THE SECRET LIBRARY

A Book-Lovers' Journey
Through Curiosities of History

OLIVER TEARLE

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INTRODUCTION

When asked once what book he'd like to have with him on a desert island, G. K. Chesterton replied: '*Thomas's Guide to Practical Shipbuilding.*' Such a witty retort probably raised smiles but meant he never got invited back onto *Desert Island Discs.* Yet Chesterton's quip does remind us of the plain but often forgotten fact that 'book' needn't mean 'great work of literature' or 'novel you've always wanted to read but have never had the time or courage to take on'. A book can be of an altogether more pragmatic kind, yet its importance to the history of Western society might be extensive.

Take Euclid's *Elements*, a classical textbook written over two thousand years ago. Few bookworms probably take Euclid to bed with them after a long day at work, but the influence of the *Elements* is immeasurable (somewhat ironically, given its subject). Similarly, few readers probably sink into a hot bath with Dr Johnson's *Dictionary* of an evening, but every dictionary written since, from *Webster's* in America to the astounding achievement that is the *Oxford English Dictionary*, owes some sort of debt to it. Such books reflect the age that produced them but have also helped to shape the course of cultural and intellectual development ever since. That is what this book is about.

Indeed, *The Secret Library* sets out to explore, and to attempt answers to, some of the book-related questions I've been curious about for a while. Some of them are questions I've already attempted to answer on my blog, *Interesting Literature: A Library of Literary Interestingness*. But most of them, especially those involving non-literary texts, are new to this book. What *did* Euclid do that was so groundbreaking and important? Has science fiction ever accurately predicted the future? Who wrote the first cookbook? Were the Victorians really a bunch of prudes – and were their novels truly shy around the trouser area?

The Secret Library tries to find answers to these and other questions. It has two related aims: to bring to light the lesser-known aspects of well-known books, and to show how obscure and little-known books have surprising links with the familiar world around us. It seeks strangeness within the familiar, and familiarity within what is otherwise strange. In

short, it attempts to bring to light some hidden facts about both the best-known and the least-known books ever written, typed, inscribed, dictated or, indeed, fabricated.

Dig a bit deeper into the world of books, and you find all sorts of untold stories. Everyone's heard of the classical Greek poet Homer, but what about the writers who parodied him? Edgar Allan Poe's short stories are justly celebrated, but few know the rather surprising book – indeed, the *only* one of his books – that sold well in his own lifetime. We all know that Shakespeare wrote a play called *Hamlet*, but he wasn't the first playwright to do so. It is with such overlooked books, which have slipped behind the back of the library shelves and become largely forgotten, that this book is particularly concerned. But sometimes a well-thumbed tome comes under the spotlight too: I wouldn't claim that Dante's *Divine Comedy* was an obscure book, but how many people have actually read it? Consequently, its more, er, *flatulent* moments are one of medieval literature's best-kept secrets.

The Secret Library is not intended as a list of the ninety-nine most influential books ever written or a compilation of 'ninety-nine books everyone should read' – not least because several of the books I discuss haven't survived into the modern age, and one of them probably never even existed in the first place. (All will be explained in due course.) Instead, it's a medley of curiosities, a whistle-stop tour around an imaginary library stuffed full of titles both familiar and forgotten. Each of the books I discuss tells us something about the age that produced it. And, collectively, they provide some intriguing answers to the questions I just mentioned.

This book is organized into nine chapters, roughly covering the major historical and cultural periods from antiquity to the present day: the ancient world, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and so on. After the mid-seventeenth century everything became a bit more interesting and complicated, not least because a new land known as America began to publish books at this time. I tell the history of America's bookish development over the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in a separate chapter; the same goes for similar developments on the Continent. Everyone regroups for the final chapter, which takes the twentieth-century age of Western modernity as its focus.

One final thing before we embark on our library tour. In each of the nine chapters, every single entry is linked to the previous one in some way. Sometimes the connections between two books will be obvious; sometimes they will take a bit longer to discern. But they are there. I hope you enjoy looking for them as much as I did.

Oliver Tearle

THE CLASSICAL WORLD

The legacy of the classical world is all around us: democracy, theatre, lyric poetry, the Olympics and a fair bit of philosophy and architecture have their roots in ancient Greece. But on a smaller level, too, we inhabit a world created by our classical forebears. Take the language we use, such as the Latin phrases still in common use: *carpe diem* ('seize the day', from the poet Horace) or *in vino veritas* ('in wine there is truth', from Pliny the Elder). In England, most people carry a piece of *The Aeneid* about with them every day: the line *decus et tutamen* ('an ornament and a safeguard'), taken from Virgil's poem, is inscribed around the edges of pound coins. American money, too, bears a Latin phrase: *E pluribus unum* ('out of the many, one') dates back to another text that has been attributed to Virgil. (Pleasingly, it's a pesto recipe.)

This all the more impressive since many works of classical literature, philosophy, science and mathematics haven't survived. Just imagine if some of the classical works that didn't make it into the modern age were still with us. Think what riches we would possess if we had all one hundred or so of Sophocles' plays, rather than the mere seven that have been preserved. Nobody can study Aristotle's theory of comedy, the second part of his book the *Poetics*, on a university literature course, for the simple reason that no copy of the work has survived.

Given that books are the bread and butter of the book you now hold, it seems fitting to begin with the ancient world, since it was there that the book itself was effectively invented. The oldest book comprising multiple pages (that is, not simply a big scroll) is often said to be the Etruscan Gold Book, which was produced around 2,500 years ago. It comprises six large sheets of 24-carat gold which have been bound together with rings, thus forming a unified object that might be labelled a 'book'. It was only discovered in the mid-twentieth century; unfortunately, as it was written in the Etruscan language, which we know very little about, deciphering it proved tricky, to say the least. To this day, we have no idea what it says.

Fortunately, there are many works of poetry, drama, fiction, science and philosophy that we *can* decipher and read. So, rather than scratching

our heads over the impenetrable oddities of Etruscan script, let's have a look at some of those.

✦ Homer's Epic ✦

We know Homer for two epic poems: the *Iliad*, about the Trojan War, and the *Odyssey*, about what Odysseus did on his way home to Ithaca. The *Iliad* is the first great work of Western literature, probably composed in around the eighth century BCE. It recounts the ten-year Trojan War between Troy and a number of Greek states, with a particular focus on the final moments of the conflict. It features everything from fearsome Amazons (warrior women whom Homer calls 'antianeirai', which has been translated as 'equals of men') to conquering heroes such as Agamemnon and Achilles. And that's all just things beginning with the letter A.

Who 'Homer' was remains a mystery. We're not even entirely certain when he lived, assuming that he did at all. The precise nature of the composition of the *Iliad* also remains something of a mystery: the poem probably started out as part of an oral tradition and was only written down much later, but whether Homer was the blind bard of legend remains unknown – and, after nearly three millennia, unknowable.

> The Victorian novelist Samuel Butler speculated that Homer was a woman; others have argued that the *Iliad* was the work of many hands.

The stories in the *Iliad* have found their way into numerous aspects of our daily lives. The story of the Greeks cunningly entering their enemies' city disguised in a big wooden horse inspired the *Trojan horse* (in computing, a piece of malware that infiltrates your computer by disguising itself as something benign). The character of Hector gave us the verb *to hector*, meaning to harass or bully someone. And if we wish to draw attention to the one weakness of an otherwise seemingly invincible person we still refer to their *Achilles' heel*, after the one weak portion of that Greek hero's anatomy. (Curiously, though, Homer makes no mention of this story, which appears to have been a later invention. Indeed, in the *Iliad* Achilles is not exactly invulnerable: at one point, a spear hits him in the elbow and draws blood.)

The one thing everyone thinks they know about the *Iliad* isn't quite true: namely, that it tells of the war between the Trojans and the Greeks. As Richard Jenkyns points out in his book *Classical Literature*, they didn't consider themselves 'Greek', which was a later appellation used by the Romans. They called themselves Hellenes, but even this is

inaccurate in relation to the *Iliad*, where Homer calls them Achaeans, Argives or Danaans – but never Greeks or Hellenes. What's more, while the Trojan War lasted for ten years, Homer's *Iliad* covers only a few weeks in the final stage of the war – and twenty-two of the twenty-four books which make up the poem cover the events of just a few days.

In classical times 'Homer' was named as the author of several other works besides the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, among them a comic poem called *Margites*, after its monumentally silly protagonist. Margites is mad, pedantic, vain, and above all, stupid – so stupid that he doesn't know which of his parents gave birth to him. Although most of the poem has not survived, we know that it enjoyed considerable popularity during classical times. A philosopher named Philodemus uses the phrase 'mad as Margites' in his writings. The line attributed to many writers and thinkers since – about the fox knowing many things, but the hedgehog knowing one big thing – originates in *Margites*.

