially instructive and theological, but by treatment they were also down-to-earth, contemporary and amusing. They were the outcome of combined ecclesiastical and social developments. Dramatization of Christian teaching in the sequences of

the Church's year, and in the symbolic summary of human redemption played out in the Mass, encouraged the habit of concretely realizing the pattern of historic and individual salvation and of participating in its reactivation. The practice of emphasizing the message of Christmas, Easter and other feasts by dramatizing such events as the meeting of the women and the angel at the empty tomb created an appetite among performers and spectators that could be fully satisfied only outside the walls of the church and the limitations of the liturgy.

The genesis of the Miracle plays, then, ensured that the little dramas illustrative of biblical events should be grasped as connected together within an all-embracing drama of man's history and destiny from Creation to Doomsday. Hence the notion of a cycle of plays was a logical expression of the theology from which they ultimately derived. But social, no less than specifically religious, causes influenced the development of the cycles. Play-production involves organization and discipline, and outside the Church no doubt guilds were the only bodies which could cope with such demands. The specialization of human activities represented by the guilds fitted neatly into the requirement for diversified contributions to a single corporate endeavour. There is sometimes a touching literalness about the link between the guild and its particular contribution to the cycle. It is the 'Waterleaders and Drawers in Dye of Chester' to whom is assigned the third pageant of Noah's Flood, *The Deluge*. And indeed the peculiar blend of religious and secular, of cosmic conflict and homely comedy, is deeply engrained in the cycles.

> I, God, that all the world have wrought,
> Heaven and earth, and all of nought,
> I see my people, in deede and thought,
> Are sett fowle in sinne.[4]

It is on this solemn note of universal judgement that Deus in *The Deluge* begins his proclamation that is to bring destruction to 'all the world' except Noah and his family; but it does not prevent the 'Good Gossips' of Noah's wife from comforting themselves, as 'the Flood comes in, full fleetinge fast', with a good swig at the madeira:

[4] Miracle plays are quoted from J. Q. Adams, *Chief Pre-Shakespearean Dramas*, Harrap, 1924.

Here is a pottell of malmsey good and stronge,
It will rejoice both hart and tong.

If the Chester Waterleaders were the right men to tackle the Flood, the Tile-thatchers of York were appropriately put in charge of *The Birth of Jesus*, whose scene is set 'in a cattle-shed', while, at Chester again, the Cooks and Inn-keepers, accustomed to internal heating, were aptly entrusted with responsibility for *The Harrowing of Hell*: its scene is 'The Interior of Hell', where 'a great light begins to shine'.

In the Miracle plays, for all their lack of sophistication and polish, there is often a simple sublimity in the presentation of God and his angels; and in plays such as *The Betraying of Christ* (from the N. town cycle) the sufferings of Jesus and St Peter, St Mary Magdalen and the Virgin Mary are represented with sensitivity. On the other hand Satan and evil characters like Herod generally obtrude as roisterous exponents of slapstick. Crude fisticuffs and hearty backchat are notably indulged in the famous *Second Shepherds' Play*[5] in the Wakefield cycle, where a comic plot of contemporary life is interwoven with the presentation of the Nativity, so that farce and ritual meet and mix. For the farce is not irrelevant. It involves theft of a sheep by one, Mak, whose wife, Gill, hides it in a cradle as though it were a baby. This use of the symbolic Lamb in homely, inoffensive parody of the Nativity is noteworthy. Squabbling and horseplay dominate domestic scenes between Noah and his wife in the Wakefield *Play of Noah*. The Wakefield cycle, sometimes called the 'Towneley cycle' because the manuscript was for long preserved at Towneley Hall, Lancashire, contains individual plays strikingly developed as dramas in themselves. It is later than the Chester and York cycles and dates from the fifteenth century. Accretions to the specifically religious basis have by this time achieved a vitality of their own.

Among non-cycle plays surviving from this period is one, *The Play of the Sacrament*, in which Jews mock and misuse the host and wine of the sacrament and are rewarded by a series of crude miraculous signs. The host and the wine bleed; the sacrament sticks to Jonathas's hand, and when they nail it to a post and drag Jonathas's arm away, his hand is left behind. It will be evident that the religious material has become little more than an excuse for grotesque horseplay.

[5] The manuscript has two plays about the shepherds coming to the manger.

A more significant development is the emergence of the Morality play, in which the Bible is forsaken and a new inventiveness is applied to allegorical treatment of the human situation. The earliest Morality surviving in a complete text is *The Castle of Perseverance*, dating from about 1425. It is ambitious in conception and lavish in declamation. A diagram, giving instructions for production, sets the castle in the middle with Mankind's bed sheltering beneath it, while 'scaffolds' to east, north-east, north, west and south are respectively assigned to God, Covetousness, Belial, World (Mundus) and Flesh (Caro). World, Flesh and Devil each have their followers. World's attendants are Lust and Folly, his treasurer is Covetousness and his messenger is Backbiter. Mankind has his advisers, Good Angel and Bad Angel. There are also the Seven Virtues, keepers of the castle, and the Four Daughters of God – Mercy, Peace, Truth and Righteousness. The conflict for possession of Mankind is conducted in formal versification that is more like alternate speechifying than living dialogue; but by the very nature of the 'characterization' in types (Gluttony, Lust, Sloth, and the like), it is possible to stage the work impressively; and the excitement that may have been engendered at contemporary performances can perhaps best be gauged by noting the stage direction for Belial when the evil powers assault the castle:

> He that shall play Belial, look that he have gunpowder burning in pipes in his hands and in his ears and in his arse, when he goeth to battle.

It seems something of an anticlimax after this that the 'Virtues beat them back with roses, emblematic of Christ's passion'.

