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The History Of English Poetry

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

Warton, Thomas

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Section III. Reign of Henry the sixth. Lydgate. His life and character. His
Dance of Death. Macaber a German poet. Lydgate's poem in honour of
Saint Edmund. Presented to Henry the sixth, at ...

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S E C T: III.

I Consider Chaucer as a genial day in an English spring. A brilliant sun enlivens the face of nature with an unusual lustre: the sudden appearance of cloudless skies, and the unexpected warmth of a tepid atmosphere, after the gloom and the inclemencies of a tedious winter, fill our hearts with the visionary prospect of a speedy summer: and we fondly anticipate a long continuance of gentle gales and vernal serenity. But winter returns with redoubled horrors: the clouds condense more formidably than before; and those tender buds, and early blossoms, which were called forth by the transient gleam of a temporary sun-shine, are nipped by frosts, and torn by tempests.

Most of the poets that immediately succeeded Chaucer, seem rather relapsing into barbarism, than availing themselves of those striking ornaments which his judgment and imagination had disclosed. They appear to have been insensible to his vigour of versification, and his flights of fancy. It was not indeed likely that a poet should soon arise equal to Chaucer: and it must be remembered, that the national distractions which ensued, had no small share in obstructing the exercise of those studies which delight in peace and repose. His successors, however, approach him in no degree of proportion. Among these, John Lydgate is the poet who follows him at the shortest interval.

I have placed Lydgate in the reign of Henry the sixth, and he seems to have arrived at his highest point of eminence about the year 1430¹. Many of his poems, however,

¹ In a copy of Lydgate's *Chronicle of English Kings*, there is a stanza of Edward the fourth. MSS. Harl. 2251. 3. In his poem *Ab inimicis nostris*, &c. Edward the fourth,

his *Queen* and *Modiv* are remembered. MSS. Harl. *ibid.* 9. fol. 10. But these pieces could not well be written by Lydgate. For he was ordained a subdeacon, 1389. Deacon,

appeared before. He was a monk of the Benedictine abbey of Bury in Suffolk, and an uncommon ornament of his profession. Yet his genius was so lively, and his accomplishments so numerous, that I suspect the holy father saint Benedict would hardly have acknowledged him for a genuine disciple. After a short education at Oxford, he travelled into France and Italy^u; and returned a complete master of the language and the literature of both countries. He chiefly studied the Italian and French poets, particularly Dante, Boccacio, and Alain Chartier; and became so distinguished a proficient in polite learning, that he opened a school in his monastery, for teaching the sons of the nobility the arts of versification, and the elegancies of composition. Yet although philology was his object, he was not unfamiliar with the fashionable philosophy: he was not only a poet and a rhetorician, but a geometrician, an astronomer, a theologian, and a disputant. On the whole I am of opinion, that Lydgate made considerable additions to those amplifications of our language, in which Chaucer, Gower, and Occleve led the way: and that he is the first of our writers whose style is clothed with that perspicuity, in which the English phraseology appears at this day to an English reader.

To enumerate Lydgate's pieces, would be to write the catalogue of a little library. No poet seems to have possessed a greater versatility of talents. He moves with equal ease in every mode of composition. His hymns, and his ballads, have the same degree of merit: and whether his subject be the life of a hermit or a hero, of saint Austin or Guy earl of Warwick, ludicrous or legendary, religious or romantic, a

con, 1393. And priest, 1397. Registr. Gul. Cratfield, abbas de Bury, MSS. Cott. TIBER. B. ix. fol. 1. 35. 52. Edward came to the crown, 1461. Pitts says, that our author died, 1482. Lydgate, in his PHILOMELA, mentions the death of Henry

lord Warwick, who died in 1446. MSS. Harl. ibid. 120. fol. 255.

^u See one of his DITTIES, MSS. Harl. 2255. 41. fol. 148.

I have been offte in dyvers londys, &c.

history

history or an allegory, he writes with facility. His transitions were rapid from works of the most serious and laborious kind to sallies of levity and pieces of popular entertainment. His muse was of universal access; and he was not only the poet of his monastery, but of the world in general. If a disguising was intended by the company of goldsmiths, a mask before his majesty at Eltham, a may-game for the sheriffs and aldermen of London, a mumming before the lord mayor, a procession of pageants from the creation for the festival of Corpus Christi, or a carol for the coronation, Lydgate was consulted and gave the poetry*.

About the year 1430, Whethamstede the learned and liberal abbot of saint Albans, being desirous of familiarising the history of his patron saint to the monks of his convent, employed Lydgate, as it should seem, then a monk of Bury, to translate the Latin legend of his life in English rhymes. The chronicler who records a part of this anecdote seems to consider Lydgate's translation, as a matter of mere manual mechanism; for he adds, that Whethamstede paid for the translation, the writing, and illuminations, one hundred shillings. It was placed before the altar of the saint, which Whethamstede afterwards adorned with much magnificence, in the abbey church^v.