But did Homer write *Margites*? Scholars are doubtful. No less an authority than Aristotle attributed the poem to Homer in his *Poetics*, but others have taken the attribution with a pinch of salt, putting forward another Greek writer, Pigres, as a more probable claimant for the authorship. Another poem which Aristotle attributed to Homer, but which historians have since ascribed to a variety of other poets, is *Batrachomyomachia*, which translates as 'The Battle of Frogs and Mice'. It's essentially one giant spoof of Homer's *Iliad*, with the Greeks and Trojans replaced by amphibians and rodents, and the author poking fun at the heroics of the *Iliad*. Right from the start – or very near the start, anyway – Western literature was sending itself up.

In *Batrachomyomachia* the Frog King is giving the Mouse King a lift across a pond, when suddenly they spot a water-snake. In order to protect himself, the Frog King instinctively dives underwater, jettisoning the Mouse King from his back in the process. The poor Mouse King drowns, and his people (sorry, his mice) interpret the Frog King's actions as wilful murder, and vow revenge on the Frog King and his people (sorry, his frogs).

George Chapman, the Elizabethan poet, translated the *Batrachomyomachia* into English, but Keats probably wasn't thinking of the frog-and-mouse poem when he penned his sonnet 'On First Looking into Chapman's Homer'. Still, the mock-epic appears to challenge the portrayal of war in Homer's *Iliad*, which, although it also highlights the futility of war, clothes the Trojan War as a whole in grandeur and heroism. War in the *Batrachomyomachia* is nothing but a petty squabble. As well as being one of the first comic poems, it may also qualify as the first anti-war poem.

⤜ **Fabulous Aesop** ⤛

The tradition of using animals in literature was already firmly established when Pigres – or whoever was its actual author – composed the *Batrachomyomachia*. But animal stories could be used for moral instruction as well as for bathetic comic effect. The clearest example of this can be found in Aesop's *Fables*. One of his fables even begins with a frog carrying a mouse across a pond, only to drown it midway.

> According to Plato's *Phaedo*, Socrates whiled away his time in prison composing poems based on Aesop's fables.

Aesop wasn't the first person to write animal fables. Several centuries earlier, Hesiod had written one about a hawk and a nightingale, while a poet named Archilochus penned several, including one about an eagle and a vixen, and another about a fox and a monkey. But Aesop would turn the fable into a popular form. William Caxton printed the first English translation of the *Fables* in 1484, enabling such phrases as 'sour grapes' and 'to cry wolf' to enter the language – though not, as is sometimes claimed, 'a wolf in sheep's clothing'. (Although one of Aesop's *Fables* does feature a wolf who dresses as a sheep, this is actually a biblical phrase.) Other phrases gifted us by the *Fables* have been misinterpreted, or creatively reinvented at any rate: 'the lion's share', for instance, comes from one of the fables in which the lion takes *all* of the food, leaving the rest of his hunting party with no share of the spoils. Now, we use the 'lion's share' to mean simply the largest, and the bitter irony of Aesop's story is lost. Some of the lesser-known fables include 'The Mouse and the Oyster', 'The Man with Two Mistresses' and 'Washing the Ethiopian White'.

As with Homer, we can't be sure an 'Aesop' ever actually existed. If he did, it was probably in around the sixth century BCE, several centuries after Homer, if Homer himself ever existed. Aesop's *Fables* may have been the work of many hands, part of an oral tradition that gradually accumulated. Nevertheless, legends grew up around the storyteller. One commentator claimed that Aesop fought at the battle of Thermopylae in 480 BCE, but since by then he had been dead for nearly a century one can't imagine he was much help.

Indeed, if a man named Aesop did exist in the first place, he is thought to have been a disabled black slave. The idea that he was of African descent – possibly from Ethiopia – dates back some time. The presence of such animals as camels and elephants in the fables, not to mention the tale 'Washing the Ethiopian White', support this theory. The conjecture of his Ethiopian descent comes not only from the fable about the Ethiopian but also his name: according to one scholar, Maximos Planudes, Aesop (or Esop) comes from 'Ethiop'. (note: it probably doesn't.)

Whatever the derivation of his name, the theory that Aesop was a slave makes a certain amount of sense in light of his fables. A man of such a low social status in Greek society would not be able to speak his mind: if he was lucky enough to be able to read and write, he would have to write allegorically about the society he lived in. Aristotle and Herodotus both support the 'slave' hypothesis, enabling literary historians to conjecture that Aesop was a slave on the island of Samos. A popular story first told by Plutarch has Aesop meeting his end in Delphi, where he is thrown from a cliff having been found guilty of stealing, but most historians dismiss this as fiction.

If fables are stories with a moral, what are the morals of Aesop's *Fables*? The most famous is probably found in 'The Tortoise and the Hare', which advises that 'slow and steady wins the race'. But the fable invites other interpretations: its moral could also be that overconfidence leads one to waste one's talents (the hare, cocksure of his victory in the race, idiotically takes a nap halfway). Or, perhaps, a bit of both.

✧ The Poet of Lesbos ✧

Around the turn of the nineteenth into the twentieth century, a series of excavations of a rubbish dump in the city of Oxyrhynchus in Egypt, about 100 miles south of Cairo, led to the discovery of some papyrus scrolls. They contained, among other things, some fragments of *Margites,* but also a fair bit of long-lost poetry by the lyric poet Sappho. We are still fi her poetry: two more fragments came to light in 2004 and 2012.

In his *Histories,* the Greek writer Herodotus connects Sappho with Aesop via Rhodopis, the Thracian courtesan whose life became the basis for the first version of the 'Cinderella' fairy tale. (The Greek word for such women was 'hetaerae' – high-class female companions for men with cash on the hip.) According to Herodotus, whom we should probably take with a generous pinch of salt, Rhodopis and Aesop were friends (if that is quite the word), and when Rhodopis was captured by an Egyptian pharaoh, it was Sappho's brother Charaxus who freed her 'with a great sum'. So, to get from Aesop to Sappho we have to go via the original Cinderella.

Although only a small amount of her poetry has survived, Sappho has had a posthumous literary reputation that most lyric poets can only dream of. And despite the tantalizingly little we know about her life or her writing – or perhaps *because* we know so little – she has become an icon for lyric poets, and, of course, a symbol for homosexual love between women. 'The female Homer' is one of the many sobriquets for her; Plato called her 'the tenth Muse'. The Victorian poet Algernon Charles Swinburne thought her the finest poet ever, better even than Homer or Shakespeare. Not bad for someone whose work mostly

survives only as fragments.

> One scholar took the trouble to copy out one of Sappho's poems because he admired her use of vowels.

It wasn't always this way. Once there were abundant copies of Sappho's poems in circulation. But time's fell hand, along with various library fires and disapproving churchmen who didn't take kindly to the 'wanton' sexuality evident in the poems, put an end to that. By the Middle Ages, only a small portion of Sappho's poems survived. It would not be until 1904, when the Canadian poet Bliss Carman published *Sappho: One Hundred Lyrics*, that the greatest female poet of antiquity would be published in an English translation of any substantial length. And even here, a fair bit of the poetry was not the work of Sappho but of Carman himself, who took it upon himself to add lines of verse to his translations. The book was a huge success, and helped set the trend for modern poetry, especially the Imagist verse of Ezra Pound, Hilda Doolittle (herself no stranger to Sapphic love), and others.

Sappho's life has also attracted much speculation, and we know less about that than we do about her poetry. She is the reason we talk of *lesbian* relationships between women, because of the homoerotic strain in her poems and because she hailed, of course, from the Greek island of Lesbos. 'Lesbian' is a relatively modern term: the earliest known instance of the word being used to describe homosexual women is in a 1925 letter by Aldous Huxley (who later wrote *Brave New World*), with 'Lesbianism' being attested from 1870 in the diary of the dirty Victorian poet Arthur Munby. Before the late nineteenth century, 'tribade' and 'tribadism' were the usual terms (from the Greek for 'to rub'). The arrival of 'lesbianism' on the scene coincides with growing interest in the work of Sappho. Its discovery changed not only the face of twentieth-century poetry but also the way we talk about same-sex female relationships.

❖ Elementary ❖

To an architect or stonemason, a 'Lesbian rule' is a ruler made of lead that can be bent to fit the curves of a building. The phrase also has a figurative sense, referring to a principle or opinion that is not fixed but can be reshaped or revised over time. It is thanks to Aristotle that we know the Greeks had Lesbian rules. (It's sometimes good to know these things.) In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, he refers to it in relation to justice: 'Lesbian builders', he writes, use a rule made of lead, 'for the rule is

altered to suit the figure of the stone, and is not fixed, and so is a decree or decision to suit the circumstances.'

Although Aristotle wrote about mathematics as well as philosophy, probably the greatest mathematician of ancient Greece was Euclid. But which Euclid? There were, it would appear, several. Euclid of Megara was a pupil of Socrates who founded a school of philosophy; this Euclid was so devoted to his teacher that when Megara banned its citizens from travelling to Athens where Socrates taught, Euclid would sneak into Athens at night, dressed as a woman. None of the works of this Euclid have survived. The other Euclid, of Alexandria, is the famous one – and the one who wrote the book known as the *Elements.*

At least, it's assumed that Euclid wrote the *Elements.* The evidence is, in fact, slight. Many early copies don't mention its author. The attribution of the work to Euclid is the result of one passing reference made by a later writer, Proclus, naming Euclid as the author of the book. Still, most historians accept the attribution as fact.

