A briefe Historie

of

English

Literature

from Chaucer to Milton

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for Professor Gisèle Venet.

A small tribute to her dedication
to studies in English Literature.
Our history begins
with Chaucer's Tales

in that cruel month
when the seed takes root

and the Ram
sleeps in the Zodiac

a miller, a cook, a nun, a wife,
each tell the story of their life.

Spenser's *Fairie Queene* returned us
to the *Age of Arthur*

of faery wights
and knights in armor,

he reached the epitome of his art
in the Amazon, *Britomart*.

Poetry was now in the hands of amateurs
courtiers wrote only in *pentameters*

deer were hunted by amorous *harts*,
and women were praised in all their parts

but this was not an age of equal rights
lips were red and skin was white

until one *upstart crow* wrote
his mistress' eyes were nothing like the sun,

but we run ahead of our story, for without *Marlowe* *Shakespeare* would never have had his foil.

*Marlowe's Faust* is something like a mystery play
played in a wreathèd cart, on *Christmas Day*.

there he wrote of *Helen*
among the topless towers of Ilium.

Of Shakespeare best to talk of *Romeo* and *Juliet*
of *Cleopatra* and *Hamlet*
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those conceived under canopies of fire
the fretted roof of poetic desire.

We are Viola
washed upon a foreign shore

and Bottom too,
dreaming of Titania.

We are Rosalind
wandering in Arden

and Ophelia
expiring.

The rest is silence.

Of Jonson, it is safe to say,
nothing he wrote was written in a day.

"Labour" was the word he used
to say how he had been abused.

Accusing Shakespeare of small Latin, less Greek
he found it difficult to speak

without a pound of Tacitus
or an epigram of Horace

an ancient pile of allusions
with which to bore us

preferring to write a tome
and turn his Reader into stone.

Milton created Satan, an angel in sin
brushing bits of heaven from his wing

envious of the Chosen Pair
he climbed into Paradise and watched them there

slithering in serpent's guise
he taught them how to idolize

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bringing down the wrath of heaven
and with it, the loss of Eden.

And now our history is at an end,
the time when things were hid

is gone and even Oxymoron
would lose her charm.

No devious path, no purling stream, no curious maze, no twisted seam,
like a chessboard without a Queen

pawns and rooks now ruled the day
jumping in perfect battle array.

The eighteenth-century was not far away.