Our author's stanzas, called the DANCE OF DEATH, which he translated from the French, at the request of the chapter of saint Paul's, to be inscribed under the representation of DEATH leading all ranks of men about the cloister of their

* See a variety of his pieces of this kind, MSS. Ashmol. 59. ii. Stowe says, that at the reception of Margaret queen of Henry sixth, several pageants, the verses by Lydgate, were shewn at Paul's gate, in 1445. Hist. p. 385. See also MSS. Harl. 2251. 118. fol. 250. b. The COVENTRY PLAY for Corpus Christi day, in the Cotton library, was very probably written by our author. VESPAS. D. viii. fol.

^v GEST. Joh. Whethamst. ut supr. p.

cxvi. cxxvii. cxxiv. It is added, that Whethamstede expended on the binding, and other exterior ornaments of the manuscript, upwards of three pounds. Bale and Pitts say, that Whethamstede himself made the translation. p. 584. 630. It is in Trinity college at Oxford, MSS. 10. And in Lincoln cathedral, MSS. I. 57. Among Lydgate's works is recited, *Vita S. Albani Martyris ad JOH. FRUMENTARIUM [Whethamstede] abbatem.*

church

church in a curious series of paintings, are well known. But their history has not, I believe, yet appeared. These verses, founded on a sort of spiritual masquerade, anciently celebrated in churches^a; were originally written by one Macabier in German rhymes, and were translated into Latin about the year 1460, by one who calls himself Petrus Desfrey Orator. This Latin translation was published by Goldastus, at the end of the SPECULUM OMNIUM STATUUM TOTIUS ORBIS TERRARUM compiled by Rodericus Zamorensis, and printed at Hanau in the year 1613^b. But a French translation was made much earlier than the Latin, and written about the walls of saint Innocents cloister at Paris; from which Lydgate formed his English version^c.

In the British Museum is a most splendid and elegant manuscript on vellum, undoubtedly a present to king Henry the sixth^d. It contains a set of Lydgate's poems, in honour of saint Edmund the patron of his monastery at Bury. Besides the decoration of illuminated initials, and one hundred and twenty pictures of various sizes, representing the incidents related in the poetry, executed with the most delicate pencil, and exhibiting the habits, weapons, architecture,

^a See *supr.* vol. i. p. 210. Notes, ^h.

A DANCE OF DEATH seems to be alluded to so early as in Pierce Plowman's VISIONS, written about 1350.

DEATH came driving after and al to dust passed KYNGS, and KAISARS, KNIGHTS, and POPES.

^b In 4to.

^c See the DAUNCE OF MACABRE, MSS. Harl. 116. 9. fol. 129. And OBSERVATIONS ON THE FAIRY QUEEN, vol. ii. p. 116. seq. The DANCE OF DEATH, falsely supposed to have been invented by Holbein, is different from this, though founded in the same idea. It was painted by Holbein in the Augustine monastery at Basil, 1543. But it appeared much earlier. In the chronicle of Hartmannus Schedelius, Norimb. 1493. fol. In the Quotidian Offices of the church, Paris, 1515. 8vo. And, in public buildings, at Minden, in

Westphalia, so early as 1383. At Lubec, in the portico of saint Mary's church, 1463. At Dresden, in the castle or palace, 1534. At Annaberg, 1525. At Leipzig, &c. Paul Christian Hilscher has written a very learned and entertaining German book on this subject, printed at Dresden, 1705. 8vo. Engravings of Holbein's pictures at Basil were published, curante Matthæo Meriano, at Francfort 1649, and 1725, 4to. The German verses there ascribed, appeared in Latin elegiacs, in Caspar Laudisman's DECENNALIA HUMANÆ PÉGRINATIONIS, A. D. 1584. I have not mentioned in my Observations on Spenser, that Georgius Amylius published this DANCE at Lyons, 1542. One year before Holbein's painting at Basil appeared. Next, at the same place, 1547. 8vo.