> The first English translation of Euclid appeared in 1570, with a preface by John Dee, astrologer to Queen Elizabeth I.

Elements is not the oldest Greek mathematical work to have survived – another text, *On the Moving Sphere,* had been written by a man named Autolycus a generation earlier – but it's certainly the one that's wielded the most influence. It is almost unanimously regarded by scholars as the most influential textbook ever written. It was translated into Arabic in the ninth century and inspired a raft of mathematical discoveries in the Middle East over the next few centuries. After the Bible, it was the most widely printed book in medieval Europe. And yet it is among the most unread influential books, up there with Isaac newton's *Principia* and Karl Marx's *Das Kapital.*

Much of the early parts of the book are often said to be based on the work of Pythagoras. Or at least, the work commonly attributed to Pythagoras. Pythagoras did many things: his views on the transmigration of souls would influence later philosophers including Plato, and his teachings on religious mysticism attracted a number of adherents. He left a series of commandments for his followers to observe, which promoted the importance of abstaining from beans, never urinating in the direction of the sun, and, perhaps oddest of all, not having children with a woman who wears gold jewellery. Legends grew up around him: he once even managed the impressive feat of being in two cities at the same time, according to one source. Just about the only thing he had nothing to do with was mathematics. His reputation as a great mathematician was another posthumous legend, cooked up by Speusippus and Xenocrates, two philosophers of Plato's Academy, in order to give the impression

that Plato's own scientific ideas chimed with older, more established theories. The theorem about right-angled triangles that bears his name was only first attributed to him 500 years after his death.

Similarly, although the *Elements* is referred to as 'Euclid's *Elements*', and Euclid certainly wrote it, the amount of original work in the book is relatively small. It may even have been modelled on an earlier book, written by Hippocrates of Chios, which hasn't survived. But the fact that so much of the *Elements* draws on the work of others only reinforces its status as the Western world's first textbook. Euclid's great talent was in bringing together the theorems arrived at by other mathematicians and presenting the whole field of geometry and trigonometry in a clear and accessible style.

❖ Oedipus Complex ❖

Aristotle was an innovative and influential philosopher. He was also, after Plato, one of the first literary critics, at least the first whose work has survived. In his *Poetics* he gave us the first-ever work of what became known, in the twentieth century, as literary theory. In this work he muses on what makes a good tragedy, and decides that the most representative example of the genre is a play by Sophocles called *Oedipus Rex*.

Tragedy as a genre began in ancient Greece, and the first great tragedies were staged as part of a huge festival known as the City Dionysia. Thousands of Greek citizens would gather in the Theatre of Dionysus Eleuthereus to watch a trilogy of tragic plays, such as Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. Going to the theatre in ancient Greece was, socially speaking, closer to attending a football match than a modern-day theatre.

Because audiences were so vast, actors wore masks that symbolized their particular character, so even those sitting towards the back of the theatre could keep track of who was who. In Latin, the word for such a mask was *persona*, which is to this day why we talk about adopting a persona whenever we become someone else – we are, metaphorically if not literally, putting on a mask. This is also the reason why the list of characters in a play is known as the 'Dramatis Personae'.

The City Dionysia in Greece possibly grew out of earlier fertility festivals where plays would be performed, and a goat would be ritually sacrificed to the god of wine, fertility and crops, Dionysus. The idea was that the sacrificial goat would rid the city-state of its sins, much as with the Judeo-Christian concept of the scapegoat. Tragedy, then, was designed to have a sort of purging effect upon the community – and this is even encoded within the word *tragedy* itself, which probably comes from the Greek for 'goat song'.

> The Oedipus story gave Sigmund Freud, father of psychoanalysis, the idea for his 'Oedipus complex', where every male child harbours an unconscious desire to do what Oedipus did.

One of the most celebrated tragedies of ancient Greece was *Oedipus Rex*, Sophocles' play about the Theban king who had unwittingly killed his father and married his mother, thus fulfilling a prophecy that he had spent his life trying to avert. In terms of genre, tragedy requires a tragic hero, one who is usually tempted to perform a deed (frequently, though not always, a murder). After the deed has been committed, the hero's fortunes suffer a decline, ending with his death or, in the case of *Oedipus Rex*, the (self-administered) putting-out of his eyes. (Freud read much into that, too, seeing it as a symbolic castration.)

The idea behind Greek tragedy, then, was to encourage the spectators to review their own thoughts and behaviour and make sure they avoided the same fate as Oedipus. Oedipus may have *inadvertently* killed his father and married his mother, but it was his pride that led him to enter into an altercation with Laius (the man who turned out to be his dad) in the first place. If he hadn't been so proud, he would never have killed the man he encountered in the road, his mother would never have been widowed, and the prophecy would never have come true. But there's also something a little unfair about it all, since Greeks believed that it was all predestined anyway: Oedipus would end up fulfilling the prophecy whether he liked it or not. The main 'moral' of Greek tragedy, then, seems to be: life isn't fair. Those goats sang for nothing.

✧ Satyrical ✧

We all know about tragedy and comedy, and these both have their origins in Greek theatre. But there was also an obscure third genre of drama: the satyr play.

The satyr play was a bawdy satire or burlesque which featured actors sporting large strap-on penises – the phallus being a popular symbol of fertility and virility, linked with the god Dionysus. Although satyr plays were often satirical in tone, there is no connection between 'satyr' and 'satire': the genre derives its name from the mythical beast, half-man, half-goat, which featured in such plays.

Euripides, Sophocles and Aeschylus – the three great tragedians of Greek theatre – all lived and worked shortly after the earliest record of the satyr play, in around 500 BCE, although some primitive form of the satyr play may have been performed much earlier. So it may be the case that comedy and tragedy even developed *from* the satyr play, or at least

its prototype.

A satyr play tended to use stories from Greek myth and then subvert or parody them. The short plays would feature a chorus of satyrs – goat–man hybrids. At the City Dionysia, the festival at which plays would be performed, a playwright would put forward a trilogy of tragic plays followed by a satyr play as the finale. One playwright would then be proclaimed the winner of the festival. The whole festival was dedicated to Dionysus, but this tradition probably grew out of earlier religious rituals pertaining to crops, fertility and rebirth.

Only one satyr play survives in its entirety: written by the great tragedian Euripides, *Cyclops* centres on the incident from the story of Odysseus when the Greek hero found himself a prisoner in the cave of Polyphemus, the one-eyed monster (I won't make a phallus joke here). After *Cyclops*, the next-best-preserved satyr play is *Ichneutae* ('trackers') by Sophocles.

This idea of ending a trilogy of high tragedies – works of considerable emotive power – with a short piece of comic burlesque seems odd to us. But in fact the practice survived, in only slightly altered form, into Shakespeare's time: the Bard's tragedies would originally be followed by a short 'jig' in the Elizabethan theatres, a little skit or comic sketch which would round off the afternoon's entertainment for the audience – following Romeo and Juliet's tragic deaths or Macbeth's bloody end.

✧ The Roman Gatsby ✧

Three of the most important works of Western literature from the 1920s, T. S. Eliot's *Th Waste Land*, James Joyce's *Ulysses*, and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Th Great Gatsby*, all tip a wink to a remarkable work of literature from classical Rome that has survived only as fragments. Depending on your view, it's either one of the first novels ever written, or a scandalous piece of trashy pornography. Its title – the *Satyricon*, meaning 'satyr-like adventures' – provides a clue to the bawdiness on offer.

The book's author, Petronius, is equally curious. He was at the court of the Emperor nero (where he held the rather splendid title *elegantiae arbiter* or 'Arbiter of Elegance') in the first century. The historian Tacitus reported that nero thought nothing charming unless Petronius approved of it first. Unfortunately, this high opinion didn't last: nero ended up thinking that the most charming thing Petronius could do was kill himself. It appears that a scheming rival named Tigellinus, jealous of Petronius' high standing, contrived to convince nero that his trusty Arbiter of Elegance was a traitor. Nero eventually ordered his former favourite's death. Petronius chose to execute the sentence himself, opening up a vein in his wrists and allowing himself slowly to bleed to death while he nattered away to his friends about poetry and shared a

light meal. Even his own death was turned into art.

> F. Scott Fitzgerald initially toyed with calling *The Great Gatsby* 'Trimalchio in West Egg', drawing a parallel between the rich party-thrower Jay Gatsby and the affluent host in Petronius' masterpiece.

The title of his novel, the *Satyricon*, carries a double meaning: it refers to the bawdy satyrs of Greek myth (they of the giant strap-on penises), but it also suggests the book's satirical flavour. Specifically, the *Satyricon* is Menippean satire (a form of satire which mocks general attitudes rather than specific individuals or institutions), a sprawling melange of drunkenness, debauchery, heated discussions about art and education, and visits to the lavatory. The portion of the book that has survived – probably something like less than a tenth of the entire work, and perhaps far less – follows the book's narrator, a former gladiator named Encolpius, and his lover, a teenage servant-boy called Giton. Much of this surviving fragment focuses on the lavish feast put on by Trimalchio, an obscenely wealthy former slave.

