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PRIMER

OF

ENGLISH LITERATURE.

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1. **What Literature is.**—Before we can enter on the story of our English Literature we must try to understand what literature itself is. By literature we mean the written thoughts and feelings of intelligent men and women arranged in a way which will give pleasure to the reader. Literature has to do therefore, so far as its subject goes, with all the things about which we learn, and think, and feel. As to its form, it has two large divisions—one of which is called Prose Literature and the other Poetical Literature.

2. **Prose Literature.**—There are many kinds of prose literature. Men write in prose about philosophy, or history, or art, or religion, or science, or manners, or the lives of men. Prose literature then means the written thoughts, learning, and feelings of men on all these subjects. Everything in fact that is written of any kind, except poetry, may be called prose. But we must not think that everything that is called prose is literature. We cannot say, for instance, that a ship's log, or a catalogue, or the daily journal of a traveller, is to be called literature simply because it is written in prose. Writing is not literature unless it gives to the reader a pleasure which arises, not only from the things said, but from the way in which they are said, and that pleasure is only given when the words are carefully or curiously or beautifully put together into sentences. To do this in a special way is to have what we call style. As much art must be used in building sentences up out of words as in building houses, if we wish the prose we write to be worthy of the name of literature. And just as in looking at different kinds of houses, we say that one is built in a strong way, another in a simple way, another in an ornamental way, so we say in reading books written by different men that one is in a simple style, another in a grand, another in an eloquent style. Again, in looking at a large building, we see not only the way in which it is built, but also the character and the mind of the builder. So also in a prose book which is fit to belong to literature we ought to feel that there is a distinct mind and character who is speaking to us through the style, that is, through the way in which the words are put together. Prose then is not literature unless it have *style* and *character*, and be written with *curious care*.

3. **Of Poetical Literature** we may say the same thing. Poetry must be tried by rules more severe even than those by which we judge prose, and

unless it satisfies those rules it does not take rank as literature. There must be more care taken, more beauty, more musical movement in the arrangement of the words than in prose; and the way in which the thoughts and feelings of the poet are put together into words will always be, in true poetry, wholly different from the way in which they would be put together by a prose writer. Poetry speaks to us of all that belongs to Man, and of all that man feels or sees when he is delighted with the beauty or grandeur of the Natural World. These are its two chief subjects in literature; and it writes of them in different kinds of poetry, in all of which we English have done well. There is *epic* poetry, like Milton's great poem *Paradise Lost*, *dramatic* poetry, like Shakespeare's plays; *lyric* poetry, or short pieces on one subject, like the songs in his plays; *narrative* poetry, like Scott's *Lady of the Lake; descriptive* poetry, like Thomson's *Seasons*, which describes nature; and *allegorical* poetry, which tells a story with a hidden meaning in it. Of this last the best example is Spenser's *Faërie Queen*. These, then, are the two main divisions of literature.

4. **The History of English Literature,** then, is the story of what great English men and women thought and felt, and then wrote down in good prose or beautiful poetry in the English language. The story is a long one. It begins about the year 670, and it is still going on in the year 1875. Into this little book then is to be put the story of 1,200 years. No people that have ever been in the world can look back so far as we English can to the beginnings of our literature; no people can point to so long and splendid a train of poets and prose writers; no nation has on the whole written so much and so well. Every English man and woman has good reason to be proud of the work done by their forefathers in prose and poetry. Every one who can write a good book or a good song may say to himself, "I belong

to a great company, which has been teaching and delighting the world for more than 1,000 years." And that is a fact in which those who write and those who read ought to feel a noble pride.

5. **The English and the Welsh.**—This literature is written in English, the tongue of our fathers. They lived, while this island of ours was still called Britain, in Sleswick, Jutland and Holstein; but, either because they were pressed from the inland or for pure love of adventure, they took to the sea, and, landing at various parts of Britain at various times drove back, after 150 years of hard fighting, the Britons, whom they called Welsh, to the land now called Wales, and to Cornwall. It is well for those who study English literature to remember that in these two places the Britons remained as a distinct race with a distinct literature of their own, because the stories and the poetry of the Britons crept afterwards into English literature and had a great influence upon it. The whole tale of King Arthur, of which English poetry and even English prose is so full, was a British tale. Otherwise we English have nothing to do with the old dwellers in our country. We drove these Britons, as the Primer of English History will describe, utterly away.

