The History Of English Poetry

From The Close of the Eleventh To The Commencement of the Eighteenth Century

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Section XLIII. General view and character of the poetry of queen Elisabeth's age.

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SECT. XLIII.

ENOUGH has been opened of the reign of queen Eliſabeth, to afford us an opportunity of forming ſome general reflections, tending to eſtabliſh a full eſtimate of the genius of the poetry of that reign; and which, by drawing concluſions from what has been ſaid, and directing the reader to what he is to expect, will at once be recapitulatory and preparatory. Such a ſurvey perhaps might have ſtood with more propriety as an introduction to this reign. But it was firſt neceſſary to clear the way, by many circumſtantial details, and the regular narration of thoſe particulars, which lay the foundation of principles, and ſuggeſt matter for diſcurſive obſervation. My ſentiments on this ſubject ſhall therefore compoſe the concluding ſection of the preſent volume.

The age of queen Eliſabeth is commonly called the golden age of Engliſh poetry. It certainly may not improperly be ſtyled the moſt POETICAL age of theſe annals.

Among the great features which ſtrike us in the poetry of this period, are the predominancy of fable, of fiction, and fancy, and a predilection for intereſting adventures and pathetic events. I will endeavour to aſſign and explain the cauſe of this characteriſtic diſtinction, which may chiefly be referred to the following principles, ſometimes blended, and ſometimes operating ſingly: The revival and vernacular verſions of the claſſics, the importation and tranſlation of Italian novels, the viſionary reveries or refinements of falſe philoſophy, a degree of ſuperſtition ſufficient for the purpoſes of poetry, the adoption of the

the machineries of romance, and the frequency and improvements of allegoric exhibition in the popular ſpectacles.

When the corruptions and impoſtures of popery were aboliſhed, the faſhion of cultivating the Greek and Roman learning became univerſal: and the literary character was no longer appropriated to ſcholars by profeſſion, but aſſumed by the nobility and gentry. The eccleſiaſtics had found it their intereſt to keep the languages of antiquity to themſelves, and men were eager to know what had been ſo long injuriouſly concealed. Truth propagates truth, and the mantle of myſtery was removed not only from religion but from literature. The laity, who had now been taught to aſſert their natural privileges, became impatient of the old monopoly of knowledge, and demanded admittance to the uſurpations of the clergy. The general curioſity for new diſcoveries, heightened either by juſt or imaginary ideas of the treaſures contained in the Greek and Roman writers, excited all perſons of leiſure and fortune to ſtudy the claſſics. The pedantry of the preſent age was the politeneſs of the laſt. An accurate comprehenſion of the phraſeology and peculiarities of the antient poets, hiſtorians, and orators, which yet ſeldom went farther than a kind of technical erudition, was an indiſpenſable and almoſt the principal object in the circle of a gentleman's education. Every young lady of faſhion was carefully inſtituted in claſſical letters: and the daughter of a ducheſs was taught, not only to diſtil ſtrong waters, but to conſtrue Greek. Among the learned females of high diſtinction, queen Eliſabeth herſelf was the moſt conſpicuous. Roger Aſcham, her preceptor, ſpeaks with rapture of her aſtoniſhing progreſs in the Greek nouns; and declares with no ſmall degree of triumph, that during a long reſidence at Windſor-caſtle, ſhe was accuſtomed to read more Greek in a day, than "ſome prebendary of that church "did Latin, in one week[a]." And although perhaps a princeſs looking out words in a lexicon, and writing down hard phraſes

[a] SCHOOLEMASTER. p. 19. b. edit. 1589. 4to.

from Plutarch's Lives, may be thought at preſent a more incompatible and extraordinary character, than a canon of Windſor underſtanding no Greek and but little Latin, yet Eliſabeth's paſſion for theſe acquiſitions was then natural, and reſulted from the genius and habitudes of her age.