A frequently revived Morality play is *Everyman*, and it belongs to the very end of the fifteenth century. It is a play that can stand on its own literary merit and does not require of the modern reader that connivance at crudities in deference to antiquity which some early drama elicits. At the beginning God sends Death to summon Everyman to come and render account of his life in the world. Everyman turns to Fellowship, then to Kindred and Cousin, to accompany him on his journey, but all make excuses. By this time the urgency of Everyman's need is conveyed with an intensity that compels involvement, and the suspense, heightened by further appeals to Goods, has bred a mood of desperation when Everyman stumbles on Good-Deeds lying on the ground, anxious to help, but

'sore bound' by Everyman's sins, so that he cannot stir. But Knowledge, the sister of Good-Deeds, leads Everyman to Confession and, after his penance, Good-Deeds is enabled to join him. Other companions accrue – Discretion, Strength, Beauty and Five Wits – but these forsake him at the grave. Knowledge however is still with him when he finally entrusts himself into God's hands, and Good-Deeds remains to speak for him as the Angel receives him.

2 Fifteenth-century poetry and prose

Our survey of drama has taken us up to the end of the fifteenth-century, and we may now consider what else was happening in the literary field in a century which saw the most important literary event of our civilization, namely the invention of printing. It is a period of which we have a peculiarly thorough record of domestic life in the *Paston Letters*, a collection covering three generations of family life in Norfolk. The public life of the same age is perhaps coloured in our imaginations by the recollections of Shakespeare's historical plays, covering the reigns of Henry IV, Henry V, Henry VI and Richard III. But it is not a great century for English literature. In Sir Thomas Malory we have one writer of the first rank, and there is a small group of gifted poets in Scotland.

John Lydgate (?1370–1452) deserves mention too. He is one of those writers who achieve in their own day an immense reputation that posterity fails to confirm. His output was enormous. His biggest poem, *The Fall of Princes*, contains some 36,000 lines. It is three times as long as *Paradise Lost*. The work known as the *Troy-book* has over 30,000 lines. Some of his 'lesser' poems are big by normal standards, and he wrote plenty of short poems too. The *Troy-book* tells the story of the Trojan War. It contains a version of the story of Troilus and Cressida, and comparison of Lydgate's treatment with Chaucer's brings out Chaucer's insight into emotion and psychology as against Lydgate's method of submerging individual characterization under a codified sequence of moral generalities. Of course twentieth-century prejudice is weighted against appreciation of Lydgate. His idea of poetry is not our idea, but an idea rooted in the medieval philosophy of universal order. He moralizes and philosophizes the human scene into a grand organized literary fabric whose sections and sub-

sections exploit the techniques of the rhetorical rule-book as formally as they exploit the cosmic medieval view of ordered life within an ordered universe. Some who have studied Lydgate attentively, however, claim that his systematized work, in spite of its artificialities, deserves something better than to be fashionably dismissed.

A name usually associated with Lydgate's is that of John Hoccleve (?1370–?1450), like Lydgate a disciple of Chaucer. His didactic work, *The Regement of Princes* (a translation from the Latin of Aegidius Romanus) was written for Henry, Prince of Wales, the future Henry V. Hoccleve has interest as a portrayer of his times, but distinctive literary quality was beyond his reach. He does however frequently tap a vein of self-revelation, and the self revealed, though neither modest nor subtle, confronts the reader vividly, notably in *La Male Regle*.

We may well introduce the Scottish poets of the fifteenth century by looking back and incorporating at their side a poet of the previous century, John Barbour (?1316–95), for his poem, *The Bruce*, written about 1375, achieved something of the status of a national epic. It covers events during the period 1304 to 1333, mostly in the reign of Robert the Bruce, taking in the Battle of Bannockburn. Fact and legend are combined in a romantically heroic account of the deeds of King Robert and James Douglas. The work has been criticized for its shapelessness and for the unevenness of its poetic quality, but its stories have fed the popular historical mind.

Poethood embraces royalty in the person of King James I of Scotland (1394–1437). Young James fell into English hands while making his way to France at the age of about twelve. He was kept in England for nineteen years and in 1424 married Lady Jane Beaufort. His poem, *The Kingis Quair* (The King's Book), celebrates his love of Lady Jane. It tells how, as a prisoner, he sees a beautiful lady in a garden from his tower (the incident is reminiscent of Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*) and is transported to celestial realms where Venus and Minerva advise him. There is a strong didactic vein, emphasizing the fickleness of Fortune. The combination of pagan divinities with Christian sentiments (Minerva quotes Ecclesiastes and urges the lover to act as a 'Christin') is incongruous perhaps only to the very literal. There is a touching authenticity in places, notably in the final fresh account of the lover's happiness, but elsewhere perhaps James is too conscious an imitator of Chaucer and Gower, to whom he pays tribute as:

Superlative as poets laureate
In moralitee and eloquence ornate.

Robert Henryson (*c.*1430–1506) is a man about whose life little is known, but it appears that he was a schoolmaster in Dunfermline. His distinction is to have excelled in two literary forms, his *Moral Fables* and his *Testament of Cresseid.* The *Fables* (the tale of the Cock and the Hen, the tale of the Town Mouse and the Country Mouse, the tale of the Fox and the Wolf, and so on) give to the animals the kind of human characteristics that Chaucer gave to Chauntecleer and Pertelote. Hear how the town mouse declines the food offered by the country mouse:

'My fair sister' (quod scho) 'have me excusit,
'This rude dyat and I can not accord,
'To tender meit my stomok is ay usit,
'For quhylis I fair alsweill as ony lord
'Thir wydderit peis, and nuttis, or thay be bord
'Will brek my teith, and mak my wame ful sklender,
'Quhilk wes before usit to meitis tender.'

By deft touches of description and felicitously phrased dialogue Henryson enlivens the situations and relationships of the animals, and he presses home his moral in a concluding section at the end of the tale, labelled *Moralitas.* Humour and quiet irony pervade his stories, but the social and moral conscience evident in his implicit and explicit commentary is a deeply concerned one. Henryson knows intimately the world he is writing about; the animals, the people, the country, the weather: he has got the feel of them and can convey it:

The wynter come, the wickit wind gan blaw,
The woddis grene were wallowit with the weit,
Baith frith and fell with froistys were maid faw,
Slonkis and slaik maid slidderie with the sleit.

Such descriptions, like the wintry landscapes in *Sir Gawayne and the Green Knight,* are refreshingly different from the standard May scenes of medieval poetry.