Is the *Satyricon* great art or lurid pornography? That interminable debate about literary works begins, in many ways, with Petronius' novel – indeed, if it can be called a 'novel' either. It's certainly remarkably modern in all sorts of ways, not least for its focus on the real, everyday lives of Roman people (before Petronius, classical poetry and drama tended to depict human beings idealistically rather than realistically). As Steven Moore notes in *The Novel: An Alternative History*, Petronius' book shares much with James Joyce's modern masterpiece *Ulysses*: the loose reworking of the plot of Homer's *Odyssey*, the scurrilous obscenity, the diversity of literary style and the engagement with previous works of literature. But Petronius was writing nearly two millennia before Joyce, whose *Ulysses* was published in 1922. T. S. Eliot's poem *Th Waste Land*, also published in 1922, takes its epigraph from Petronius' work.

Petronius' novel is one of the first-ever narratives in which the narrator is also one of the characters in the story, rather than the general detached narrator of the romances and epics produced up until this time. For this and a myriad other reasons it represents a decisive moment in the development of fiction.

✧ True Story . . . ✧

Pinpointing the starting-point of science fiction is a tricky undertaking. Did it all begin with Jules Verne's *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* in

1864? Or Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* in 1818? Some notable authors in the genre, among them Isaac Asimov and Carl Sagan, give the mantle to the astronomer Johannes Kepler, whose *Somnium,* written in Latin in 1608, speculated on what the Earth might look like from the Moon. (Like Asimov and Sagan, Kepler, it would seem, was both a scientist *and* a writer of science fiction.) But the origins of science fiction can be traced back far earlier even than Kepler.

Indeed, we have to go right the way back to the second century ce and to a Syrian writer named Lucian, whose short work *A True History* has a claim to being the first-ever work of science fiction. Lucian was born in what is modern-day Turkey, spent much of his adult life in Syria, spoke Greek, and lived under the Roman Empire. He was a satirist who wrote in a variety of genres, and one of the genres he played around with was the prose romance – what would later be given the name of 'novel'. In fact, Lucian arguably represents the starting-point of both science fiction and the comic dialogue, which later practitioners such as Oscar Wilde would make their own. Another of his works, *Philopseudes* ('lover of lies'), is the source of the 'Sorcerer's Apprentice' story later made famous by Goethe and the composer Paul Dukas, among others.

A True History is essentially a parody of the far-fetched travel writings of antiquity: classical explorers who never let the truth get in the way of a good story. Fantastical places and improbable events were often reported as true in travel accounts of the time; Lucian wittily turns this on its head by admitting up front that his story is a lie from start to finish. Because his intention is to poke fun at the incredible claims made by other writers, Lucian's imagination is allowed a free rein: in his story we encounter rivers flowing with wine and islands made of cheese, as well as trees that are grown from men's testicles and develop into the shape of penises.

The actual story of *A True History* similarly requires not so much a suspension of disbelief as a full-on levitation act. The narrator's ship is blown out of the Mediterranean by a gigantic whirlwind and cast up into outer space (thus becoming the first spaceship, we might say). It eventually lands on the moon, whose king is at war with the king of the sun over the colonization of Venus. The lunar army features giant spiders bigger than the Cyclades, which spin webs between the moon and Venus to act as a sort of gossamer battlefield, while the solar army includes ants over two hundred feet long, giant mosquitoes, and an army of 'Sky-Dancers' whose main weaponry consists of large radishes that they hurl at the enemy, causing them to collapse and die of a malodorous but unspecified wound.

Lucian is, as you'd expect, a bit hazy on the detail as to how his narrator gets to the moon: a powerful whirlwind seems to be the sole method of propulsion. But the book certainly sowed the seeds for later works of *bona fide* science fiction, from Jules Verne's *From the Earth to the Moon* to H. G. Wells's *The First Men in the Moon* and beyond. And because it uses a fantastical narrative to satirize contemporary literary

trends, it is also the precursor to later works such as Thomas More's *Utopia* and *Gulliver's Travels* by Jonathan Swift.

✧ Pliny's History ✧

When Vesuvius erupted in 79 CE, it laid waste to three large Italian settlements. Pompeii is the one everyone knows about, but the towns of Herculaneum and Oplontis were also engulfed. One of the many casualties during the eruption was the philosopher and naturalist Pliny the Elder.

It is often said that Pliny perished in the Vesuvian eruption because of his burning curiosity. Intrigued by the smoke coming out of the volcano, the story goes, he foolishly went to take a closer look. It's a nice story – the curious philosopher whose curiosity cost him his life – but the truth (or at least the account offered by Pliny's own nephew of his uncle's death) is a little different. After the destruction of Pompeii and Herculaneum had already occurred, Pliny sailed to the nearby town of Stabiae in order to help rescue a close friend, Pomponianus. Having arrived, Pliny discovered that the wind was against them and a swift getaway was impossible, so he did the only thing he could do in the circumstances: he ran a bath. The building in which they were sheltering threatened to collapse on them, so the party had to flee, taking their chances with the fragments of lava that were now showering down on the town. It was while trying to escape that Pliny, who was asthmatic, fell down and died. The image of him walking up to Vesuvius to take a closer look, with a pillow tied to his head with a strip of linen, is untrue – though Pliny and his crew did use pillows to protect themselves from the raining lava as they made their way to Stabiae.

Still, one can see how the story of his death came to be mythologized, since there was perhaps no Roman writer more curious than Pliny. Gaius Plinius Secundus (23–79) is thought to have written some seventy-five books and kept a staggering 160 notebooks. He was, without doubt, a workaholic: he had a day job as an administrator for Vespasian, the Roman emperor, but he had a burning curiosity, a desire to examine just about everything around him, from emeralds (which could reportedly be used to cure leprosy) to hyena penis dipped in honey (used by women as a sexual fetish, apparently). He filled his numerous notebooks with his observations. But just one of his books is now widely known: *Natural History*. In this book Pliny gave himself the modest aim to 'set forth in detail all the contents of the entire world'. He read voraciously, declaring that no book was so bad that some good couldn't be got out of it. He was at work on *Natural History* – which by this time ran to thirty-seven volumes – when he died in the Vesuvius eruption.

What made Pliny's *Natural History* so influential on later works of science and history was its structure as much as its scope: containing an

index as well as references to the original authors for relevant information, it would become a model for subsequent scholarly publications. It was also one of the first books to include a table of contents, an idea Pliny had picked up from the Roman poet and grammarian Quintus Valerius Soranus. *Natural History* has been called the first encyclopedia, but it's probably better to view it as an eye-opening – and occasionally jaw-dropping – window into Roman life and culture.

According to his nephew, Pliny the Younger, *Natural History* was largely written at night and during any free moments its author could grab when he wasn't on official business for Vespasian. This method of composition may account for some of the more outlandish theories (to put it politely) that found their way into the book. At one point, he describes people with dogs' heads instead of human heads as though they are real. He writes of people with no heads at all, and people with no mouths who eat through their nostrils. He also dutifully describes one-legged humans who use their solitary foot as a sunshade. Some of Pliny's book reads as not so much *Natural History* as *True History* – Lucian's, that is.

Then there are some of the cures and remedies, which practitioners of modern medicine would, quite frankly, find laughable. A headache could be cured by tying a fox's 'male organ' to the forehead, 'worn as an amulet'. Haemorrhoids could be treated either with a fresh root of rosemary (rubbed on the relevant area) or with a cream prepared from pig lard mixed with rust taken from a chariot's wheels. (Shoving an onion up your rectum also came highly recommended.) Garlic, meanwhile, was the cure-all: it could be used to treat just about everything from epilepsy to rheumatism, ulcers and, yes, haemorrhoids. Rubbing mouse droppings on a bald head would, Pliny assures us, restore a full head of hair. In 1469 *Natural History* became one of the first-ever classical texts to be printed. How many heads of hair were restored thanks to Pliny's advice history has not, alas, been recorded.

✦ The Oldest Joke Book ✦

It's nearly the end of the chapter, so how about a joke? Have you heard the one about the idiot, the barber and the bald man who go camping? In order to ensure nobody makes off with their stuff as they sleep, they agree to take turns to stay up all night on watch, in four-hour shifts. The barber takes the first watch, and to amuse himself during his shift he takes out his razor and cuts the sleeping idiot's hair off. When the barber's four-hour stint is over, he wakes up the idiot to take over. The idiot, feeling his hairless head, exclaims: 'What a moron that barber is! He's woken up the bald bloke instead of me.'

This is an excerpt from the oldest surviving joke book, *Philogelos*. It

may not have been the first-ever collection of jokes, but it's the oldest one that's come down to us – pretty intact, too. Some of the jokes still work, though they're as subject to the vagaries of individual taste as modern gags. One of them, involving a conversation between a slave-owner and a customer, has even been called the classical world's answer to Monty Python's 'Dead Parrot' sketch. A disgruntled customer goes to a slave-owner and complains that the slave the man sold him has gone and died. Shocked, the slave-owner replies, 'He never did anything like that when I owned him.' There's certainly a similarity, albeit of a superficial sort. But the crucial thing is that the structure of many of the jokes is strikingly familiar: their one-line or two-line narratives succinctly deliver a set-up and punchline in the manner of many modern comedians.