The books of antiquity being thus familiariſed to the great, every thing was tinctured with antient hiſtory and mythology. The heathen gods, although diſcountenanced by the Calviniſts on a ſuſpicion of their tending to cheriſh and revive a ſpirit of idolatry, came into general vogue. When the queen paraded through a country-town, almoſt every pageant was a pantheon. When ſhe paid a viſit at the houſe of any of her nobility, at entering the hall ſhe was ſaluted by the Penates, and conducted to her privy-chamber by Mercury. Even the paſtry-cooks were expert mythologiſts. At dinner, ſelect transformations of Ovid's metamorphoſes were exhibited in confectionary: and the ſplendid iceing of an immenſe hiſtoric plumb-cake, was emboſſed with a delicious baſſo-relievo of the deſtruction of Troy. In the afternoon, when ſhe condeſcended to walk in the garden, the lake was covered with Tritons and Nereids: the pages of the family were converted into Wood-nymphs who peeped from every bower: and the footmen gamboled over the lawns in the figure of Satyrs. I ſpeak it without deſigning to inſinuate any unfavourable ſuſpicions, but it ſeems difficult to ſay, why Eliſabeth's virginity ſhould have been made the theme of perpetual and exceſſive panegyric: nor does it immediately appear, that there is leſs merit or glory in a married than a maiden queen. Yet, the next morning, after ſleeping in a room hung with the tapeſtry of the voyage of Eneas, when her majeſty hunted in the Park, ſhe was met by Diana, who pronouncing our royal prude to be the brighteſt paragon of unſpotted chaſtity, invited her to groves free from the intruſions of Acteon. The truth is, ſhe was ſo profuſely flattered for this virtue, becauſe it was eſteemed the characteriſtical ornament of the heroines, as fantaſtic honour was the chief pride of the champions, of the old barbarous romance.

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It was in conformity to the ſentiments of chivalry, which ſtill continued in vogue, that ſhe was celebrated for chaſtity: the compliment, however, was paid in a claſſical alluſion.

Queens muſt be ridiculous when they would appear as women. The ſofter attractions of ſex vaniſh on the throne. Eliſabeth ſought all occaſions of being extolled for her beauty, of which indeed in the prime of her youth ſhe poſſeſſed but a ſmall ſhare, whatever might have been her pretenſions to abſolute virginity. Notwithſtanding her exaggerated habits of dignity and ceremony, and a certain affectation of imperial ſeverity, ſhe did not perceive this ambition of being complimented for beauty, to be an idle and unpardonable levity, totally inconſiſtent with her high ſtation and character. As ſhe conquered all nations with her arms, it matters not what were the triumphs of her eyes. Of what conſequence was the complexion of the miſtreſs of the world? Not leſs vain of her perſon than her politics, this ſtately coquet, the guardian of the proteſtant faith, the terror of the ſea, the mediatrix of the factions of France, and the ſcourge of Spain, was infinitely mortified, if an embaſſador, at the firſt audience, did not tell her ſhe was the fineſt woman in Europe. No negociation ſucceeded unleſs ſhe was addreſſed as a goddeſs. Encomiaſtic harangues drawn from this topic, even on the ſuppoſition of youth and beauty, were ſurely ſuperfluous, unſuitable, and unworthy; and were offered and received with an equal impropriety. Yet when ſhe rode through the ſtreets of the city of Norwich, Cupid, at the command of the mayor and aldermen, advancing from a groupe of gods who had left Olympus to grace the proceſſion, gave her a golden arrow, the moſt effective weapon of his well-furniſhed quiver, which under the influence of ſuch irreſiſtible charms was ſure to wound the moſt obdurate heart. "A gift, ſays honeſt Hollinſhed, "which her majeſty, now verging to her fiftieth year, received "very thankfullie[b]." In one of the fulſome interludes at

[b] Chron. iii. f. 1297.

court,

court, where ſhe was preſent, the ſinging-boys of her chapel preſented the ſtory of the three rival goddeſſes on mount Ida, to which her majeſty was ingeniouſly added as a fourth: and Paris was arraigned in form for adjudging the golden apple to Venus, which was due to the queen alone.

This inundation of claſſical pedantry ſoon infected our poetry. Our writers, already trained in the ſchool of fancy, were ſuddenly dazzled with theſe novel imaginations, and the divinities and heroes of pagan antiquity decorated every compoſition. The perpetual alluſions to antient fable were often introduced without the leaſt regard to propriety. Shakeſpeare's Mrs. Page, who is not intended in any degree to be a learned or an affected lady, laughing at the cumberſome courtſhip of her corpulent lover Falſtaffe, ſays, "I had rather be a giantess and lie under mount "Pelion [c]." This familiarity with the pagan ſtory was not, however, ſo much owing to the prevailing ſtudy of the original authors, as to the numerous Engliſh verſions of them, which were conſequently made. The tranſlations of the claſſics, which now employed every pen, gave a currency and a celebrity to theſe fancies, and had the effect of diffuſing them among the people. No ſooner were they delivered from the pale of the ſcholaſtic languages, than they acquired a general notoriety. Ovid's metamorphoſes juſt tranſlated by Golding, to inſtance no farther, diſcloſed a new world of fiction, even to the illiterate. As we had now all the antient fables in Engliſh, learned alluſions, whether in a poem or a pageant, were no longer obſcure and unintelligible to common readers and common ſpectators. And here we are led to obſerve, that at this reſtoration of the claſſics, we were firſt ſtruck only with their fabulous inventions. We did not attend to their regularity of deſign and juſtneſs of ſentiment. A rude age, beginning to read theſe writers, imitated their extravagancies, not their natural beauties. And theſe, like other novelties, were purſued to a blameable exceſs.