The *Testament of Cresseid* is a sequel to Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* written in the same stanza form. It tells how Diomede wearies of Cresseid and leaves her. She returns to Calchas, and to his

temple, and there, on her knees, vents her anger in reproaches against Venus and Cupid. Then, in a vision, Cupid summons the seven Planets to hear of Cresseid's blasphemy, and she is condemned to suffering and incurable disease. She wakes in grief to find herself a leper. She goes to a hospital, but moans there so lamentably that she is driven out and becomes a beggar. By this point the poem is already heavy with sadness, its heroine weighed down under the burden of suffering and remorse alike; for Henryson's oppressively moralistic tone matches the intensity of his feeling: but now the agony becomes something rarely fine and dramatic, for Troilus passes by the hideous beggar: something faintly reminds him of his darling Cresseid and he gives a generous sum. When Cresseid asks who it is that was so kind, another leper identifies Troilus. Cresseid is overcome by grief and remorse: she writes a will bequeathing a ring to Troilus, and dies. The ring is taken to Troilus, who has an inscription put on her tomb. It commemorates Cresseid of Troy town, once the flower of womanhood, who died a leper. Here, as elsewhere, one admires that discipline of mind in Henryson that cherished concentration and economy.

King James, Henryson and Dunbar have been called the 'Scottish Chaucerians', and indeed each of them paid tribute to Chaucer. At the beginning of the *Testament of Cresseid* the poet is reading the poem 'writtin be worthie Chaucer glorious', and in *The Goldyn Targe* Dunbar exclaims:

> O reverend Chaucere, rose of rethoris all,
> As in oure tong ane flour imperiall.

The words remind us that fifteenth-century poets looked to Chaucer as the great master of *rhetoric*, sadly undervaluing perhaps the qualities that have appealed to later ages. William Dunbar (*c.*1460–*c.*1530) seems to have been employed in the service of King James IV as Chaucer was employed by the English court, and like Chaucer he became the recipient of a royal pension. His high connections can be measured by the fact that *The Thrissil and the Rois*, a dream-allegory in which 'fresche May' wakens the poet and calls him to a gathering of articulate birds and beasts and flowers, is concerned with the marriage of James IV to Henry VII's daughter, Margaret. *The Goldyn Targe* is a bigger essay in the same artificial form, handling classical gods and goddesses alongside 'Nature', 'dame Beautee',

'Fair Having', 'Benigne Luke' and many other comparable personifications. At the opposite extreme *The Tua Mariit Wemen and the Wedo* is an exercise in ripe realism. It is a private conversation and the poet is an eavesdropper. Its subject is married life, chiefly bed-life, and the women exchange their confidences with a frankness and crudity that contrasts harshly with their external beauty, dignity and sweetness as they appear before the world. In this sharp ironical antithesis the power of the poem resides. The two married women are revealed as comparative novices in the art of getting the maximum sexual pleasure and personal advantage from men. The widow's lurid record illustrates the paradoxical moral that, with a husband out of the way, one can give delight all round.

Dunbar's excellence is a gift for descriptive writing that intermittently throws a flash of colour before the reader such that his eyes dazzle:

> The roses yong, new spreding of thair knopis
> War powderit brycht with hevinly beriall droppis,
> Throu bemes rede birnying as ruby sperkis.
> (*The Goldyn Targe*)

He has neatness in handling well-balanced stanza forms and, at his best, a dexterous control of rhythm and a ready adaptability of technique to a variety of moods and purposes. There is not much in fifteenth-century poetry more memorable than his tribute to fellow poets now dead, *Lament for the Makaris*, with its opening epigraph 'When He Wes Sek':

> The stait of man dois change and vary
> Now sound, now seik, now blith, now sary,
> Now dansand mery, now like to dee;
> *Timor mortis conturbat me.*

With Dunbar we have moved into the sixteenth century and it is fitting to link Gavin Douglas (1475–1522) with his fellow Scottish makers. He was of high birth (son of the Earl of Angus), was educated at St Andrews, and held Church appointments while also involving himself in the political struggles of the day. His poem, *Palice of Honour*, is a dream-allegory in which various routes to honour are explored – the way of study, of statecraft, of virginity – and the way of poetry chosen. But Douglas's great achievement is his translation of

Virgil's *Aeneid* which he completed in 1513. The work is not a bare translation, for it includes passages of commentary and prologues to individual books: these sometimes have a personal flavour and discuss the task of interpretation or describe the passing season. The vigour and versatility of Douglas's version are indisputable, though it is medieval in rendering and in presuppositional outlook.

We return to England and to the mid fifteenth century to look at the work of Sir Thomas Malory (*c.*1408–71). Malory lived through the Wars of the Roses and spent some time in prison, where *Le Morte Darthur* was composed. He has been conjecturally identified with a Sir Thomas Malory whose recorded career of violence, theft and even rape seems incongruous for the exponent of chivalrous idealism, and the identification has been disputed. *Le Morte Darthur* uses stories from the vast cycles of Arthurian chronicles and works them into a single fabric, made coherent by its central concern with the conflicts which bring about the dissolution of the Round Table. Superimposed on this material is the quest for the Holy Grail, and the tragic figure of Launcelot links the two elements together, for it is his adulterous relationship with Queen Guenever that unfits him for the sacred quest; and his unsullied son Galahad finally achieves it.

Heroic tales of Arthur appear in the twelfth-century *History of the Kings of Britain* by Geoffrey of Monmouth, who ended his life as Bishop of St Asaph. One of the 'books' of the history is concerned with the 'Prophecies of Merlin', another with the reign of Arthur's father, Uther Pendragon, and two others provide a substantial record of the exploits of Arthur, already a highly romantic figure. In the same century Wace of Jersey used the Arthurian legends in his *Roman de Brut*, and soon afterwards (about the turn of the century) appeared Layamon's *Brut*, a verse history of England connecting the British kingdom with the ancient world by linking the first legendary British king Brut with Aeneas. The poem takes in the reigns of King Lear and Cymbeline. Arthur is the great national figure, and the crucial story of his passing is included. There was some indebtedness by Malory to a fourteenth-century poem in alliterative verse, *Morte Arthure*, whose material resembles what was to be found in Geoffrey of Monmouth and Layamon; but Malory also followed French sources closely.