6. **The First English Poetry.** — When we came to Britain we were great warriors and great sea pirates—"sea wolves" as a Roman poet calls us; and all our poetry down to the present day is full of war, and still more of the sea. No nation has ever written so much sea-poetry. It was in the blood of our fathers, who chanted their sea war-songs as they sailed. But we were more than mere warriors. We were a home-loving people when we got settled either in Sleswick or in England, and all our literature from the first writings to the last is full of domestic love, the dearness of home, and the ties of kinsfolk. We were a religious people, even as heathen, still more

so when we became Christian; and our poetry is as much tinged with religion as with war. Whenever literature died down in England it rose again in poetry; and the first poetry at each recovery was religious, or linked to religion. We shall soon see that our first poems were of war and religion.

7. **The English Tongue.** — Of the language in which our literature is written we can say little here; it is fully discussed in the Primer of English Grammar. Of course it has changed its look very much since it began to be written. The earliest form of our English tongue is very different from modern English in form, pronunciation, and appearance, and one must learn it almost as if it were a foreign tongue; but still the language written in the year 700 is the same as that in which the prose of the Bible is written just as much as the tree planted a hundred years ago is the same tree to-day. It is this sameness of language, as well as the sameness of national spirit, which makes our literature one literature for 1200 years.

8. **Old English Poetry** was also different then from what it is now. It was not written in rime, nor were its syllables counted. The lines are short; the beat of the verse depends on the emphasis given by the use of the same letter, except in the case of vowels, at the beginning of words; and the emphasis of the words depends on the thought. The lines are written in pairs; and in the best work the two chief words in the first, and the one chief word in the second, usually begin with the same letter. Here is one example from a war-song:—

"*W*igu *w*intrum geong	"*W*arrior of *w*inters young
*W*ordum mælde."	With *w*ords spake."

After the Norman Conquest there gradually crept in a French system of rimes and of metres and accent which we find full-grown in Chaucer's works.

But unrimed and alliterative verse lasted in poetry to the reign of John, and alliteration was blended with rime up to the sixteenth century. The latest form of it occurs in Scotland.

9. **Our Greatest Early Poems** remaining are two—*Beowulf* and *Cædmon's Paraphrase of the Bible.* The first is on the whole a war story, the second is religious; and on these two subjects of war and religion English poetry for the most part speaks till the Conquest. BEOWULF was brought into our land from the Continent, and was rewritten in parts by a Christian Englishman of Northumbria. It is a story of the great deeds and death of a hero named Beowulf. Its social interest lies in what it tells us of the manners and customs of our forefathers before they came here; its poetical interest lies in its descriptions of wild nature, of the lives and feelings of the men of that time, and of the way in which the Nature-worship of our people made dreadful and savage places seem dwelt in—as if the places had a spirit—by monstrous beings. For it was thus that all that half-natural, half-spiritual world began in our poetry which, when men grew gentler and the country more cultivated, became so beautiful as faeryland. Here is the description of the dwelling-place of the Grendel, a man-fiend that devoured men, and whom Beowulf overcomes in battle :—

"A lonely land
Won they in; wolf-caverns,
Wind-traversed nesses,
Perilous fen-paths,
Where the mountain flood,
Under the mists of the ness,
Downwards is moved;
Flood under feld.
Not further from hence
Than a mile's space
Is the place of the mere;
Over which frown
And rustle the forests.
Fast-rooted the wood
The water that shadows;
There deadly the wonder
One may watch every night;
Fire in the flood."

The love of wild nature in our poetry, and the peopling of it with wild half-human things, begins in work like this. After the fight Beowulf returns to his own land, where he rules well for many years, till a Fire-drake, who guards a treasure, comes down to harry his people. The old king goes out then to fight his last fight, slays the dragon, but dies of its flaming breath, and his body is burned high up on a sea-washed ness or headland.