Its title translating roughly as 'the laughter-lover' or 'the joker', *Philogelos* was compiled by two Greek men, Hierokles and Philagrios, in around the third or fourth century, when Greece had become part of the Roman empire. It contains around 260 short jokes, many of which feature a particular kind of person. A fair number of the gags focus on a fool or idiot figure, though there are also jokes about – and, more specifically, at the expense of – various ethnic groups, which seems to mean anyone not fortunate enough to have been born Greek. These include the Kymaeans (known principally for being stupid), Sidonians (who are viewed as quite stupid), and Abderites (who, as well as being stupid, appear to have somehow attracted a reputation for getting hernias a lot).

But the best bits of *Philogelos* have much in common with our own style of humour. One of the best-known jokes involves an exchange between a barber and his customer. Asked how he would like his hair cut, the customer replies, 'In silence.' There's a quip about a man who is particularly tight with money, who, drawing up his will, names himself as the heir to his fortune; in another joke, one of a pair of identical twins dies, and a fool, meeting the surviving twin, asks him if it was him or his brother who died. Other jokes are at the expense of women, or, more specifically, wives: in one, a man brags to his friend, 'I slept with your wife last night.' The friend retorts, 'As her husband I *have* to; but what's your excuse?' People who remarked that the material used by many 1970s comedians was not so fresh were clearly right.

Certainly, if nothing else *Philogelos* proves that the ancients had a sense of humour not all that diff ent from our own. How funny they were remains a moot point. One Greek Stoic philosopher, Chrysippus of Soli, reportedly laughed so hard at his own joke (about a donkey drinking wine to wash down some figs it had gorged on) that he dropped down dead. One suspects you had to be there. Still, it was said of Isaac newton that he was only known to have laughed once in his entire life, and that was when somebody asked him what was the point of studying Euclid. Which lends a new meaning to the phrase 'the elements of comedy'.

THE MIDDLE AGES

It's not easy to determine who owned the largest library in medieval England, but a man named Richard de Bury would have to be a contender. A fourteenth-century bishop of Durham, de Bury appears to have been something of an incurable bibliophile whose private library dwarfed those of his fellow bishops. His rooms were so chock-full of books that visitors often had difficulty finding somewhere to sit down. It's little wonder that he's been described by his biographer Samuel Lane Boardman as the patron saint of book-lovers. Whether you're a bibliophile, a bibliomaniac, a bibliognost (one who knows books), a bibliophagist (a devourer of books), or a bibliosmiac (a book-sniffer), you'd probably have got on with Richard de Bury.

De Bury even wrote a book about his book obsession, *Philobiblon* (literally, 'love of books'), which has been described as the first-ever book about library management. In it he outlined why he loved books and why it was important to take care of them. He completed it shortly before his death in 1345.

As we will learn in this chapter, sometimes books have survived because the right person has come along to discover them, or save them from oblivion. The Middle Ages – roughly extending from the fall of Rome in the fifth century to the beginning of the Renaissance around a thousand years later – were precarious times. Life could be cheap, disease was everywhere, and war was a part of life. Three years after the good bishop joined the great library in the sky, the Black Death would arrive in England, killing a third of the population. In an age in which people had difficulty surviving from one year to the next, it's little wonder that books should have had trouble keeping themselves in existence. But many did – and it is the textual treasures of the medieval age that this chapter will examine.

✧ Anglo-Saxon Attitudes ✧

Although it is celebrated nowadays as an important work of Anglo-Saxon – indeed, 'English' – literature, the great epic poem *Beowulf* was virtually unknown and forgotten about for nearly a thousand years.

Th plot of *Beowulf* is fairly simple. Most people know that the poem records the struggle of the title character in vanquishing a monster named Grendel. But what is less well known is that Beowulf has to slay not one big monster, but three: after he has taken care of Grendel, the dead monster's mother shows up, and she proves even more of a challenge for our hero, although ultimately he triumphs and wins the day. The poem then ends with Beowulf, now in his twilight years, slaying a third monster (this time, a dragon), although this encounter proves his undoing, as he is fatally wounded in the battle. The poem ends with his subsequent death and 'burial' at sea. Nobody's sure when the poem was composed, but it was written down in around the year 1000.

Although it is often thought of as the first great work of English literature (and often taught on English Literature courses as such), *Beowulf*, in many ways, has little to do with England. It is a tale about Scandinavians, set in Denmark, and told by Germans (the Angles from north-west Germany), although it was written in England after the Angles' and Saxons' invasion (they first began to settle in Britain from the fifth century). The poem may have been written in England, but the notion of 'Englishness' was at this time still taking shape, and the poem is heavily indebted to Germanic heroic poetry rooted in an oral tradition that pre-dated the arrival of the Angles and Saxons in Britain, although whether the specific tale of Beowulf pre-dated the written version of the poem, nobody knows for sure. But then again, since the word 'English' stems from the very Germanic peoples – the Angles – who brought the idea of *Beowulf* to Britain in the first place, perhaps it might be more appropriate to see *Beowulf* as the *most* 'English' work of literature there is.

Yet after the norman Conquest in 1066, *Beowulf* seems to disappear from view. The poem was only rescued from obscurity in 1815, when someone decided it might be an idea to print an edition of it. But in fact in many ways it's nothing short of a miracle that we have the poem at all. That we can read it in modern times, whether in the original translation or in some translation such as that undertaken by Seamus Heaney, is largely down to two men, an Icelandic–Danish scholar named G. J. Thorkelin and an obscure English MP and antiquarian by the name of Sir Robert Cotton.

Beowulf only survived in one manuscript until the nineteenth century, when it was eventually copied down. Prior to that, there was one version in existence in the whole world, and it was by chance that this copy landed in Cotton's hands. In fact, all of the Anglo-Saxon poetry we have, we have because of *four* manuscripts that survived: the Cotton manuscript (which includes *Beowulf*), the Exeter Book, the Vercelli book, and the manuscripts of the Bodleian Library at Oxford.

Despite Cotton's preservation of the manuscript of the poem, the

world seems to have been reluctant to do anything with *Beowulf* immediately. Instead, after Cotton's death, it was moved from place to place and, much like Beowulf himself in the poem, seems to have lurched from one narrow scrape with disaster to another: it managed to escape being destroyed during the Civil War of the 1640s (largely thanks to the efforts of an antiquarian who had taken up Cotton's mantle), only to be badly damaged in a fire in 1731, along with the rest of Cotton's collection.

Beowulf survived, dog-eared but intact, into the early nineteenth century when Thorkelin entered the scene. Thorkelin hired somebody from the British Museum to make a copy of the poem, working from Cotton's manuscript. He then set about preparing a modern translation – the first of many to be undertaken – only for the Battle of Copenhagen of 1807 to put paid to his efforts. During the conflict the scholar's house was burned down and the manuscript – the work of some twenty years transcribing 3,182 lines of poetry – was destroyed.

However, Thorkelin managed to salvage from the wreckage of his house the transcription of the original poem, and set to work on his translation again, publishing it – finally – in 1815. It was a timely publication: within the ensuing decades, Cotton's manuscript of the poem would deteriorate to the point where many parts of the text would become illegible, so we have Thorkelin and his translation to thank for the fact that we have a full, intact Beowulf to read at all.

Ten years after the publication of Thorkelin's translation, the first university course in Old English was introduced at the university of Virginia, in 1825. It would be nearly another hundred years before Oxford and Cambridge introduced English Literature courses. When they did so, *Beowulf* headed the university curriculum: at Oxford, none other than J. R. R. Tolkien lectured on the poem for many years. Now it is hard to imagine the story of English literature without *Beowulf,* but the poem has only attracted the attention it deserves in the last century or two. And it's all thanks to a curious MP and a persistent scholar.

✧ Merlin's Debut ✧

The stories of King Arthur draw upon a similar historical time period to *Beowulf.* Indeed, both names, Arthur and Beowulf, are thought by some linguists to have etymological connections with bears, conveying their fearsome might and dauntless courage (though in both cases the theory has been disputed). The chief difference is that Arthur fought against the Angles and Saxons, the very people who brought the tale of Beowulf with them to Britain. Arthur is a pre-Saxon figure, king of the 'Britons' or natives, defending his land against the Germanic hordes.

Arthur's story has been told countless times by writers down the ages, since at least the ninth century. As a result, there are some strange and

inconsistent ideas surrounding the legend. Most people know of the tale of the 'sword in the stone' – memorably told, or rather retold, by T. H. White in his 1938 novel *The Sword in the Stone*, later filmed by Disney – which features Arthur plucking Excalibur from a stone, an act that could only be performed by the true king. (This myth may have its basis in the very real practice of casting metal swords in stone moulds, from which they would have to be extracted once the metal had set.) But in most renderings of the tale, the sword Arthur pulls from the stone is not Excalibur: Excalibur is the sword he receives later, once he has been crowned king, from the Lady of the Lake. In some versions of the story, it is Galahad who has to pull the sword from the stone. In others, Bedivere, not Arthur, receives the sword from the Lady of the Lake. In the earliest romances, it is Arthur's nephew Gawain who owns a sword named Excalibur. These inconsistencies are a result of the fact that many authors, not one, have contributed to the Arthurian story, so there is no definitive version of the legend. Instead, our idea of Arthuriana is an amalgamation and conflation of various myths, stories and rewritings.

