

HISTORY OF SPANISH LITERATURE.

FIRST PERIOD.

CHAPTER I.

DIVISION OF THE SUBJECT.—ORIGIN OF SPANISH LITERATURE IN TIMES OF GREAT TROUBLE.

IN the earliest ages of every literature that has vindicated for itself a permanent character in modern Europe, much of what constituted its foundations was the result of local situation and of circumstances seemingly accidental. Sometimes, as in Provence, where the climate was mild and the soil luxuriant, a premature refinement started forth, which was suddenly blighted by the influences of the surrounding barbarism. Sometimes, as in Lombardy, and in a few portions of France, the institutions of antiquity were so long preserved by the old municipalities, that, in occasional intervals of peace, it seemed as if the ancient forms of civilization might be revived and prevail;—hopes kindled only to be extinguished by the violence amidst which the first modern communities, with the policy they needed, were brought forth and established. And sometimes both these causes were combined with others, and gave promise of a poetry full of freshness and originality, which, however, as it advanced, was met by a spirit more vigorous than its own, beneath whose predominance its language was

forbidden to rise above the condition of a local dialect, or became merged in that of its more fortunate rival; a result which we early recognize alike in Sicily, Naples, and Venice, where the authority of the great * 4 Tuscan masters * was, from the first, as loyally acknowledged as it was in Florence or Pisa.

Like much of the rest of Europe, the southwestern portion, now comprising the kingdoms of Spain and Portugal, was affected by nearly all these different influences. Favored by a happy climate and soil, by the remains of Roman culture, which had lingered long in its mountains, and by the earnest and passionate spirit which has marked its people through their many revolutions down to the present day, the first signs of a revived poetical feeling are perceptible in the Spanish peninsula even before they are to be found, with their distinctive characteristics, in that of Italy. But this earliest literature of modern Spain, a part of which is Provençal, and the rest absolutely Castilian or Spanish, appeared in troubled times, when it was all but impossible that it should be advanced freely or rapidly in the forms it was destined at last to wear. For the masses of the Christian Spaniards filling the separate states, into which their country was most unhappily divided, were then involved in that tremendous warfare with their Arab invaders, which, for twenty generations, so consumed their strength, that, long before the cross was planted on the towers of the Alhambra, and peace had given opportunity for the ornaments of life, Dante, Petrarca, and Boccaccio had appeared in the comparative quiet of Lombardy and Tuscany, and Italy had again taken her accustomed place at the head of the elegant literature of the world.

Under such circumstances, a large portion of the Spaniards, who had been so long engaged in this solemn contest, as the forlorn hope of Christendom, against the intrusion of Mohammedanism¹ and its imperfect civilization into Europe, and who, amidst all their sufferings, had constantly looked to Rome, as to the capital seat of their faith, for consolation and encouragement, did not hesitate again to acknowledge that Italian supremacy in letters to which, in the days of the Empire, their allegiance had * been * 5 complete. A school formed on Italian models naturally followed; and though the rich and original genius of Spanish poetry received less from its influence ultimately than might have been anticipated, still, from the time of its first appearance, its effects are too important and distinct to be overlooked.

Of the period, therefore, in which the history of Spanish literature opens upon us, we must make two divisions. The first will contain the genuinely national poetry and prose produced from the earliest times down to the reign of Charles the Fifth; while the second will contain that portion which, by imitating the refinement of Provence or of Italy, was, during the same interval, more or less separated from the popular spirit and genius. Both, when taken together, will fill up the period in which the main elements and characteristics of Spanish literature were developed, such as they have existed down to our own age.

In the first division of the first period, we are to consider the origin and character of that literature which sprang, as it were, from the very soil of Spain,

¹ August Wilhelm von Schlegel, Ueber Dramatische Kunst, Heidelberg, 1811, 8vo, Vorlesung, XIV.

and was almost entirely untouched by foreign influences.