It can be argued that *Le Morte Darthur* is rather a collection of tales than a single integrated work. The early books, dealing with Arthur's

first battles, his marriage, his establishment of the Round Table, and the extension of his conquests into Italy, are interwoven with fully developed tales like that of Balin and Balan (brothers who fight to the death and learn one another's identity only when the fatal wounds have been dealt) and that of Sir Gareth. The saga of Tristram and Isoud then intrudes at length upon the developing story of Sir Launcelot and Guenever. It is only perhaps in the last books that the sense of an integrated artistic whole is conveyed. The culminating events of Malory's chronicle put an end to a great venture in fellowship sustained by many individuals of unquestioning loyalty, unselfish courage and high idealism. The tragic irony of the conclusion inevitably carries a fatalistic flavour. The larger moral issue, involving the gradual growth of mistrust and jealous disloyalty, and the persisting infidelity of Guenever, asserts itself notably in those passages where the central story of Arthur and Launcelot is worked out, and it overshadows the ending. The unity sensed retrospectively by the reader at the end is less apparent as one moves through the maze of adventures in which the various knights pursue their heroic quests, dealing death to dragons and giants, encountering deception, magic and sorcery, their days punctuated by wayside fights to the death, their years by feasts and tournaments.

Malory's fusion of the Holy Grail story with the Arthurian material creates difficulties, for it introduces the Christian ethic in such a way as to disturb the moral consistency of the whole. Chivalric idealism had its Christian basis in the knights' pledge to defend the weak, suppress the wicked, and honour God in noble acts. Courtly Love, in so far as it exalted fidelity and unselfish service, was in tune with Christian idealism, but the cult of adultery was not. Malory spells out the Christian ethic of the Grail episode, exalting virginity. As a result there is an uncomfortable clash with the Courtly Love code implicit in other parts of the book. The devotion of Launcelot and Tristram to their loves is the source and inspiration of their heroic deeds: it is disquieting to see this devotion dragged through the mire by the high hand of chastity. Our eyes are forcibly opened to the discrepancy between Camelot and Carbonek over this issue.

Perhaps such discrepancies were unavoidable unless the tales were to be told on a level of shallow narrative interest alone. Malory's instinct and artistry gave to his treatment of the cycle the kind of depth that raises awkward moral questions: but the depth, and the

unity it seeks to establish, make the book memorable. By making Arthur the centre of things and his court the locus for annual review of achievements, Malory gave a thread of connection to all the adventures. The early deeds of valour, however disconnected outwardly, tend to the glorification of Arthur's ideals and the rise of his kingdom. Thus a narrative rhythm emerges. The rot sets in; the knights begin to be jealous and critical of each other, and after triumphs of worldly pageantry and of spiritual exaltation before the Holy Grail, there is a collapse. Intrigue and counter-intrigue tear the fabric of chivalrous achievement to tatters. Old loyalties are forgotten. Ultimately it is not so much Launcelot's love that causes the disintegration as the evil-minded spite of those who reveal it to the king and use it as a cloak for their designs:

> Ah, Agravaine, Agravaine, said the king, Jesu forgive it thy soul, for thine evil will that thou and thy brother Sir Mordred hadst unto Sir Launcelot hath caused all this sorrow.

During the decades when the 'Scottish Chaucerians' were at work there was only one poet in the south to break through the mediocrity of what was a dull period for English poetry, and that was John Skelton (*c.*1460–1529). Skelton won a 'laureateship' at both Oxford and Cambridge, and became tutor to Prince Henry, later Henry VIII. He took holy orders and was rector of Diss, Norfolk, for about ten years, and then returned to court where he acquired the title of *Orator Regius* in about 1512. (*The Bouge of Court* is a dream-allegory satirizing the life of the court.) As parish priest of Diss, Skelton earned some notoriety. He kept a mistress by whom he had a child, and complaints were made to the bishop. It is said that he responded by showing the naked baby to his congregation from the pulpit and protesting: 'If I had . . . broughte forthe thys chylde without arms or legges, or that it was deformed . . . I wolde never have blamed you to have complayned to the bishop of me; but to complayne without a cause, I say . . . you be, and have be, & wyll and shall be knaves . . .'[1]

Here speaks the extraordinary character who invented 'Skeltonics', if *invented* is the right term to apply to the devising of a formless form in which rhythmically anarchic short lines are spilt down the page so indiscriminately that rhyme seems to provide the sole

[1] The story is told in *Merye Tales of Skelton* (1567).

discipline. *Philip Sparow* probably displays this style at its best. It is a mock-heroic elegy, in part a burlesque requiem, for the deceased pet bird of a young lady, Jane Scrope. Skelton's persistent hammering and jingle are perhaps not out of place in this playful if tediously protracted burst of gentle mockery. And perhaps the battering of crude, tumbling jingles is not unsuited to its purpose in *The Tunning of Elinor Rumming.* It describes the keeper of an alehouse, a dirty woman with a dirty female clientele who pay for their drinks either by notching up credit or by depositing goods.

> Some brought their clipping shears,
> Some brought this and that,
> Some brought I wot n'ere what;
> Some brought their husband's hat . . .

It is a rollicking, disorderly scene, full of quarrelling and drunkenness, spattered with bad language, bad smells, and obscenities:

> Maude Ruggy thither skipped:
> She was ugly hipped,
> And ugly thick lipped,
> Like an onion sided,
> Like tan leather hided . . .

There is a more serious purpose in the two satires, *Colyn Clout* and *Why Come Ye not to Court?* The defiant battery of invective hurled at corruption in high places shows Skelton to be a master of vituperation. It is not difficult to understand how he earned Wolsey's hostility and was at some risk as a result. Indeed the elaborate play, *Magnificence*, is a Morality converted into a means of satirizing the powers that be. But neither this nor the stiltedly formalized *Garden of Laurel* is readily palatable except to the antiquarian. *Speke Parot* is unintelligible. It has been compared to *The Waste Land* because of the tangle of contemporary references its cryptic form conceals.