[c] Merry W. Act ii. Sc. i.

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I have before given a ſketch of the introduction of claſſical ſtories, in the ſplendid ſhow exhibited at the coronation of queen Anne Boleyn. But that is a rare and a premature inſtance: and the pagan fictions are there complicated with the barbariſms of the catholic worſhip, and the doctrines of ſcholaſtic theology. Claſſical learning was not then ſo widely ſpread, either by ſtudy or tranſlation, as to bring theſe learned ſpectacles into faſhion, to frame them with ſufficient ſkill, and to preſent them with propriety.

Another capital ſource of the poetry peculiar to this period, conſiſted in the numerous tranſlations of Italian tales into Engliſh. Theſe narratives, not dealing altogether in romantic inventions, but in real life and manners, and in artful arrangements of fictitious yet probable events, afforded a new gratification to a people which yet retained their antient reliſh for tale-telling, and became the faſhionable amuſement of all who profeſſed to read for pleaſure. They gave riſe to innumerable plays and poems, which would not otherwiſe have exiſted; and turned the thoughts of our writers to new inventions of the ſame kind. Before theſe books became common, affecting ſituations, the combination of incident, and the pathos of cataſtrophe, were almoſt unknown. Diſtreſs, eſpecially that ariſing from the conflicts of the tender paſſion, had not yet been ſhewn in its moſt intereſting forms. It was hence our poets, particularly the dramatic, borrowed ideas of a legitimate plot, and the complication of facts neceſſary to conſtitute a ſtory either of the comic or tragic ſpecies. In proportion as knowledge encreaſed, genius had wanted ſubjects and materials. Theſe pieces uſurped the place of legends and chronicles. And although the old hiſtorical ſongs of the minſtrels contained much bold adventure, heroic enterpriſe, and ſtrong touches of rude delineation, yet they failed in that multiplication and diſpoſition of circumſtances, and in that deſcription of characters and events approaching nearer to truth and reality, which were demanded by a more

diſcerning

diſcerning and curious age. Even the rugged features of the original Gothic romance were ſoftened by this ſort of reading: and the Italian paſtoral, yet with ſome mixture of the kind of incidents deſcribed in Heliodorus's Ethiopic hiſtory now newly tranſlated, was engrafted on the feudal manners in Sydney's ARCADIA.

But the reformation had not yet deſtroyed every deluſion, nor diſinchanted all the ſtrong holds of ſuperſtition. A few dim characters were yet legible in the mouldering creed of tradition. Every goblin of ignorance did not vaniſh at the firſt glimmerings of the morning of ſcience. Reaſon ſuffered a few demons ſtill to linger, which ſhe choſe to retain in her ſervice under the guidance of poetry. Men believed, or were willing to believe, that ſpirits were yet hovering around, who brought with them *airs from heaven, or blaſts from hell*, that the ghoſt was duely releaſed from his priſon of torment at the ſound of the curfue, and that fairies imprinted myſterious circles on the turf by moonlight. Much of this credulity was even conſecrated by the name of ſcience and profound ſpeculation. Proſpero had not yet *broken and buried his ſtaff*, nor *drowned his book deeper than did ever plummet ſound*. It was now that the alchymiſt, and the judicial aſtrologer, conducted his occult operations by the potent intercourſe of ſome preternatural being, who came obſequious to his call, and was bound to accompliſh his ſevereſt ſervices, under certain conditions, and for a limited duration of time. It was actually one of the pretended feats of theſe fantaſtic philoſophers, to evoke the queen of the Fairies in the ſolitude of a gloomy grove, who, preceded by a ſudden ruſtling of the leaves, appeared in robes of tranſcendent luſtre [d]. The Shakeſpeare of a more inſtructed and poliſhed age, would not have given us a magician darkening the ſun at noon, the ſabbath of the witches, and the cauldron of incantation.

[d] Lilly's LIFE, p. 151.