And here, at the outset, we are struck with a remarkable circumstance, which announces something, at least, of the genius of the coming literature, — the circumstance of its appearance in times of great confusion and violence. For, in other portions of Europe, during those disastrous troubles that accompanied the overthrow of the Roman power and civilization, and the establishment of new forms of social order, if the inspirations of poetry came at all, they came in some period of comparative quietness and security, when the minds of men were less engrossed than they were wont to be by the necessity of providing for their personal safety, and for their most pressing physical wants. But in Spain it was not so. There the first utterance of that popular feeling which became the foundation of the national literature was heard in the midst of the extraordinary contest which the

* 6 Christian *Spaniards, for above seven centuries, urged against their Moorish invaders; so that the earliest Spanish poetry seems but a breathing of the energy and heroism which, at the time it appeared, animated the great mass of the Spanish Christians throughout the Peninsula.

Indeed, if we look at the condition of Spain in the centuries that immediately preceded and followed the formation of its present language and poetry, we shall find the mere historical dates full of instruction. In 711 Roderic rashly hazarded the fate of his Gothic and Christian empire on the result of a single battle against the Arabs, then just forcing their way into the western part of Europe from Africa. He failed; and the wild enthusiasm which marked the earliest age of

the Mohammedan power achieved almost immediately the conquest of the whole of the country that was worth the price of a victory. The Christians, however, though overwhelmed, did not entirely yield. On the contrary, many of them retreated before the fiery pursuit of their enemies, and established themselves in the extreme northwestern portion of their native land, amidst the mountains and fastnesses of Biscay and Asturias. There, indeed, the purity of the Latin tongue, which they had spoken for so many ages, was finally lost, through that neglect of its cultivation which was a necessary consequence of the miseries that oppressed them. But still, with the spirit which so long sustained their forefathers against the power of Rome, and which has in our own times carried their descendants through a short but hardly less fierce contest against the power of France, they maintained, to a remarkable degree, their ancient manners and feelings, their religion, their laws, and their institutions; and, separating themselves by an implacable hatred from their Moorish invaders, they there, in those rude mountains, laid deep the foundations of a national character which has subsisted down to our own times.²

* As, however, they gradually grew inured to * 7 adversity, and understood the few hard advantages which their situation afforded them, they began to make incursions into the territories of their conquer-

² Augustin Thierry has in a few words finely described the fusion of society that originally took place in the northwestern part of Spain, and on which the civilization of the country still rests: "Reserrés dans ce coin de terre, devenu pour eux toute la patrie, Goths et Romains, vainqueurs et vaincus, étrangers et indigènes, maîtres et

esclaves, tous unis dans le même malheur, oublièrent leurs vieilles haines, leur vieil éloignement, leurs vieilles distinctions; il n'y eut plus qu'un nom, qu'une loi, qu'un état, qu'un langage; tous furent égaux dans cet exil." — Dix Ans d'Études Historiques, Paris, 1836, 8vo, p. 346.

Castilians

in trouble

but Visigoth king

ors, and to seize for themselves some part of the fair possessions once entirely their own. But every inch of ground was defended with the same fervid valor by which it had originally been won. The Christians, indeed, though occasionally defeated, generally gained something in each of their more considerable struggles; but what they gained could be preserved only by an exertion of bravery and military power hardly less painful than that by which it had been acquired. In 801 we find them already possessing a considerable part of Old Castile. But the very name now given to that country, from the multitude of castles with which it was studded, shows plainly the tenure by which the Christians from the mountains were compelled to hold these early fruits of their courage and constancy.³ A century later, or in 914, they had pushed the outposts of their conquests to the chain of the Guadarrama, separating New from Old Castile; and they may, therefore, at this date, be regarded as having again obtained a firm foothold in their own country, whose capital they established at Leon.

From this period the Christians seem to have felt assured of final success. In 1085 Toledo, the venerated head of the old monarchy, was wrested from the Moors, who had then possessed it three hundred and sixty-three years; and in 1118 Saragossa was recovered: so that, from the beginning of the twelfth century, the whole Peninsula, down to the Sierra of Toledo, was again occupied by its former masters, and the Moors were pushed back into the southern and western provinces, by which they had originally entered. Their power, however, though thus reduced

³ Manuel Risco, *La Castilla y el mas Famoso Castellano*, Madrid, 1792, 4to, pp. 14-18.

within limits comprising scarcely more than one third of its extent when it was greatest, seems still to * have been rather consolidated than broken; * 8 and, after three centuries of success, more than three other centuries of conflict were necessary before the fall of Granada finally emancipated the entire country from the loathed dominion of its misbelieving conquerors.