^d MSS. Harl. 2278. 4to.

utenfils,

ntensils, and many other curious particulars, belonging to the age of the ingenious illuminator, there are two exquisite portraits of the king, one of William Curteis abbot of Bury, and one of the poet Lydgate kneeling at saint Edmund's shrine^c. In one of the king's pictures, he is represented on his throne, crowned, and receiving this volume from the abbot kneeling: in another he appears as a child prostrate on a carpet at saint Edmund's shrine, which is richly delineated, yet without any idea of perspective or proportion. The figures of a great number of monks, and attendants, are introduced. Among the rest, two noblemen, perhaps the king's uncles, with bonnets, or caps, of an uncommon shape. It appears that our pious monarch kept his Christmas at this magnificent monastery, and that he remained here, in a state of seclusion from the world, and of an exemption from public cares, till the following Easter: and that at his departure he was created a brother of the chapter^d. It is highly probable, that this sumptuous book, the poetry of which was undertaken by Lydgate at the command of abbot Curteis^e, was previously prepared, and presented to his majesty during the royal visit, or very soon afterwards. The substance of the whole work is the life or history of saint Edmund, whom the poet calls the "precious charboncle of martirs alle^h." In some of the prefatory pictures, there is a

^c There is an ancient drawing, probably coeval, of Lydgate presenting his poem called the *Pilgrimage* to the earl of Salisbury, MSS. Harl. 4826. 1. It was written 1426. Another of these drawings will be mentioned below.

^d Fol. 6.

^e Curteis was abbot of Bury between the years 1429, and 1445. It appears that Lydgate was also commanded, "Late charyd in myn oold days," to make an English metrical translation of *De Profundis*, &c. To be hung against the walls of the abbey church. MSS. Harl. 2255. 11. fol. 40. See the last stanza.

^h The poet's *Prayer to saint Edmund for*

his assistance in compiling his LIFE, fol. 9. The history begins thus, fol. 10. b.

In Saxonie whilom ther was a kyng
Callid Alkmond of excellent noblesse.

It seems to be taken from John of Tinmouth's *SANCTOLOGIUM*, who flourished about the year 1360. At the end, connected with saint Edmund's legend, and a part of the work, is the life of saint Fremund; fol. 69. b. But Lydgate has made many additions. It begins thus,

Who han remembre the myracles merueilous
Which Crist Jhesu list for his seyntes shewe.

Compare MSS. Harl. 372. 1. 2. fol. 1. 25. 43. b.

description.

description and a delineation of two banners, pretended to belong to faint Edmund¹. One of these is most brilliantly displayed, and charged with Adam and Eve, the serpent with a human shape to the middle, the tree of life, the holy lamb, and a variety of symbolical ornaments. This banner our bard feigns to have been borne by his faint, who was a king of the east Angles, against the Danes: and he prophesies, that king Henry, with this ensign, would always return victorious². The other banner, given also to faint Edmund, appears to be painted with the arms of our poet's monastery, and its blazoning is thus described.

The' other standard, ffield fable, off colour ynde¹,
 In which of gold been notable crownys thre,
 The first toknè: in cronycle men may fynde,
 Grauntyd to hym for royal dignyte:
 And the second for his virgynyte:
 For martyrdam the thridde, in his suffring.

To these annexyd feyth, hope, and charyte,
 In toknè he was martyr, mayd, and kyng.
 These three crownys^m kynge Edmund bar certeyn,
 Whan he was sent by grace of goddis hand,
 At Geynesburuhe for to sleyn kyng Sweyn.

A sort of office, or service to faint Edmund, consisting of an antiphone, versicle, response, and collect, is introduced with these verses.

To all men present, or in absence,
 Whiche to seynt Edmund have devocion
 With hool herte and dewe reverence,
 Seynⁿ this antephnè and this orison;

¹ Fol. 2. 4.² Fol. 2.³ Blue.^m See fol. 103. b. f. 104.ⁿ Sing.

Two hundred days is grauntid of pardoun,
 Writ and registred afforn his holy shryne,
 Which for our feyth suffrede passioun,
 Blyssyd Edmund, kyng, martyr, and virgyne.

This is our poet's *l'envoye*.

Go littel book, be ferfull, quaak for drede,
 For to appere in so hyhe prefence^o.

Lydgate's poem called the *LYFE OF OUR LADY*, printed by Caxton^o, is opened with these harmonious and elegant lines, which do not seem to be destitute of that eloquence which the author wishes to share with Tully, Petrarch, and Chaucer^o. He compares the holy Virgin to a star.

O thoughtfull hertè, plonged in distresse
 With flombre of slouth, this long wynter's night!
 Out of the slepe of mortal hevinessè
 Awake anon, and loke upon the light
 Of thilkè sterre, that with her bemys bright,
 And with the shynynge of her stremes meryè,
 Is wont to glad all our hemisperie^r!—

This sterre in beautie passith Pleiades,
 Bothe of shynynge, and eke of stremes clere,
 Bootes, and Arctur, and also Iades,
 And Esperus, whan that it doth appere:
 For this is Spica, with her brightè spere^s,

^o Fol. 118. b.

