

**A briefe *Historie***  
**of**  
**English**  
**Literature**  
**from *Chaucer to Milton***

Lynn Sermin MESKILL

*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*

*"A Briefe Historie of English Literature"*

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

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.