But it was in the midst of this desolating contest, and at a period, too, when the Christians were hardly less distracted by divisions among themselves than worn out and exasperated by the common warfare against the common enemy, that the elements of the Spanish language and poetry, as they have substantially existed ever since, were first developed. For it is precisely between the capture of Saragossa, which insured to the Christians the possession of all the eastern part of Spain, and their great victory on the plains of Tolosa, which so broke the power of the Moors that they never afterwards recovered the full measure of their former strength,⁴—it is precisely in this century of confusion and violence, when the Christian population of the country may be said, with the old chronicle, to have been kept constantly in battle array, that we hear the first notes of their wild na-

⁴ Speaking of this decisive battle, and following Arabic authorities, Conde says: "This fearful rout happened on Monday, the fifteenth day of the month Safer, in the year 609 [A. D. 1212]; and with it fell the power of the Moslems in Spain, for nothing turned out well with them after it." (*Historia de la Dominacion de los Arabes en España*, Madrid, 1820, 4to, Tom. II. p. 425.) Gayangos, in his more learned and yet more entirely Arabic "Mohammedan Dynasties in Spain" (London, 1843, 4to, Vol. II. p. 323), gives a similar

account. The purely Spanish historians, of course, state the matter still more strongly; Mariana, for instance, looking upon the result of the battle as quite superhuman. — *Historia General de España*, 14a impresion, Madrid, 1780, fol., Lib. XI. c. 24. Perhaps, however, the safest account of the whole, and the most trustworthy exhibition of its consequences to Spanish civilization, are to be found in Aschbach, *Geschichte der Almoraviden und Almohaden*, Frankfurt, Band II. 1837, Buch v. kap. 2, and the Beilagen.

tional poetry, which come to us mingled with their war-shouts, and breathing the very spirit of their victories.⁵

⁵ "And in that time," we are told in the old "Crónica General de España" (Zamora, 1541, fol. f. 275), "was the war of the Moors very grievous; so that the kings, and counts, and nobles, and all the knights that took pride in arms, stabled their horses in the rooms where they slept with their wives; to the end that, when they heard the war-cry, they might find their horses and arms at hand, and mount instantly at its summons." "A hard and rude

training," says Martínez de la Rosa, in his graceful romance of "Isabel de Solís," recollecting, I suspect, this very passage, — "a hard and rude training, the prelude to so many glories and to the conquest of the world, when our forefathers, weighed down with harness, and their swords always in hand, slept at ease no single night for eight centuries." — Doña Isabel de Solís, Reyna de Granada, Novela Histórica, Madrid, 1839, 8vo, Parte II. c. 15.

Enfoje XIII Compendio a escritor España (castellano)

* CHAPTER II.

* 9

FIRST APPEARANCE OF THE SPANISH AS A WRITTEN LANGUAGE. — POEM OF THE CID. — ITS HERO, SUBJECT, LANGUAGE, AND VERSE. — STORY OF THE POEM. — ITS CHARACTER. — ST. MARY OF EGYPT. — THE ADORATION OF THE THREE KINGS. — BERCEO, THE FIRST KNOWN CASTILIAN POET. — HIS WORKS AND VERSIFICATION. — HIS SAN DOMINGO DE SILOS. — HIS MIRACLES OF THE VIRGIN.

THE oldest documents known to exist with ascertained dates in the Spanish language come from the reign of Alfonso VII. The first of them is a charter of Oviedo, in 1145, and the other is the confirmation of a charter of Avilés, in 1155; — neighboring cities in Asturias, and therefore in that part of Spain where we should naturally look for the first intimations of a new dialect.¹ They are important, not only because they exhibit the rude elements of the unformed language just emerging from the corrupted Latin, little or not at all affected by the Arabic infused into it in the southern provinces, but because they are believed to be among the very oldest documents ever written in Spanish, since there is no good reason to suppose that language to have existed in a written form even half a century earlier.

How far we can go back towards the first appearance of poetry in this Spanish, or, as it was oftener called, Castilian dialect, is not so precisely ascertained. But we know that we can trace Castilian verse to a period surprisingly near the date of the documents of Oviedo and of Avilés. It is, too, a remarkable circum-

¹ See Appendix (A), on the History of the Spanish Language.