^p "This book was compyled by Dan John Lydgate monke of Burye, at the excitation and ityrynge of the noble and victorious prynce, Harry the fyfthe, in the honowre, glory and reverance of the byrthe of our most

bleffed lady, &c." Without date. fol. A. Afterwards by Robert Redman, 1531. 4to. See MSS. Harl. 629. fol. membran.

^q Cap. xxxiii. xxxiv.

^r Hemisphere.

^s Sphere.

That towarde evyn, at midnyght, and at morowe,
Downe from hevyn adawith 'al our sorowe.—

And dryeth up the bytter terys wete
Of Aurora, after the morowe graye,
That she in wepyng dothe on floures flete^u,
In lusty Aprill, and in freshe^v Maye :
And causeth Phebus, the bryght somers daye,
Wyth his wayne gold-yborned^w, bryght and fayre,
To' enchafe the myftes of our cloudy ayre.

Now fayrè sterre, O sterre of sterrys all !
Whose lyght to se the angels do delyte,
So let the gold-dewe of thy grace yfall
Into my breste, lyke scalys fayre and whyte,
Me to enspire^x!— — — —

Lydgate's manner is naturally verbose and diffuse. This circumstance contributed in no small degree to give a clearness and a fluency to his phraseology. For the same reason he is often tedious and languid. His chief excellence is in description, especially where the subject admits a flowery diction. He is seldom pathetic, or animated.

In another part of this poem, where he collects arguments to convince unbelievers that Christ might be born of a pure virgin, he thus speaks of God's omnipotence.

And he that made the high and cristal heven,
The firmament, and also every sphere,
The golden ax-tre^y, and the sterres seven,
Citherea, so lusty for to' appere,

¹ Affright. Remove.

^u Float. Drop.

^w Burnished with gold. So in Lydgate's Legend on Dan Joos a monk, taken from Vincentius Bellovacensis's *Speculum His-*

TORIALE, the name Maria is *ful fayre igraven on a red rose*, in *lettiris of BOURNID gold*. MSS. Harl. 2251. 39. fol. 71. b.

^x Prologue.

^y Of the sun.

And

And reddè Marsè^z, with his sternè here ;
 Myght he not eke onèly for our sake
 Wythyn a mayde of man his^a kyndè take ?

For he that doth the tender braunches sprynge,
 And the freshe flouris in the gretè mede,
 That were in wynter dede and eke droupynge,
 Of bawmè all yvoyd and leftyhede ;
 Myght he not make his grayne to growe and fede,
 Within her brest, that was both mayd and wyfe,
 Whereof is made the fothfast^b breade of lyfe^c ?

We are surprisèd to find verses of so modern a cast as the following at such an early period ; which in this sagacious age we should judge to be a forgery, was not their genuineness authenticated, and their antiquity confirmed, by the venerable types of Caxton, and a multitude of unquestionable manuscripts.

Like as the dewe descendeth on the rose
 With sylver drops^d. — — —

Our Saviour's crucifixion is expressed by this remarkable metaphor.

Whan he of purple did his baner sprede
 On Calvarye abroad upon the rode,
 To save mankynde^e. . — — —

Our author, in the course of his panegyric on the Virgin Mary, affirms, that she exceeded Hester in meekness, and Judith in wisdom ; and in beauty, Helen, Polyxena, Lucretia, Dido,

^z Mars.
^a Nature.
^b True.

^c Cap. xx.
^d Cap. xix.
^e Cap. ix.

Bathsheba, and Rachel^f. It is amazing, that in an age of the most superstitious devotion so little discrimination should have been made between sacred and profane characters and incidents. But the common sense of mankind had not yet attained a just estimate of things. Lydgate, in another piece, has versified the rubrics of the missal, which he applies to the god Cupid: and declares, with how much delight he frequently meditated on the holy legend of those constant martyrs, who were not afraid to suffer death for the faith of that omnipotent divinity^g. There are instances, in which religion was even made the instrument of love. Arnaut Daniel, a celebrated troubadour of the thirteenth century, in a fit of amorous despair, promises to found a multitude of annual masses, and to dedicate perpetual tapers to the shrines of saints, for the important purpose of obtaining the affections of an obdurate mistress.

^f Cap. iv. In a LIFE of the Virgin in the British museum, I find these easy lyrics introduced, MSS. Harl. 2382. 2. 3. fol. 75. fol. 86. b. Though I am not certain that they properly belong to this work.

A mery tale I telle yow may
Of seynt Marie that swete may :

Alle the tale of this lessone
Is of her Assumptione.—

'Mary moder, welle thee be!

Mary mayden, thenk on me!

Mayden and moder was never none,

Togader, lady, save thee allone.

But these lines will be considered again.

^g MSS. Fairfax, xvi. Bibl. Bodl.

SECT.