10. **Cædmon.**—The poem of Beowulf has the grave Teutonic power, but it is not native to our soil. It is not the first true English poem. That is the work of CÆDMON, and is also from Northumbria. The story of it, as told by Bæda, proves that the making of songs was common at the time. Cædmon was a servant to the monastery of Hild, an abbess of royal blood, at Whitby in Yorkshire. He was somewhat aged when the gift of song came to him, and he knew nothing of the art of verse, so that at the feasts when for the sake of mirth all sang in turn he left the table. One night, having done so and gone to the stables, for he had care of the cattle, he fell asleep, and One came to him in vision and said, "Cædmon, sing me some song." And he answered, "I cannot sing; for this cause I left the feast and came hither." Then said the other, "However, you shall sing." "What shall I sing?" he replied. "Sing the beginning of created things," answered the other. Whereupon he began to sing verses to the praise of God, and, awaking, remembered what he had sung and added more in verse worthy of God. In the morning he came to the steward, and told him of the gift he had received, and, being brought to Hild, was ordered to tell his dream before learned men, that they might give judgment whence his verses came. And when they had heard, they all said that heavenly grace had been conferred on him by our Lord.

11. **Cædmon's Poem,** written about 670, is for us the beginning of English poetry, and the story

of its origin ought to be loved by us. Nor should we fail to reverence the place where it began. Above the small and land-locked harbour of Whitby rises and juts out towards the sea the dark cliff where Hild's monastery stood, looking out over the German Ocean. It is a wild, wind-swept upland, and the sea beats furiously beneath, and standing there one feels that it is a fitting birthplace for the poetry of the sea-ruling nation. Nor is the verse of the first poet without the stormy note of the scenery among which it was written. In it also the old fierce war element is felt when Cædmon comes to sing the fight of the rebel angels with God and the overthrow of Pharaoh's host, and the lines, repeating, as was the old English way, the thought a second time, fall like stroke on stroke in battle. But the poem is religious throughout—Christianity speaks in it simply, sternly, with fire, and brings with it a new world of spiritual romance and feeling. The subjects of the poem were taken from the Bible, in fact Cædmon paraphrased the history of the Old and New Testament. He sang the creation of the world, the history of Israel, the book of Daniel, the whole story of the life of Christ, future judgment, purgatory, hell, and heaven. All who heard it thought it divinely given. "Others after him," says Bæda, "tried to make religious poems, but none could vie with him, for he did not learn the art of poetry from men, nor of men, but from God." It was thus that English song began in religion. The most famous passage of the poem not only illustrates the dark sadness, the fierce love of freedom, and the power of painting distinct characters which has always marked our poetry, but it is also famous for its likeness to a parallel passage in Milton. It is when Cædmon describes the proud and angry cry of Satan against God from his bed of chains in hell. The two great English poets may be brought together over a space of a thousand years in another

way, for both died in such peace that those who watched beside them knew not when they died.

12. **Lesser Old English Poems.**—Of the poetry that came after Cædmon we have few remains. But we have many things said which show us that his poem, like all great works, gave birth to a number of similar ones. The increase of monasteries where men of letters lived naturally made the written poetry religious. But an immense quantity of secular poetry was sung about the country. *Aldhelm*, a young man when Cædmon died, and afterwards Abbot of Malmesbury, united the song-maker to the religious poet. He was a skilled musician, and it is said that he had not his equal in the making or singing of English verse. His songs were popular in King Ælfred's time, and a pretty story tells, that when the traders came into the town on the Sunday, he, in the character of a gleeman, stood on the bridge and sang them songs, with which he mixed up Scripture texts and teaching. Of all this wide-spread poetry we have now only the few poems brought together in a book preserved at Exeter, in another found at Vercelli, and in a few leaflets of manuscripts. The poems in the *Vercelli book* are all religious: legends of saints and addresses to the soul; those in the *Exeter book* are hymns and sacred poems. The famous *Traveller's Song* and the *Lament of Deor* inserted in it, are of the older and pagan time. In both there are poems by CYNEWULF, whose name has come down to us. They are all Christian in tone. The few touches of love of nature in them dwell on gentle, not on savage scenery. They are sorrowful when they speak of the life of men, tender when they touch on the love of home, as tender as this little bit which still lives for us out of that old world: "Dear is the welcome guest to the Frisian wife when the vessel strands; his ship is come, and her husband to his house, her own provider. And she welcomes him in, washes his weedy garment, and clothes

him anew. It is pleasant on shore to him whom his love awaits." Of the scattered pieces the finest are two fragments, one long, on the story of *Judith*, and another short, in which Death speaks to Man, and describes "the low and hateful and doorless house," of which he keeps the key. But stern as the fragment is, with its English manner of looking dreadful things in the face, and with its English pathos, the religious poetry of our old fathers always went with faith beyond the grave. Thus we are told that King Eadgar, in the ode on his death in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, "chose for himself another light, beautiful and pleasant, and left this feeble life."

