



Literature of the Western World, Volume I: The Ancient World Through the Renaissance (5th Edition)

By Brian Wilkie, James Hurt

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Editorial Review

From the Inside Flap

Preface

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Even within Western literature, two volumes, thick as they are, can include only a tiny fraction of the most highly regarded and most influential works. The editors have adopted principles of both balance and range in making their hard choices. The text goes from about 2000 B.C. to 2000 A.D., and the editors have tried to represent the earlier periods as fully and fairly as the later ones. The temporal range and balance are matched by a range and balance of literary modes. If the works included were divided into the modes of lyric, narrative, and drama, the result would be three substantial anthologies of poems, stories, and plays. The national literatures within the boundaries of the subject have been represented in a balanced way as well, as far as possible. Balance, too, has been the goal in the representation of "high" and "low" literature (both *Oedipus Rex* and *Aesop's Fables*) and literature by women and men (*Marguerite de Navarre* as well as *Boccaccio*, *Anna Akhmatova* as well as *Rainer Maria Rilke*).

The way the texts are presented has been as important to the editors as their selection. The editors are aware that most students who use *Literature of the Western World* are encountering the works in it for the first time. Therefore, they try to make the initial encounter as rich and meaningful as possible. This means that translations of works in languages other than English must be carefully chosen, not only for accuracy but also for readability and, above all, for capturing the literary quality of the original as vividly as possible. Robert Fitzgerald's translations of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the longest selection from a single author in the anthology, achieve these goals, as do Robert Fagles's and Phillip Vellacott's translations of Greek tragedy, H. R. Huse's translation of the *Divine Comedy*, Louise and Aylmer Maude's translations of Tolstoy, and Stephen Mitchell's translations of Rilke. In a number of cases, we have been able to include translations by distinguished writers in their own right. Thus the Irish poets Thomas Kinsella and Derek Mahon translate the Irish *Tain* and the poems of Gerard de Nerval; the American poets Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, William Cullen Bryant, W. S. Merwin, and Denise Levertov translate some of the Renaissance lyrics; Marianne Moore and Richard Wilbur translate *La Fontaine* and *Moliere* respectively; and Randall Jarrell translates *Faust*. The great English novelist Tobias Smollett translates *Voltaire*, his contemporary; and D. M. Thomas

translates both Alexander Pushkin and Anna Akhmatova. Such pairings of congenial temperaments often result in happy blendings that read like original works.

Introductions and annotations are also intended to help the student feel at home in the often remote and unfamiliar worlds of the writers. Extensive period introductions survey historical events and provide syntheses of the thematic and aesthetic preoccupations of each period. Detailed introductions to individual authors and works place each work in the context of its author's life and times and suggest what to look out for in a first reading without giving away the content or imposing a single interpretation. Annotations are economical and factual rather than interpretive but ample enough to minimize trips to the dictionary or encyclopedia.

The fifth edition retains much from the previous editions, especially texts that instructors told us were especially important in a course in Western literature, but it also includes a great deal of new material. The most striking innovation is perhaps the sections of "Cultural Texts" for each period. These are made up of selections that, though they may have considerable literary value themselves, are likely to be read principally for their ideas rather than their literary merits. A few of these are works of literary theory, such as Aristotle's *Poetics*, Boileau's *Art of Poetry*, and the selection from Raymond Williams's *The Long Revolution*. Most, though, are works of philosophy, history, political science, and other nonliterary fields that express directly some of the ideas that poets, storytellers, and playwrights express indirectly. A total of forty-three of these cultural texts appear in the two volumes as illuminating companion pieces to the works of literature proper.

A second structural change is not strictly new but represents an expansion of features of the earlier editions: a number of sections of lyric poetry in both volumes, a series of minianthologies within the anthology. The fourth edition included such a section of French Symbolist and Modernist Poetry. This edition adds similar sections of Greek and Latin Lyric Poetry, Renaissance Lyric Poetry, and Romantic Lyric Poetry. Some of the poets included in these sections appeared separately in previous editions; placing them in the contexts of their contemporaries considerably enriches our reading of them.

A third new feature of the book is greater attention to popular literature. There is a temptation in compressing all of Western literature into two volumes to focus on the most heroic works, often aristocratic in origin. But the "high" literature of the West has always been accompanied by the "low," and we have tried to acknowledge its presence by including such popular forms as folktales, beast fables, and tales of wonder throughout the two volumes. Thus in Volume I Aesop's fables follow the *Odyssey*, the medieval beast-epic *Renard the Fox* follows the *Lais of Marie de France*, and the *Thousand and One Nights* follows the *Divine Comedy*. Folk tales in sophisticated retellings appear near the beginning and near the end of Volume II, in La Fontaine's suave, ironic *Fables* and Calvino's *Italian Folktales*, in which folk tradition meets postmodernism.

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Among the participants in the ongoing conversation that resulted in this book are friends who took an active part in planning and advising on this edition. They include the following: Randy Malamud, Georgia State Univ

From the Back Cover

This first volume of a two-volume survey allows students and instructors to choose among the most important canonical and less familiar texts of the Western literary tradition in Europe and the Americas.

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