However, if there was one writer who helped to bring Arthur to an international audience, it was the twelfth-century Welsh cleric Geoffrey of Monmouth, whose *Historia Regum Britanniae* or *History of the Kings of Britain* was the most influential text for later writers of the Arthur myth. Geoffrey's *History* was a medieval bestseller in a world before printed books. As we've seen, *Beowulf* survived in one single scorched manuscript; there are over 200 copies of Geoffrey's *History* from the medieval period. When Geoffrey was writing, the line between history and fiction was by no means easy to draw, and as a result we cannot say how much of his 'History' is grounded in fact and how much was later invention, whether his own or other people's.

The nineteenth-century French scholar Gaston Paris suggested that Geoffrey changed the Welsh *Myrddin* to Merlin to avoid resemblance to the Latin *merda*, 'faeces'.

Geoffrey's account of the legendary king contains the first appearance of many of the iconic features of the Arthurian myth, including the wizard Merlin. (It also features some strange notions, such as the theory that Merlin was responsible for the construction of Stonehenge, having taken the huge stones from Ireland by magic. People remained confused about Stonehenge for some time after this: the seventeenth-century architect Inigo Jones thought it was a Roman monument.) As if all this wasn't enough of a cultural legacy, Geoffrey's *History* is also ultimately the source (albeit indirectly) for two of Shakespeare's plays, *King Lear* and *Cymbeline*.

Geoffrey of Monmouth had his own agenda in popularizing the Arthur

myth, though quite what that agenda was continues to divide critics. He could well have been suggesting that the arrival of the Normans at the Battle of Hastings had put an end to the squabbles between the Saxons and the native Britons such as Arthur, but if this is the case, it's somewhat ironic that Geoffrey himself was writing against the backdrop of a bloody civil war raging between the Norman king Stephen and his cousin, Empress Matilda. What is certain is that subsequent authors have also reworked the Arthurian tale to reflect their own times. Francis of Assisi remarked that Arthur, along with other medieval pin-ups such as Charlemagne and Roland, were Christian martyrs who had been prepared to die in battle to defend their faith in Christ. There were numerous retellings of the Arthur legend throughout the Middle Ages, such as that by the Norman author Wace (pronounced 'wassy'), who added the Round Table, the French writer Chrétien de Troyes' poems of the late twelfth century (which added the character of Lancelot and the adulterous affair with Guinevere, wife of Arthur), the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* written in Middle English and dating from around 1400, and – most enduringly of all – Sir Thomas Malory's fifteenth-century prose work *Le Morte d'Arthur*.

✦ Before Marco Polo ✦

In the prologue to his *Travels*, the Venetian explorer Marco Polo claims to have travelled more extensively than anyone before him; remarkably, this is probably no exaggeration. But he was not, as is widely thought, the first European to travel to the Far East and write about it. That honour goes to a fellow Italian who died two years before Polo was even born, named Giovanni da Pian del Carpine and often known in English as John of Plano Carpini.

Carpini, a Franciscan monk and former disciple of the more famous St Francis of Assisi, was an old man and reportedly rather fat when he undertook his voyage to the Far East, where he was granted an audience with the Great Khan, Kuyuk (grandson of Genghis). Quite what he was doing there has been the topic of much speculation, but it's probable that he was on a spy mission, given the particular interest in the Mongols' military strategies which his book displays. But he also gives us a valuable insight into the Mongols' marriage practices, the food they ate, the clothing they wore, their laws and customs, and much else. He wrote up his report of his travels in the late 1240s, and became something of a celebrity in his final years, as the man who had first revealed the Mongol world to European Christians.

It would be another fifty years before Marco Polo would get round to writing up *his* travels. What's more, the Mongolia that Polo visited was the home of an empire in decline; Carpini visited it when it was still a great power. Carpini's account also has the ring of truth, something that

cannot always be said of Polo's *Travels*. (Polo didn't help himself by mistaking rhinoceroses for unicorns, and whimsically placing himself in the midst of battles and other key events which he almost certainly wasn't around to witness.) In 1995, Frances Wood even wrote a book titled *Did Marco Polo Go to China?* The answer, Wood concludes, is 'No'. Wood is doubtful that Polo ever got beyond the Black Sea. Other scholars, however, disagree and think that, whilst some of his claims were undoubtedly exaggerated, Polo was speaking from first-hand experience of 'Cathay', as China was known at the time.

This is not to deny the enormous popularity that Polo enjoyed, or the influence his *Travels* had. His book, dictated by Polo to a fellow prisoner in around 1300, is an account of his travels around the Middle East and the Far East, from Armenia to Indonesia and virtually everywhere, or so it seems, in between. He shares with us his brushes with the great and not-so-good (most famously Kubla Khan, grandson of Genghis), and even his bouts of diarrhoea through drinking the 'green' and brackish water in the Iranian desert. (One drop of it, he tells us in words that have the ring of experience, is enough to make you void your bowels ten times over.) The *Travels* also provided the West with a host of indispensable new inventions: Polo's book is credited with introducing both paper money and spectacles to Europe. Columbus took the book on his famous voyage of 1492.

But it is worth bearing in mind that Carpini was there before Polo, and it is to him that the honour of 'first Westerner to write a popular book about the Far East' should go.

⟡ Flatulent Demons ⟡

The poet Dante Alighieri was a contemporary of Marco Polo, though one finds it hard to imagine them knocking about together. Dante's travels were geographically less ambitious but theologically far more extensive than Polo's. He is best-remembered for the epic poem about heaven, hell, damnation, purgatory and salvation called *The Divine Comedy*, though that title was unknown in Dante's own lifetime. It wasn't named *The Divine Comedy* by Dante himself, who referred to it simply as the *Commedia*. His fellow Italian poet Boccaccio called it the *Divina*, but it wasn't given the title *Divina Commedia* until 1555, two and a half centuries after it was written.

It's not a 'comedy' because it's funny – readers looking for belly-laughs will come away disappointed – but essentially because it's *not* a tragedy written in the high language of Latin. Instead, it's about journeying from hell to paradise – somewhat more upbeat than your average tragedy – and it's composed in the Italian vernacular of the day. Dante's journey begins on Good Friday 1300 (about the same time Marco Polo was busy dictating his travels in prison) during Dante's

thirty-fifth year, halfway through his biblical threescore and ten. It might be viewed as the original fantasy trilogy, charting the poet's journey from hell to purgatory before arriving in heaven, 'Paradiso'. It's certainly the first great work of Italian literature to have been written *in* Italian rather than Latin.

T. S. Eliot, to whom Dante meant a great deal, said of Dante's work that genuine poetry is able to communicate before it is fully understood. Nevertheless, Dante is undoubtedly more known about than he is avidly read these days. Voltaire wrote of Dante in 1764: 'His reputation will go on increasing, because scarce anybody reads him.' Those who make the attempt may be put off by the unusual and repetitive verse form employed – *terza rima,* a three-line stanza structure – or by the references to figures from Italian medieval history who now mean little or nothing to us. (One notable exception is the Montagues and Capulets: Shakespeare's rival families from *Romeo and Juliet* had their origins in historical fact, it would seem.)

It doesn't help, either, that theology, as a topic for poetry, is not the exciting draw that it once was. But it would be wrong to think that Dante's poetry is all abstract religious doctrine and vague talk of sin and redemption. It's a surprisingly visual and often visceral work, much of it preoccupied with the body as much as the soul. In her book *On Farting: Language and Laughter in the Middle Ages,* Valerie Allen discusses the more flatulent moments in Dante's religious epic. Malacoda, one of the demons who helps Dante and his trusty guide, the Roman poet Virgil, to negotiate the various circles of Hell, makes a trumpet of his backside and farts at his fellow demons. Elsewhere, Dante provides an image of sinners being cooked in a giant sewer of food, filth and farts. And there's more. At one point in the *Inferno,* the poet sees a host of tormented sufferers covered in diarrhoea that appears to be flowing out of cubicles, as if hell has become a giant public toilet.

Such lavatorial descriptions are not meant to be fun, as they are in, say, the *Satyricon.* Dante's purpose in writing *The Divine Comedy* was partly political: at the time, the city of Florence had been taken over by a faction known as the 'Blacks', Dante's political enemy: Dante himself belonged to the rival 'Whites'. The Whites resisted papal control, arguing for a greater degree of autonomy within Florence, while the Blacks gave the Pope more power within the city-state. Dante, as a prominent mover and shaker among the Whites, was banished from Florence by the Blacks on pain of death: he was told he would be burned at the stake if he was seen in the city again.