13. **The War Poetry of England** at this time was probably as plentiful as the religious. But it was not likely to be written down by the writers who lived in religious houses. It was sung from feast to feast and in the halls of kings, and it naturally decayed when the English were trodden down by the Normans. But we have two examples of what kind it was, and how fine it was, in the *Battle Song of Brunanburh*, 937, and in the *Song of the Fight at Maldon*, 991. A still earlier fragment exists in a short account of the *Battle of Finnesburg*, probably of the same time and belonging to as long a story as the story of Beowulf. Two short odes on the victories of King Eadmund, and on the coronation of King Eadgar, inserted in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, complete the list of war poems.

14. **The Songs of Brunanburh and Maldon** are fine war odes, the fitting sources, both in their short and rapid lines, and in their almost Homeric simplicity and force, of such war-songs as the "Battle of the Baltic" and the "Charge of the Light Brigade." The first describes the fight of King Æthelstan with Anlaf the Dane. From morn till night they fought till they were "weary of red battle" in the "hard hand play," till five young kings and seven earls of

Anlaf's host lay in that fighting place "quieted by swords," and the Northmen fled, and only "the screamers of war were left behind, the black raven and the eagle to feast on the white flesh, and the greedy battle-hawk, and the grey beast the wolf in the wood." The second is the story of the death of Brihtnoth, an ealdorman of Northumbria, in battle against the Danes. It contains 690 lines. In the speeches of heralds and warriors before the fight, in the speeches and single combats of the chiefs, in the loud laugh and mock which follow a good death-stroke, in the rapid rush of the verse when the battle is joined, the poem though broken, as Homer's verse is not, is Homeric. In the rude chivalry which disdains to take vantage ground of the Danes, in the way in which the friends and churls of Brihtnoth die one by one, avenging their lord, keeping faithful the tie of kinship and clanship, in the cry not to yield a foot's breadth of earth, in the loving sadness with which home is spoken of, the poem is English to the core. And in the midst of it all, like a song from another land, but a song heard often in English fights from then till now, is the last prayer of the great earl, when dying he commends his soul with thankfulness to God.

15. **Old English Prose.**—It is pleasant to think that I may not unfairly make English prose begin with BÆDA. He was born about A.D. 673, and was, like Cædmon, a Northumbrian. From 683 he spent his life at Jarrow, in the same monastery, he says, "and while attentive to the rule of mine order, and the service of the Church, my constant pleasure lay in learning, or teaching, or writing." He long enjoyed that pleasure, for his quiet life was long, and from boyhood till his very last hour his toil was unceasing. Forty-five works prove his industry, and their fame over the whole of learned Europe during his time proves their value. His learning was as various as

it was great. All that the world then knew of science, music, rhetoric, medicine, arithmetic, astronomy, and physics was brought together by him; and his life was as gentle and himself as loved as his work was great. His books were written in Latin, and with these we have nothing to do, but his was the first effort to make English prose a literary language, for his last work was a *Translation of the Gospel of St. John*, as almost his last words were in English verse. In the story of his death told by his disciple Cuthbert is the first record of English prose writing. When the last day came, the dying man called his scholars to him that he might dictate more of his translation. "There is still a chapter wanting," said the scribe, "and it is hard for thee to question thyself longer." "It is easily done," said Bæda, "take thy pen and write quickly." Through the day they wrote, and when evening fell, "There is yet one sentence unwritten, dear master," said the youth. "Write it quickly," said the master. "It is finished now." "Thou sayest truth," was the reply, "all is finished now." He sang the "Glory to God" and died. It is to that scene that English prose looks back as its sacred source, as it is in the greatness and variety of Bæda's Latin work that English literature strikes its key-note.

16. **Ælfred's Work.**—When Bæda died Northumbria was the home of English literature. Though as yet written mostly in Latin, it was a wide-spread literature. Wilfrid of York and Benedict Biscop had founded libraries and established monastic schools far and wide. Six hundred scholars gathered round Bæda ere he died. But towards the end of his life this northern literature began to decay, and after 866 it was, we may say, blotted out by the Danes. The long battle with these invaders was lost in Northumbria, but it was gained for a time by Ælfred the Great in Wessex; and with Ælfred's literary work learning changed its seat from the north