Undoubtedly

Undoubtedly moſt of theſe notions were credited and entertained in a much higher degree, in the preceding periods. But the arts of compoſition had not then made a ſufficient progreſs, nor would the poets of thoſe periods have managed them with ſo much addreſs and judgement. We were now arrived at that point, when the national credulity, chaſtened by reaſon, had produced a ſort of civilized ſuperſtition, and left a ſet of traditions, fanciful enough for poetic decoration, and yet not too violent and chimerical for common ſenſe. Hobbes, although no friend to this doctrine, obſerves happily, "In a good poem "both judgement and fancy are required; but the fancy muſt "be more eminent, becauſe they pleaſe for the EXTRAVA-"GANCY, but ought not to diſpleaſe by INDISCRETION [e]."

In the mean time the Gothic romance, although ſomewhat ſhook by the claſſical fictions, and by the tales of Boccace and Bandello, ſtill maintained its ground: and the daring machineries of giants, dragons, and inchanted caſtles, borrowed from the magic ſtorehouſe of Boiardo, Arioſto, and Taſſo, began to be employed by the epic muſe. Theſe ornaments have been cenſured by the bigotry of preciſe and ſervile critics, as abounding in whimſical abſurdities, and as unwarrantable deviations from the practice of Homer and Virgil. The author of AN ENQUIRY INTO THE LIFE AND WRITINGS OF HOMER is willing to allow a fertility of genius, and a felicity of expreſſion, to Taſſo and Arioſto; but at the ſame time complains, that, "quitting "life, they betook themſelves to aerial beings and Utopian "characters, and filled their works with Charms and Viſions, "the modern Supplements of the Marvellous and Sublime. The "beſt poets copy nature, and give it ſuch as they find it. When "once they loſe ſight of this, they write falſe, be their talents "ever ſo great [f]." But what ſhall we ſay of thoſe Utopians, the Cyclopes and the Leſtrigons in the Odyſſey? The hippogrif of Arioſto may be oppoſed to the harpies of Virgil. If leaves

[e] LEVIATH. Part i. ch. viii. [f] SECT. V. p. 69.

are turned into ſhips in the Orlando, nymphs are transformed into ſhips in the Eneid. Cacus is a more unnatural ſavage than Caliban. Nor am I convinced, that the imagery of Iſmeno's necromantic foreſt in the Gieruſalemme Liberata, guarded by walls and battlements of fire, is leſs marvellous and ſublime, than the leap of Juno's horſes in the Iliad, celebrated by Longinus for its ſingular magnificence and dignity [z]. On the principles of this critic, Voltaire's Henriad may be placed at the head of the modern epic. But I forbear to anticipate my opinion of a ſyſtem, which will more properly be conſidered, when I come to ſpeak of Spenſer. I muſt, however, obſerve here, that the Gothic and pagan fictions were now frequently blended and incorporated. The Lady of the Lake floated in the ſuite of Neptune before queen Eliſabeth at Kenilworth; Ariel aſſumes the ſemblance of a ſea-nymph, and Hecate, by an eaſy aſſociation, conducts the rites of the weird ſiſters in Macbeth.

Allegory had been derived from the religious dramas into our civil ſpectacles. The maſques and pageantries of the age of Eliſabeth were not only furniſhed by the heathen divinities, but often by the virtues and vices imperſonated, ſignificantly decorated, accurately diſtinguiſhed by their proper types, and repreſented by living actors. The antient ſymbolical ſhews of this ſort began now to loſe their old barbariſm and a mixture of religion, and to aſſume a degree of poetical elegance and preciſion. Nor was it only in the conformation of particular figures that much fancy was ſhewn, but in the contexture of ſome of the fables or devices preſented by groupes of ideal perſonages. Theſe exhibitions quickened creative invention, and reflected back on poetry what poetry had given. From their familiarity and public nature, they formed a national taſte for allegory; and the allegorical poets were now writing to the people. Even romance was turned into this channel. In the Fairy Queen, allegory is wrought upon chivalry, and the feats and figments of Arthur's round table

[z] Iliad, V. 770. Longin. §. ix.

are

are moralised. The virtues of magnificence and chastity are here personified: but they are imaged with the forms, and under the agency, of romantic knights and damsels. What was an afterthought in Tasso, appears to have been Spenser's premeditated and primary design. In the mean time, we must not confound these moral combatants of the Fairy Queen with some of its other embodied abstractions, which are purely and professedly allegorical.