Rumour has it that Dante taught his cat to hold a candle up for him in its paw while he was eating or reading.

The most famous things about the poem are probably the various circles of hell that Dante describes, and the young girl, Beatrice, to whom Dante was devoted, despite only ever meeting her twice. To modern minds Dante's admiration for Beatrice may sound odd, but Dante, who had first clapped eyes on Beatrice when he himself was but a boy, viewed her as a paragon of purity and virtue, revering her almost as a goddess on Earth. When Beatrice died in her twenties in 1290, Dante wrote his first major work, a mixture of poetry and prose called *La Vita Nuova* ('The New Life'), as a tribute to her. It is Beatrice who reveals the world of heaven to Dante in the final part of the *Comedy*. As for the circles of hell, there are nine in total, many of them taking one of the seven deadly sins as their focus. In the ninth circle, associated with treachery, Satan sits right in the centre of hell, up to his waist in ice (it's not all fire and brimstone in Dante's vision of the inferno) and sporting three faces – one black, one blood-red, and one pale yellow. It would seem that where the Devil is concerned, being *two*-faced isn't quite treacherous enough.

His fellow Italian writer Boccaccio records that, when Dante's mother was pregnant with him, she dreamt that he transformed into a peacock. In the end, all he managed to become was Italy's first great poet of the post-classical era. Which, whilst less impressive as a feat of metamorphosis, is nevertheless a resounding achievement.

✧ Chaucer's Astronomy ✧

In the early 1370s, a young Geoffrey Chaucer travelled to Italy on a diplomatic mission for King Edward III. While he was there he also found time to familiarize himself with the fruits of what can only be described as a golden age of Italian literature: the sonnets of Petrarch, the work of Boccaccio (whose *Decameron*, featuring a group of people telling stories, would serve as the model for Chaucer's own *Canterbury Tales*), and Dante.

Like Dante before him, Chaucer wrote more besides the one big book he is principally known for. As well as *The Canterbury Tales*, there's *Troilus and Criseyde*, telling the story of the star-crossed couple from the Trojan Wars, and 'An ABC', one of his earliest works, an acrostic poem for people to use in prayer. Like much of Chaucer's work, 'An ABC' was a Middle English translation of a French work, in this case a prayer written by Guillaume de Deguileville. Each of the twenty-six eight-line stanzas begins with a successive letter of the alphabet. Probably written in the 1370s, the poem shows Chaucer's art in its early stages of development. (Chaucer had been born in London around 1343 – the precise date of his birth is not known. His surname, by the way, derives from the French *chausseur*, 'shoemaker'.)

Chaucer also wrote an early work of popular science: his *Treatise on the Astrolabe* is possibly the first science book written in English, dating

from around 1391. It is also one of the first books in English written for children: it was written for Chaucer's own son, Lewis.

An astrolabe (literally, 'star-taker') was an astronomical instrument used for a variety of purposes, but chiefly to calculate the position of stars in relation to the user's latitude on Earth. As a scientific instrument it would later be superseded by the sextant. We're in the realm of astrology as much as astronomy here: part of the astrolabe's purpose was to determine the movement of the zodiac so one could plot the orbits and positions of stars and planets in order to divine mystical meanings from them. But it was also a useful device for charting the astronomical calendar – in a sense, for plotting space and time. Chaucer's book is essentially an instruction manual, directing the reader in how to use the device and explaining what it is used for. It's a work of popular science because Chaucer is no expert astronomer, but an amateur enthusiast tinkering with the device, and encouraging his son to do so too.

Chaucer died in 1400; the date on his tomb in Westminster Abbey reads 25 October. He became the first person to be buried in Poets' Corner, though it was bureaucratic service rather than poetic achievement that earned Chaucer his place in the Abbey.

✧ A Medieval Cookbook ✧

We have Richard II to thank for several things. As well as providing Shakespeare with the subject for one of his finest early history plays, he is credited with introducing the handkerchief to England. He is also remembered for putting down the Peasants' Revolt while he was a boy of just fourteen.

But there is another thing for which we have Richard – in many ways a rather unpleasant king – to thank: the first cookbook written in English was compiled for him. *The Forme of Cury* ('the form of cooking') was put together by an anonymous author in around 1390. It contains nearly 200 recipes, including an early quiche (known then as a 'custard') and a 'blank mang', a sweet dish made with milk, rice, almonds, sugar and – er, slices of meat. It may not sound much but it was a popular dish at the time and would later evolve, for good or ill, into blancmange.

A number of ingredients – spices, in particular – feature in *The Forme of Cury*, making their debut in English records. Cloves and mace appear here for the first time in English cookery, and numerous other rare spices such as ginger, pepper and nutmeg are to be found in the recipes. Perhaps surprisingly – given that it is England's only native spice – mustard gets only one mention in the entire book, where it appears as 'mustard balls'.

The *Forme of Cury* contains some of the first English recipes for three pasta dishes: ravioli,

lasagne and macaroni cheese.

The Forme of Cury is also the first English book to mention olive oil. An early salad recipe is listed: it includes parsley, sage, rosemary, garlic, mint, shallots, onions, fennel, and other herbs and vegetables, all shredded together in oil, vinegar and salt (indeed, the word *salad* derives from the Latin for 'salted').

Many of the recipes in *The Forme of Cury* haven't lasted. But the book did have one enduring legacy. That word 'cury', Middle English for 'cookery', would continue to be used by English traders travelling to the Far East, and would eventually be applied – at least according to one theory – to the spicy sauces used in Asian cooking. Which, so many language historians believe, is how we got the word 'curry'.

❧ A Woman's Revelations ❧

On 8 May 1373, a thirty-year-old woman fell seriously ill – so ill that she nearly died. Deep in delirium, she experienced a series of visions – or 'shewings' as she herself called them – which she took to be revelations from God. Her name was Julian of Norwich – well, actually, it probably wasn't. Julian almost certainly wasn't her real name, but the name of the local church in the parish where she lived. But she would become known by that name and would be a medieval celebrity in England. She wrote up her visions in the 1390s, around the time that Richard II, when he wasn't dining on blancmange or macaroni cheese, was busy annoying his noblemen by showering his favourites with gifts and seizing land from people.

In the book outlining the nature of her delirious visions, Julian describes herself as 'unlettered', which has been taken as false modesty (clearly she was highly gifted to be able to write such a book) but which also points up the fact that she had not received the kind of thorough education normally reserved for privileged men at the time. It is for this reason that Julian did not write about her visions in Latin – the usual language for such books of the day – but English. *Revelations of Divine Love* thus became the first book written by a woman in the English language. Formal education's loss was the English language's gain.

'Julian' uses the Middle English of her day to describe and explore the series of sixteen visions which convinced her to become an anchorite and shut herself away from society, living in a nun's cell at her church in Norwich. Much of *Revelations* may seem incomprehensible to the non-religious mind, steeped as it is in theological contemplation of the visions she has experienced. Was it mere delirium, or divine communication? Most of the visions feature Jesus Christ, with a particular focus on the Crucifixion and Resurrection – though some of

the most memorable accounts involve moments of great simplicity: at one point Christ comes to her and shows her a hazelnut containing 'all that is made'.

But for the majority of modern readers the most noteworthy thing about her book is not what she writes but how she writes. Because she was a woman she could not use the Latin reserved for the monks and professional theologians. But that is to her, and her book's, advantage. Hers is a democratic book, a book about ordinary English people, reflecting their experience of Christianity in their own language. (This is all somewhat ironic given that Julian shut herself away from everyone else.)

The most famous line from *Revelations of Divine Love* runs: 'Sin is behovely, but all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.' This is the real message of *Revelations*. Given that Julian's lifetime had seen the arrival of the Black Death in England, which had killed around a third of the population, and that she would live to see civil unrest (the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, for one), this was a timely message of comfort for a fraught period of English history. It is fitting that T. S. Eliot, when completing his *Four Quartets* in the midst of the Second World War in 1942, would choose to allude to Julian's message that 'all shall be well' in his poem of war and salvation, 'Little Gidding'.

❖ The First Autobiography ❖

In 1934, a man named William Erdeswick made a startling discovery. It was the kind that most literary scholars dream of, but Erdeswick was a lieutenant-colonel rather than a professor. In a cupboard in his house in Chesterfield, he found a copy of a manuscript that had been thought lost for five hundred years: the sole surviving copy of a book first transcribed in the 1430s and, as was later realized, the first work of autobiography ever written in the English language.

The author of the book, Margery Kempe, was a medieval pilgrim and mystic who, like Julian of Norwich a few decades before, had experienced vivid and powerful divine visions. A few years before the end of her life, the author of *Revelations of Divine Love* even received the middle-aged Kempe as a visitor to her cell in Norwich.

Although the book is often called the first English autobiography, Kempe tells 'her' story in the third person, using the term 'this creature' to refer to the central woman figure in the book – hardly the style of a deeply personal account. *The Book of Margery Kempe* is probably best viewed not as personal memoir but as a depiction of the typical lives of many Christian women during the period. Nevertheless, much of the book is related with a vivid clarity which smacks of personal experience that has then been universalized.