to the south. But he made it by his writings an English, not a Latin literature; and in his translations he, since Bæda's work is lost, is the true father of English prose. As Whitby is the cradle of English poetry, so is Winchester of English prose. At Winchester Ælfred took the English tongue and made it the tongue in which history, philosophy, law and religion spoke to the English people. No work was ever done more eagerly, or more practically. He brought scholars from different parts of the world. He set up schools in his monasteries "where every free-born youth, who has the means, shall attend to his book till he can read English writing perfectly." He presided over a school in his own court. He made himself a master of a literary English style, and he did this that he might teach his people. He translated the popular manuals of the time into English, but he edited them with large additions of his own, needful, as he thought, for English use. He gave his nation moral philosophy in Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy;* a universal history, with geographical chapters of his own, in the *History of Orosius;* a history of England in *Bæda's History*, giving to some details a West Saxon form; and a religious handbook in the *Pastoral Rule* of Pope Gregory. We do not quite know whether he worked himself at the *English* or *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, but at least it was in his reign that it rose out of meagre lists into a full narrative of events. To him, then, we English look back as the father of English literature.

17. **The Later Old English Prose.**—The impulse he gave soon fell away, but it was revived under King Eadgar, when Æthelwald, Bishop of Winchester, made it his constant work to keep up English schools and to translate Latin works into English, and when Archbishop Dunstan took up the same pursuits with eagerness. Æthelwald's school sent out from it a scholar and abbot named Ælfric. He takes rank as

the first large translator of the Bible, turning into English the first seven books and part of Job. We owe to him a series of *Homilies*, and his *Colloquy*, afterwards edited by another Ælfric, may be called the first English-Latin dictionary. But this revival had no sooner begun to take root than the Northmen came again in force upon the land and conquered it. During the long interweaving of Danes and English together under Danish kings from 1013 to 1042, no English literature arose. It was not till the quiet reign of Edward the Confessor it again began to live. But no sooner was it born than the Norman invasion repressed, but did not quench its life.

18. **The English Chronicle.**—One great monument, however, of old English prose lasts beyond the Conquest. It is the English Chronicle, and in it our literature is continuous from Ælfred to Stephen. At first it was nothing but a record of the births and deaths of bishops and kings, and was probably a West Saxon Chronicle. Ælfred edited it from various sources, added largely to it from Bæda, and raised it to the dignity of a national history. After his reign, and that of his son Eadward, 901-925, it becomes scanty, but songs and odes are inserted in it. In the reign of Æthelred and during the Danish kings its fulness returns, and growing by additions from various quarters, it continues to be our great contemporary authority in English history till 1154, when it abruptly closes with the death of Stephen. "It is the first history of any Teutonic people in their own language; it is the earliest and the most venerable monument of English prose." In it old English poetry sang its last song, in its death old English prose dies. It is not till the reign of John that English poetry in any extended form appears again in the *Brut* of Layamon. It is not till the reign of Edward the Third that original English prose again begins.

CHAPTER II.

FROM THE CONQUEST TO CHAUCER, 1066—1400.

Layamon's *Brut*, 1205.—Ormin's *Ormulum*, 1215.—Sir John Mandeville's *Travels*, 1356.—William Langland's *Vision concerning Piers the Plowman*, 1362—1378.—John Wyclif's *Translation of the Bible*, 1380.—John Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, 1393—4.

Geoffrey Chaucer, born 1340, died 1400.—*Dethe of Blaunche the Duchesse*, 1369.—*Troylus and Creseide.*—*Parlament of Foules.*—*Compleynt of Mars.*—*Anelida and Arcite.*—*Hous of Fame.* 1374—1384.—*Legende of Good Women*, 1385.—*Prose Treatise on Astrolabe*, 1391.—*Canterbury Tales*, 1373 to 1400.

19. **General Outline.**—The invasion of Britain by the English made the island, its speech and its literature, English. The invasion of England by the Danes left our speech and literature still English. The Danes were of our stock and tongue, and we absorbed them. The invasion of England by the Normans seemed likely to crush the English people, to root out their literature, and even to threaten their speech. But that which happened to the Danes happened to the Normans also, and for the same reason. They were originally of like blood to the English, and of like speech; and though during their settlement in Normandy they had become French in manner and language, and their literature French, yet the old blood prevailed in the end. The Norman felt his kindred with the English tongue and spirit, became an Englishman, and left the French tongue to speak and write in English. We absorbed the Normans, and we took into our literature and speech some French elements they had brought with them. It was a process slower in literature than it