It may here be added, that only a few critical treatises, and but one ART OF POETRY, were now written. Sentiments and images were not absolutely determined by the canons of composition: nor was genius awed by the consciousness of a future and final arraignment at the tribunal of taste. A certain dignity of inattention to niceties is now visible in our writers. Without too closely consulting a criterion of correctness, every man indulged his own capriciousness of invention. The poet's appeal was chiefly to his own voluntary feelings, his own immediate and peculiar mode of conception. And this freedom of thought was often expressed in an undisguised frankness of diction. A circumstance, by the way, that greatly contributed to give the flowing modulation which now marked the measures of our poets, and which soon degenerated into the opposite extreme of dissonance and asperity. Selection and discrimination were often overlooked. Shakespeare wandered in pursuit of universal nature. The glancings of his eye are from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven. We behold him breaking the barriers of imaginary method. In the same scene, he descends from his meridian of the noblest tragic sublimity, to puns and quibbles, to the meanest merriments of a plebeian farce. In the midst of his dignity, he resembles his own Richard the second, the *skipping king*, who sometimes discarding the state of a monarch,

Mingled his royalty with carping fools [h].

[h] FIRST P. HENRY iv. Act iii. Sc. ii.

He ſeems not to have ſeen any impropriety, in the moſt abrupt tranſitions, from dukes to buffoons, from ſenators to ſailors, from counſellors to conſtables, and from kings to clowns. Like Virgil's majeſtic oak,

——— Quantum vertice ad auras
Ætherias, tantum radice in Tartara tendit[1].

No Satires, properly ſo called, were written till towards the latter end of the queen's reign, and then but a few. Pictures drawn at large of the vices of the times, did not ſuit readers who loved to wander in the regions of artificial manners. The Muſe, like the people, was too ſolemn and reſerved, too ceremonious and pedantic, to ſtoop to common life. Satire is the poetry of a nation highly poliſhed.

The importance of the female character was not yet acknowledged, nor were women admitted into the general commerce of ſociety. The effect of that intercourſe had not imparted a comic air to poetry, nor ſoftened the ſeverer tone of our verſification with the levities of gallantry, and the familiarities of compliment, ſometimes perhaps operating on ſerious ſubjects, and imperceptibly ſpreading themſelves in the general habits of ſtyle and thought. I do not mean to inſinuate, that our poetry has ſuffered from the great change of manners, which this aſſumption of the gentler ſex, or rather the improved ſtate of female education, has produced, by giving elegance and variety to life, by enlarging the ſphere of converſation, and by multiplying the topics and enriching the ſtores of wit and humour. But I am marking the peculiarities of compoſition: and my meaning was to ſuggeſt, that the abſence of ſo important a circumſtance from the modes and conſtitution of antient life, muſt have influenced the cotemporary poetry. Of the ſtate of manners among our anceſtors reſpecting this point, many traces remain. Their ſtyle of courtſhip may be collected from the love-dialogues of Hamlet, young

[1] Georg. ii. 291.

Percy,

Percy, Henry the fifth, and Maſter Fenton. Their tragic heroines, their Deſdemonas and Ophelias, although of ſo much conſequence in the piece, are degraded to the back-ground. In comedy, their ladies are nothing more than MERRY WIVES, plain and chearful matrons, who ſtand upon the *charineſs of their honeſty*. In the ſmaller poems, if a lover praiſes his miſtreſs, ſhe is complimented in ſtrains neither polite nor pathetic, without elegance and without affection: ſhe is deſcribed, not in the addreſs of intelligible yet artful panegyric, not in the real colours, and with the genuine accompliſhments, of nature, but as an eccentric ideal being of another ſyſtem, and as inſpiring ſentiments equally unmeaning, hyperbolical, and unnatural.

All or moſt of theſe circumſtances, contributed to give a deſcriptive, a pictureſque, and a figurative caſt to the poetical language. This effect appears even in the proſe compoſitions of the reign of Eliſabeth. In the ſubſequent age, proſe became the language of poetry.

In the mean time, general knowledge was encreaſing with a wide diffuſion and a haſty rapidity. Books began to be multiplied, and a variety of the moſt uſeful and rational topics had been diſcuſſed in our own language. But ſcience had not made too great advances. On the whole, we were now arrived at that period, propitious to the operations of original and true poetry, when the coyneſs of fancy was not always proof againſt the approaches of reaſon, when genius was rather directed than governed by judgement, and when taſte and learning had ſo far only diſciplined imagination, as to ſuffer its exceſſes to paſs without cenſure or controul, for the ſake of the beauties to which they were allied.

END OF THE THIRD VOLUME.