But a fair portion of her *Book* seems to revolve around trying to persuade her husband to keep his hands off her. Margery wished to be chaste because she was convinced that this was what the Lord expected of her. Her husband had other ideas, and presses her to allow him to enjoy his conjugal rights on virtually every page in the early sections of the book. Perhaps unsurprisingly, she ended up bearing him fourteen children. It was after the birth of her first child that she suffered the illness which led to her religious visions, and it was these visions that convinced her to devote her life to God. Unfortunately, her approach was deemed controversial for the time: she was accused of being a heretic, and threatened with being burned at the stake. Unlike Julian of Norwich before her, Margery was a wife and mother, and medieval mothers simply weren't supposed to do the things that Margery did. In fact, nobody was. She courted the wrong sort of attention wherever she went, weeping loudly throughout church services and performing odd acts of penance. On her way back from one of several pilgrimages – she travelled to both Jerusalem and Rome, as well as to other holy sites – she gave all her money away to the poor and was reduced to beggary, attracting unwanted attention from the authorities. Apparently, it's possible to follow Christ's lead *too* closely.

Her 'autobiography' (if we can so consider her *Book*) was dictated towards the end of a long and eventful life. Unlike Julian, Margery didn't write her account but dictated it: *The Book of Margery Kempe* was transcribed by an unknown writer in the 1430s. Extracts from it were published by the gloriously named early English printer Wynkyn de Worde in 1501, but much of it remained lost for centuries until Erdeswick made his extraordinary discovery. Now we can read the full thing, and whether we approach it as a powerful work of religious literature or as an account of one woman's life during the Middle Ages, it's a good thing that that manuscript turned up in Erdeswick's cupboard.

✧ Robin of Barnsdale ✧

Robin Hood makes his debut in writing in the late fourteenth-century poem *Piers Plowman,* which is commonly attributed to William Langland, a contemporary of Geoffrey Chaucer. It was a timely moment for the outlaw to enter literature: English literature as we know it was starting to emerge, and the Peasants' Revolt – one leader of which, the priest John Ball, even quoted from Langland's poem – occurred in 1381, shortly after Robin Hood first appeared on the literary scene. It was a time when the social order of England was being challenged and feudalism was rapidly declining. The oldest surviving work of literature to detail Robin's adventures is the anonymous fifteenth-century ballad *A Gest of Robyn Hode.* The early printer Wynkyn de Worde helped to get some of the first Robin Hood tales into print, around fifty years later: by

then, Robin Hood was well and truly part of the English literary landscape.

> Friar Tuck, the famous man of the cloth among Robin's merry men, was a real person in fifteenth-century England, whose original name was Robert Stafford.

But where exactly *is* Robin's landscape? Why is Doncaster and Sheffield's airport named after Robin Hood, if the plucky outlaw lived in Nottinghamshire? There are several reasons. First, the earliest stories which mention Robin Hood are set in Yorkshire, not Nottinghamshire. Robin Hood's original home was Barnsdale Forest, not Sherwood (and in any case, the majority of the remaining woodland of Sherwood Forest is actually in Yorkshire, not Nottinghamshire). *A Gest*, for instance, makes no mention of Sherwood Forest. *A Gest* is, however, our source of many of the familiar features of the Robin Hood story, and many of the characters – Little John, Will Scarlet, Much the Miller's Son – first appeared in this anonymous poem. Robin Hood's cloak was scarlet in some of the Robin Hood tales: one nineteenth-century poem, for instance, has Robin in scarlet while his men don the famous Lincoln green.

Nottingham, while we're at it, derives its name from Snotingaham, the original name for the Saxon settlement that stood on the site of the present city: Snot was the Saxon chieftain who settled there, and somewhere along the way the initial 'S' was dropped.

In the original *Gest* story, Robin's king wasn't the absent crusading Richard the Lionheart (reigned 1189–99) – *A Gest* refers to 'King Edward', not Richard or John, and this puts Robin Hood later in English history, some time after 1272 when Edward I ascended the throne.

The idea of Robin being an outlawed nobleman, Robin of Locksley, is far more recent: it derives from Sir Walter Scott's celebrated medieval romance *Ivanhoe* (1820). This novel has also been credited with helping to popularize medieval history for a generation of later writers and artists, among them Tennyson and the Pre-Raphaelites. More recently, Scott's novel provided the blockbuster 1991 movie starring Kevin Costner, *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*, with its source material for the character of Robin Hood (who is known throughout as 'Robin of Locksley'; Locksley, by the way, provides us with another Yorkshire connection, since Loxley is the name of a village and suburb of the city of Sheffield in South Yorkshire). Many people criticized Costner for playing Robin with an unashamedly American accent, but Alan Rickman himself appears to have remarked that the American accent was closer to twelfth-century Anglo-Saxon than modern British English is.

THE RENAISSANCE

For the literary historian Stephen Greenblatt, it was a book that began the Renaissance. In *The Swerve: How the Renaissance Began*, Greenblatt argues that an Italian librarian's rediscovery in the fifteenth century of an all-but-forgotten classical text, Lucretius' epic poem *De Rerum Natura* ('On the Nature of Things'), sparked a resurgence of interest in long-abandoned theories of the universe, such as the notion that worldly events are governed by chance rather than divine will, and that everything is fundamentally composed of atoms. Granted, Lucretius also believed that worms spontaneously grew out of wet soil, and that winds in underground caves were responsible for earthquakes, but on the topic of atomic physics he was, in a startling way, correct.

The rediscovery of Lucretius' poem, Greenblatt argues, led to a 'swerve' away from Christian asceticism in favour of a focus on this world and the pleasures it can offer (Lucretius was a follower of Epicurus, who advocated the responsible pursuit of pleasure). Perhaps, though, things were not that simple. Reviewing Greenblatt's book, Robert Douglas-Fairhurst suggested that it was not one book, but rather the *invention* of the modern book itself, that gave the Renaissance its real momentum. Sure enough, Johannes Gutenberg's invention of movable type in the mid-fifteenth century, the technological innovation that made the printed book possible, allowed for a much freer and easier exchange of ideas across Europe and, in time, the entire Western world. Suddenly you didn't need a dozen monks slowly and slavishly copying out the Bible in their scriptorium: a printer in a workshop could produce hundreds of copies, for a fraction of the cost.

Eventually, among other things, this would enable people who would never have otherwise had ready access to the Bible – other than through the priest's Latin recital of it at mass – to scrutinize the word of God closely and carefully. Along with other factors, this would help to bring about the Christian Reformation, whereby Catholicism lost its claim to being the sole version of Christianity practised in much of the Western world. In fact, Catholicism hadn't had a true monopoly for some time: in England the Lollards, followers of John Wycliffe, had been active since

the fourteenth century, rejecting many aspects of Roman Catholicism and advocating a return to a simpler form of worship. (Wycliffe was a near-contemporary of Chaucer, and undertook an English translation of much of the Bible – yet more evidence of this explosion of creativity among English writers during the fourteenth century.)

But the Lollards (the word comes from the Dutch for 'mumbler', from its practitioners' habit of muttering passages from the Bible) remained a relatively small group. It was the arrival of Protestantism in the sixteenth century that really gave Catholicism a run for its money, beginning on Halloween 1517 when the German monk Martin Luther nailed his ninety-five theses, or calls for religious reform, to the church door at Wittenberg. Within two decades, England had followed, with Henry VIII declaring himself the head of the Church of England – he, not the Pope, would be the religious leader of his country. Of course, Henry's motive was largely political: he wanted to get a divorce from his first wife, Catherine of Aragon, but the Pope refused to grant him permission. The upheaval and change wrought by Luther throughout Europe, and by Henry VIII in England, would exercise a profound effect on how people lived – and, as we'll see in this chapter, on the kinds of books people wrote.

Theoretically, the most expensive book in the world costs 153 million Euros and is only 13 pages long. I say 'theoretically' because nobody has yet felt it was worth its somewhat inflated price. Called 'The Task', it's a short work by the self-proclaimed greatest philosopher of all time, Tomas Alexander Hartmann. Only one copy of his magnum opus will ever exist, Hartmann assures us, so to learn the answers to some of the world's biggest questions you need to have pretty deep pockets. As it stands, the most that anyone has ever actually *paid* for a single book is just under $31 million, when Bill Gates bought the *Codex Leicester,* better known as Leonardo da Vinci's notebooks. Few figures better exemplify the Renaissance than Leonardo, but it is with some altogether more everyday works – treating everything from bodily functions to Tudor attitudes towards cats – that this chapter is chiefly concerned. They won't cost you $31 million to acquire, but they are, in their own quiet ways, highly valuable artefacts.

✧ Gargantuan ✧

It takes a certain kind of writer to get their own adjective. Shakespearean, Dickensian, Orwellian: it helps if your work comes to typify, even define, a particular style or theme. Take *Rabelaisian*: pertaining to the writings of the French author François Rabelais (*c.*1494–1553), which are described by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as 'noted for their earthy humour, their parody of medieval learning and literature, and their affirmation of humanist values; bawdy, vulgar'. No other writer of the