Many English ballads have come down to us in a form that dates from the fifteenth century. Oral transmission has left questions of authorship wrapped in mystery. It also accounts for the simple memorability of the stanzaic patterns and for the existence of the same 'poem' in different versions. Ballads have to be accepted on their own terms. By its very simplicity the form easily lapses into doggerel. Yet the impersonal presentation of a story, uncluttered by

reflection and bare of psychological elaboration, can make a telling emotional impact. The better ballads contain beauty and pathos peculiar to the genre. In *Lord Thomas and Fair Annie* this is Annie's response when her lover asks her to receive the wife he is determined to take:

> 'But how can I gang maiden-like
> When maiden I am nane?
> Have I not born seven sons to thee,
> And am with child again?'

Sometimes highly dramatic use of the simplest devices of repetition and alliteration may create a pulsing sense of dash and urgency at a moment of crisis. Just so, in *Lady Maisry*, Lord William learns that Lady Maisry, his mistress, is being tortured for her love:

> 'O saddle me the black, the black,
> O saddle me the brown;
> O saddle me the swiftest steed
> That ever rade frae a town.'

Often a momentous scene of crucial action may be condensed into a few short lines that do their work obliquely and make a curiously concentrated impact. In *A Gest of Robyn Hode* the knight returns home to his wife after having been helped at the last moment to pay his debt to the Abbot of St Mary's, York. His lands are thereby saved from confiscation:

> 'Welcome, my lorde' sayd his lady:
> 'Syr, lost is all your good?'
> 'Be mery, dame' sayd the knyght
> 'And pray for Robin Hode.'

The oblique revelation can serve a tragic purpose too. The dying bride in *The Cruel Brother* brings the murder to light only as she is pressed with questions about her will:

> 'What will you leave to your brother John?'
> 'The gallows-tree to hang him on.'

The technique is a by-product of eschewing step-by-step narration. The ballads tend to focus attention lingeringly on moments of crisis without explicitly filling out connecting events. There is no accu-

mulation of detail, but a deft selectivity and a weighted use of things basic to life's turning-points, happy and tragic; cradles, bride-beds, shrouds, graves and gallows-trees. The intimate emotional intensity of short ballads of personal distress, like *Fair Margaret and Sweet William*, complements the obvious thrust and excitement of longer narrative ballads that celebrate deeds of courage. Battles on the Scottish border, like the doings in Sherwood Forest, provided a lively impetus to balladry, which did not quickly die. Percy, the Earl of Northumberland, goes hunting in the borderland with 'fifteen hundred bowmen bold' in *Chevy Chase* and is confronted by Earl Douglas with a muster of 'twenty hundred Scottish speres'. The ensuing slaughter involves the deaths of both Percy and Douglas, and many bold and bloody deeds are vigorously enacted;

> For Withrington needs must I wayle
> As one in dolefull dumpes,
> For when his leggs were smitten of
> He fought upon his stumpes.[2]

Alongside the anonymous ballad there flourished the largely anonymous lyric. Of the lyrics that have survived many date from the fourteenth century, but most from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The subjects are as various as no doubt their authorship was. Many of the religious lyrics are songs to the Virgin Mary or to Christ, to the Cross or to the Sacrament. One of the loveliest, 'I sing of a maiden / That is makeles' presents the Incarnation in imagery as rich and as simple as the movements of nature's own life:

> He cam also stille
> Ther his moder was,
> As dew in Aprille
> That falleth on the grass.[3]

That the lyrical tradition did not lack exploration of verbal ambiguity as well as of imaginative natural correspondence is plain from a surviving thirteenth-century verse to Mary:

[2] Ballads are quoted from F. J. Childs (ed.), *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, Harrap, 1904.

[3] Lyrics are quoted from R. T. Davies (ed.), *Mediaeval English Lyrics*, Faber & Faber, 1963.

Now goth sonne under wod:
Me reweth, Marye, thy faire rode.
Now goth sonne under Tre:
Me reweth, Marye, thy sone and thee.

There are secular lyrics in praise of the natural world, of ale, of flowers and of women ('A woman is a worthy wight: / She serveth a man both daye and night'). There are sober reflections on death, and saddened outbursts against the female sex. But perhaps the most touching of all are those in which the religious and the secular meet and mix, sometimes joyfully, and sometimes wryly, as in the girl's outcry about Jankin who sings and serves so impressively at Mass:

Jankin at the Agnus
Bereth the pax-brede:
He twinkled but said nowt,
And on my fot he trede,
Kyrieleyson.
Benedicamus Domino
Christ from shame me shilde:
Deo gracias therto –
Alas! I go with childe,
Kyrieleyson.

3 The early sixteenth century

No literary personality of the early sixteenth century stands out more impressively than Sir Thomas More (1478–1535). He wrote his best-known book, *Utopia*, in Latin, but it was translated into English in 1551. Interpretation of the book has led to controversy. It cannot be treated as a straightforward representation of an imaginary perfect state. C. S. Lewis has observed that 'if it were intended as a serious treatise it would be very confused indeed.'[1] Lewis regards it as the playful product of intellectual high spirits, closer to satires like *Gulliver's Travels* than to serious philosophical works like Plato's *Republic*. For More's imaginary state is sustained by slave labour, there is no private property, there is tedious uniformity of dress, attachment to home and to family is decried, euthanasia is recommended, divorce is by mutual consent, gold and silver are used to make chamber pots. These practices do not represent the values that More stood for. William Roper (1496–1578), his son-in-law and devoted disciple, left a delightful picture of More in his *Life of Sir Thomas More*. More emerges in it as a man eminently able to enjoy life yet profoundly aware of its transitoriness, a man whose joy was in simple things like love of his family and the pleasures of reading, yet who long sensed the inevitability of an ultimate clash between service to Henry and his religious faith. The picture reinforces Erasmus's exclamation: 'What did nature ever create milder, sweeter or happier than the character of Thomas More?'[2]

More's *Life of Richard III* is a knowledgeable historical study which

[1] C. S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*, Clarendon Press, 1954.
[2] Letter to Robert Fisher, 5 December 1499, quoted in J. Huizinga, *Erasmus of Rotterdam*, Phaidon, 1952.

has real dramatic power, both grave and comic, and it provided the source for Shakespeare's tragedy; but otherwise More's direct claim to be a contributor to English literature must depend on the controversial religious works he wrote in refutation of the opponents of orthodoxy, and for the most part they appeal only to the historian. But the *Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation*, which he wrote in prison while awaiting execution for refusal to take the oath of supremacy to the king, is a moving and sensitive work. More unblinkingly faces what is before him while keeping a clear head and making every effort to be cheerful. Though he points patiently to the blessings of earthly tribulation, the Devil's power against the suffering Christian is fully reckoned with. The persistent humour and merriment are awesomely real, and the inevitable urgency is undergirded by a deep assurance and inner peace.

One of More's opponents in religious controversy was the Reformer, William Tyndale (?1494–1536). Like More's, his polemical works are of theological and historical rather than of literary significance, but his insistence on scriptural authority made him anxious to have a translation of the Bible. When the Bishop of London opposed his plan, he went to Germany and in 1526 his translation of the New Testament was issued at Worms, to be followed by the Pentateuch in 1530 and Jonah in 1531. Later revisions followed. Tyndale was indebted to Erasmus's Latin version of the New Testament and to Luther's German version, but he worked directly from the Greek and the Hebrew. There is a vigour and homeliness about his style which helped to determine the character of the Authorized Version. Some unforgettable words and phrases are his own inventions, such as 'passover', 'long-suffering', 'scapegoat', 'the Lord's anointed', 'flowing with milk and honey' and 'filthy lucre'.

Tyndale's work was taken up by Miles Coverdale (1488–1568), who published the first complete English Bible in 1535. Coverdale was not a linguistic scholar comparable to Tyndale: his version incorporated Tyndale's work and was otherwise indebted to the Vulgate, to Luther and to other sources. The revision of this version which he made at Thomas Cromwell's request was known as 'The Great Bible' (1539). Coverdale's importance is that he had a sensitive ear for English prose rhythm and a gift for felicitous phrasing, not always reliably grounded in scholarship, but contributing to the rich

quality of the English Bible nevertheless. The expressions 'tender mercies' and 'loving kindness' are his. So too are the haunting phrases, 'His leaf also shall not wither' and 'my beauty is gone for very trouble'. It was the Great Bible which was revised under the direction of Archbishop Parker in 1568 and called the 'Bishops' Bible', and on this text the Authorized Version (1611) was to be based.

The one book of comparable significance in English literary history to that of the Bible is the Book of Common Prayer. Thomas Cranmer (1489–1556) was in charge of the preparation of the Prayer Book of 1549 (in the reign of Edward VI) on which the Prayer Book of 1662 was based. What cannot be ascertained with confidence is the extent of Cranmer's personal contribution to the production of the text. His own original literary work in the field of theological controversy is not inspiring. Yet the achievement of the Book of Common Prayer in matching the Latin liturgy with an English rendering that has solemnity, beauty and sublimity, and yet is fresh and sinewy in its Englishness, is a remarkable one. The clarity of the English liturgy, its rhythmic vitality, its sonority and its rich compactness, have left their mark on our literature.

There are two prose writers of the period whose work was done in the educational field, Elyot and Ascham. Sir Thomas Elyot (*c.*1490–1546) published *The Boke Named the Governour* in 1531, and in the 'Proheme' dedicated it to Henry VIII as a work that 'treateth of the education of them that hereafter may be demed worthy to be governours of the publike weale'. The influence of the classics is evident; the philosophical and social emphasis on order is important: it was a book that Shakespeare evidently knew well, and the symbolization of order in the passage on 'The Good Order of Dancing' has left its imprint on the work of T. S. Eliot (*Four Quartets*). Roger Ascham (1515–?68), another humanist scholar, held a readership in Greek at Cambridge, and became tutor to Princess Elizabeth, the future queen, in her teens. Ascham managed to be a Protestant and Latin Secretary to Queen Mary at the same time, an indication perhaps of the charm of manner of which his contemporaries speak, though Camden observes that he was 'too much given to dicing and cockfighting'.[3] His book, *Toxophilus* (1545), is in praise of

[3] Quoted by C. S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*, Clarendon, 1954.

archery and in particular a defence of the English long-bow. It is written in the form of a dialogue and deals delightfully with the activities that might compete with Ascham's devotion to the bow – music, gaming and the up-and-coming gun. But Ascham's best-known work, *The Schoolmaster*, on the education of boys, was not published until after his death, in 1570. In its attitude to the young it is a practical and sensitive book; but Ascham's humanist bias plays havoc with his literary judgement in some instances. He objects that the whole pleasure of Malory's *Morte Darthur* 'standeth in two special points, in open manslaughter and bold bawdery'. 'Those be counted the noblest knights', he complains, 'that do kill most men without any quarrel, and commit foulest adulteries by subtlest shifts.'

We turn to the poetry of the age, and that means chiefly to the work of Wyatt and Surrey, poets who had been dead ten years or more when their poems were first published in *Tottel's Miscellany* in 1557. This collection is regarded as the prologue to the great burst of lyrical productivity that came in the reign of Elizabeth. Sir Thomas Wyatt (?1503–42) rose through a number of court appointments and took part in a diplomatic mission to Paris in 1526. In the same year an unhappy early marriage broke down. Later he was High Marshal of Calais, but came back to England in 1532. He was imprisoned for a short time on three occasions, but each time he was quickly restored to favour. He died of pneumonia in 1542. An urgent ride through bad weather to Falmouth, on diplomatic business, was the cause. Wyatt's relationship with Ann Boleyn, its possible connection with his second imprisonment (it came as she was arrested), and its more likely connection with some of his lyrics, has been the subject of much conjecture. If we compare his poems with the anonymous lyrics of the previous century we recognize a new sophistication of form and substance. The cultivated yet none the less authentic contrivances are presented sometimes with a swinging metrical regularity which reminds us that Wyatt often wrote his verses to be sung:

> My lute awake, perform the last
> Labour that thou and I shall waste;
> And end that I have now begonne:
> And when this song is sung and past:
> My lute be styll for I have done.

Wyatt has been compared to Donne for his capacity to pack a lyric

with dramatic power. The initial impact of 'To his unkind love' has Donne's thrust:

> What rage is this? what furor? of what kinde?
> What power, what plage doth wery thus my minde . . .

And there is similar emotional force in the complaint of the forsaken lover:

> They flee from me, that sometime did me seek
> With naked foot stalking within my chamber.

At his best Wyatt has an intensity of feeling, an unaffectedness of phrase, and a directness of tone which, contained within a pressurized rhythmic pattern, sweep the reader into intimate involvement with him. One is carried on the tide. But it must be admitted that he is often not at his best. Moreover he is always complaining, as a disappointed, ill-treated lover. The melancholy is all-pervasive. Successive titles read like a record of misery: 'The lover forsaketh his unkind love' . . . 'describeth his restless state' . . . 'laments the death of his love' . . . 'blameth his love' . . . 'curseth the time when he first fell in love' . . . When Wyatt does turn aside from his own miseries to be objective, the result is scarcely more cheerful: 'Of the mother that eat her child at the siege of Jerusalem'.

Of course the suffering lover is a conventionalized figure in the poetry of the period, and perhaps it is wrong to criticize Wyatt for realizing the role with such intimate authenticity that we seem to be in touch with an unhappy man. Such convincing intensity is lacking in the work of Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey (1517–47) who is to some extent Wyatt's disciple, though more decisively under the influence of the classics. He translated Books II and IV of Virgil's *Aeneid* in unrhymed iambic pentameters, to earn for himself the reputation of having invented blank verse. In his best lyrics he has a smoothness and polish that compare favourably with Wyatt's:

> O happy dames, that may embrace
> The fruit of your delight,
> Help to bewail the woeful case
> And eke the heavy plight
> Of me, that wonted to rejoice
> The fortune of my pleasant choice:
> Good ladies help to fill my mourning voice.

And there is a well-known sonnet on spring ('The soote season, that bud and bloom forth brings') that is vigorously fresh and observant, a model of compactness and control. Along with Surrey, other named poets represented in *Tottel's Miscellany* are Thomas Churchyard (*c.*1520–1604), Lord Vaux (1510–56) and Nicholas Grimald (1519–62).

The drama of this period is important, not for its intrinsic quality, but for its significance in linking the age of the Miracles and the Moralities with the magnificent outburst of dramatic literature in the Elizabethan Age. We take up the story of its development with an account of the Interludes, dramatic entertainments for a small cast, that were performed indoors at court and in colleges. They represent a movement away from the stylized allegory of the Moralities, for though some had a strong didactic element, others were lively farces, briefly working out a single situation or anecdotal argument in down-to-earth dialogue. John Heywood (?1497–?1580), husband of Sir Thomas More's niece and a skilled singer and virginalist, became a favoured courtier under both Henry VIII and Queen Mary. His play, *The Four P*'s, dating from about 1522, is a lively specimen of the Interlude form. A Palmer, a Pardoner, and a 'Pothecary meet and excitedly dispute in defence of their respective callings. A Pedlar joins them and arranges a competition for the maximum achievement in lying. The discussion is earthy and frank. The ability of the contestants to lie, and the rabelaisian flavour of the inventiveness, may be illustrated by the 'Pothecary's story of how he cured a woman by plugging her up behind with a tampion, which was fired so explosively that it was propelled ten miles across country and demolished a castle. But it is the Palmer who wins the prize for the biggest whopper of all: he has never in all his life seen a woman 'out of patience'.

The brief Interlude, *A Mery Play between Johan Johan, the Husband, Tyb his Wife, and Sir Johan the Priest* (in print by 1533), is generally attributed to Heywood. There are only three characters; terrified, hen-pecked husband, shrewish wife and parish priest. The slapstick in this domestic triangle is hearty, the irony knocked home with a sledge-hammer. The husband is a bully, full of talk about wife-beating, until his wife actually appears: then he is the poor cuckold who is kept busy at the chores while Tyb and the priest feast on a pie. The use of asides enlivens the situation:

JOHAN (*aside*):
If that parish priest, Sir John
Did not see her now and then
And give her absolution upon a bed
For woe and pain she would soon be dead.

The priest is a smooth, amusing rogue. The sore-tried husband rebels at the end, takes up a shovel of coal and drives wife and priest out of the house.

The more respectable vein in Heywood's work can be seen in *The Play of the Weather* (also published in 1533), which opens with Jupiter speaking from his throne (as earlier plays began with a speech from God). Jupiter proclaims his intention to conduct an opinion poll about reforming the weather. Mery-report is the pollster who interviews various people with their conflicting requirements – a Merchant, a Ranger, a Water-Miller, a Wind-Miller, a Launder and so on. Jupiter finally earns the gratitude of all by proclaiming a balanced mixture of weather calculated to serve the needs of each in turn.

Ralph Roister Doister is known as the first English comedy. It was written by Nicholas Udall (1505–56), headmaster of Eton for seven years but dismissed as a flogger. The work is indebted to Plautus and Terence. It is a five-act comedy in rather crude rhymed verse with a good deal of horseplay. Dame Christian Custance is a wealthy widow affianced to Gawin Goodlucke, a London merchant who is away from home. Roister Doister is a braggart and a dunderhead, but Mathew Merygreek, 'the fun-maker', encourages him to woo her. The Dame is in the plot and Ralph's attempt to take her by storm 'in martial array' is forcefully repulsed. Another comedy acted in the 1550s was *Gammer Gurton's Needle*, sometimes attributed to William Stevenson, a fellow of Christ's College, Cambridge. Gammer Gurton has been mending Hodge's breeches and has lost her needle. First the household, then the village, is thrown into confusion by the search, the false accusations, the mischievous elaborations, assaults and counter-assaults, until finally a hand is laid forcefully on Hodge's buttocks and the needle is painfully discovered. Diccon, the vagabond Bedlamite, in the role of mischief-maker, adds salt to this farce of coarse village life played out between Gammer Gurton's house and Dame Chat's ale-house. It is a display of cumulative

horse-play on a studiedly structured classical base. The rhyming couplets are crude and the idiom coarse. Listen to Hodge:

> My guts they yawl-crawl, and all my belly rumbleth,
> The puddings cannot lie still, each one over other tumbleth.

A parallel development in tragedy was marked by the acting of *Gorboduc* at the Inner Temple in 1561. Regarded as 'the first English tragedy', it was the fruit of a collaboration between Thomas Norton (1532–84), who wrote the first three acts, and Thomas Sackville, Earl of Dorset (1536–1608), who wrote the last two acts. The play is modelled on Seneca and thus matches Udall's imitation of Plautus and Terence: indeed the action takes place offstage and is then presented to the audience in narration. But there are important native influences too. The story of Gorboduc appears in Geoffrey of Monmouth. The authors of the play sum up the argument themselves:

> Gorboduc, king of Britain, divided his realm in his lifetime to his sons, Ferrex and Porrex; the sons fell to division; the younger killed the elder; the mother, that more dearly loved the elder, for revenge killed the younger; the people, moved with the cruelty of the fact, rose in rebellion and slew both father and mother . . .

Civil war and devastation follow.

The moral pattern determines the play's structure. Each development in the plot is given its appropriate moral, a moral emphasized in the dumb shows that introduce each act and in the speeches of the Chorus that round each act off. Finally the moral of the whole is summed up in six points at the end with a precision befitting the pulpit. And the general message had special contemporary political implications in drawing attention to the dangers of disputed succession at a time when Queen Elizabeth was being urged to marry. The influence of the Morality play is evident. Ferrex stands listening to the alternating advice of good and evil counsellors, Dordan and Hermon, the one urging restraint, the other inciting to strife by flattery and slander. Porrex too stands between a wise counsellor, Philander, and a parasite, Tynder. The fusion of classical form with native legendary history and features of medieval dramatic presentation is interesting, and the play's blank verse, if it lacks all variety, does not lack force or dignity.

George Gascoigne (*c.* 1530–77) adapted Ariosto's *Suppositi* as a prose comedy under the title, *Supposes*. In writing *Jocasta*, a version of the *Phoenissae* by Euripides, Gascoigne gave the English theatre its first tragedy from the Greek. (The play was translated from an Italian version.) But more significant in itself is *Cambises* (*c.* 1560) by Thomas Preston (1537–98). Half Morality play and half tragedy, it is an unpolished and ill-planned work often extravagantly written and crudely conceived. When Marian-be-good deals roughly with Ambidexter, the direction reads: '*Here let her swinge him in her brome: she gets him down, and he her down, – thus one on top of another make pastime.*' Allegorical personifications like Shame, Diligence and Execution play their part, and there are ruffians called Huf, Ruf and Snuf. The action is heavily moralistic. King Cambises, tempted by Vice, gives way to cruelty and murder. Sisamnes, the judge, also tempted by Vice, gives way to injustice. The two meet their doom. Both *Gorboduc* and *Cambises* deal with a divided kingdom, a theme which is to be important in Elizabethan tragedy. However, it is impossible to take the bombast of *Cambises* seriously. 'With velvet paps I gave thee suck', laments the mother of a brutally murdered child, and 'Oh, oh! my hart, my hart! O, my bum will break', cries Ambidexter at the end. We can understand Falstaff's mockery in *1 Henry IV*, 2, iv: 'I must speak in passion, and I will do it in King Cambyses' vein.'

4 Elizabethan drama (Shakespeare and his predecessors)

The English literature of the Elizabethan and Jacobean Ages is one of the great phenomena of European culture. The period was one of immense and concentrated literary activity. Nor did the activity end with the death of James I, convenient as that may be as a dividing line, for the work of the Cavalier poets as well as *Paradise Lost* was to follow. If we consider what was written in English between the birth of Spenser in 1552 and the death of Milton in 1674 we find ourselves confronted by a great concourse of major and minor writers of astonishing variety. It is necessary to pick one's way through the mass of material with guide lines that are rough and ready. Even the convenient distinction between drama and poetry is imprecise. A very large proportion of the drama was in verse. The great dramatists were poets.

There was a group of young writers at the beginning of this period who have come to be known as the 'University Wits' because, after studying at Oxford or Cambridge, they moved to London to take up writing professionally. Greene, Lyly, Nashe, Lodge and Peele, as well as Marlowe, are classed among them. They represent an interesting cultural development in their attempt to put the fruits of their education before the public and to professionalize their enthusiasm for literature and ideas. They worked as prose-writers and poets as well as for the theatre, and so in some cases their names will recur later in our study. The blend of university culture and gentlemanly sophistication which some of them brought to bear on the popular theatre is significant, while Greene and Nashe may be credited with the achievement of marrying university culture and popular tradition.

John Lyly (*c.* 1554–1606) wrote prose fiction (*Euphues*)[1] as well as plays. His prose comedy, *Campaspe*, was performed publicly in Blackfriars Hall in 1583, then before the queen at court on New Year's Day, 1584. The choirboys of St Paul's were the performers. The story comes from Pliny. Alexander the Great has a Theban beauty, Campaspe, among his prisoners: he frees her and orders Apelles to paint her portrait. Painter and sitter fall in love, and Apelles delays completion of the portrait by spoiling it intentionally, so as to go on seeing her. Alexander sees through the ruse, but nobly surrenders Campaspe to the artist. The play is far from being an exercise in 'euphuism'. There *is* mannered prose, of course. 'I cannot tell, Alexander,' says Hephestion, 'whether the report be more shameful to be heard or the cause sorrowful to be believed.' But there is also brisk exchange of concise dialogue, notably between Alexander and the philosopher, Diogenes, who sits on stage in his tub:

ALEXANDER: What dost thou want?
DIOGENES: Nothing that you have.
ALEXANDER: I have the world at command.
DIOGENES: And I in contempt.
ALEXANDER: How should I learn to be content?
DIOGENES: Unlearn to covet.

This is a far cry from the crudity of *The Four P's* or the pomposity of *Cambises*.

Lyly's later plays, *Midas* (1592) and *Endimion* (1591), are based on classical legend, the former on the story of the king who was granted his wish that everything he touched should turn to gold – and had to beg release from the boon when he found that even the food he tried to eat became gold –, the latter on the story of Endimion's passion for the moon, Cynthia, a story which was later to be told by Keats. In both plays Lyly allegorizes the material shrewdly so as to point to contemporary affairs. Midas is a satirical study of Philip of Spain and his covetous imperialism. The king is touched with bitter remorse for his lust for gold, and there are echoes of the destruction of the Armada in his outburst:

I have written my laws in blood, and made my gods of gold. Have

[1] For *Euphues* and 'euphuism' see chapter 8.