

CHAPTER III.

THE AGE OF SHAKSPERE.

1564-1616.

THE great age of English poetry opened with the publication of Spenser's *Shepherd's Calendar*, in 1579, and closed with the printing of Milton's *Samson Agonistes*, in 1671. Within this period of little less than a century English thought passed through many changes, and there were several successive phases of style in our imaginative literature. Milton, who acknowledged Spenser as his master, and who was a boy of eight years at Shakspeare's death, lived long enough to witness the establishment of an entirely new school of poets, in the persons of Dryden and his contemporaries. But, roughly speaking, the dates above given mark the limits of one literary epoch, which may not improperly be called the Elizabethan. In strictness the Elizabethan age ended with the queen's death, in 1603. But the poets of the succeeding reigns inherited much of the glow and splendor which marked the diction of their forerunners; and "the spacious times of great Elizabeth" have been, by courtesy, prolonged to the year of the Restoration (1660). There is a certain likeness in the intellectual products of the whole period, a largeness of utterance and a high imaginative cast of thought which stamp them all alike with the queen's seal.

Nor is it by any undue stretch of the royal prerogative that the name of the monarch has attached itself to the literature of her reign and of the reigns succeeding hers. The expression "Victorian poetry" has a rather absurd sound when one considers how little Victoria counts for in

the literature of her time. But in Elizabethan poetry the maiden queen is really the central figure. She is Cynthia, she is Thetis, great queen of shepherds and of the sea; she is Spenser's Gloriana, and even Shakspeare, the most impersonal of poets, paid tribute to her in *Henry VIII.*, and, in a more delicate and indirect way, in the little allegory introduced into *Midsummer Night's Dream*.

That very time I saw—but thou could'st not—
Flying between the cold moon and the earth,
Cupid all armed. A certain aim he took
At a fair vestal throned by the west,
And loosed his love-shaft smartly from his bow
As it should pierce a hundred thousand hearts.
But I might see young Cupid's fiery shaft
Quenched in the chaste beams of the watery moon,
And the imperial votaress passed on
In maiden meditation, fancy free—

an allusion to Leicester's unsuccessful suit for Elizabeth's hand.

The praises of the queen, which sound through all the poetry of her time, seem somewhat overdone to a modern reader. But they were not merely the insipid language of courtly compliment. England had never before had a female sovereign, except in the instance of the gloomy and bigoted Mary. When she was succeeded by her more brilliant sister the gallantry of a gallant and fantastic age was poured at the latter's feet, the sentiment of chivalry mingling itself with loyalty to the crown. The poets idealized Elizabeth. She was to Spenser, to Sidney, and to Raleigh, not merely a woman and a virgin queen, but the champion of Protestantism, the lady of young England, the heroine of the conflict against popery and Spain. Moreover Elizabeth was a great woman. In spite of the vanity, caprice, and ingratitude which disfigured her character, and the vacillating, tortuous policy which often distinguished her government, she was at bottom a sovereign of large views, strong will, and dauntless

courage. Like her father, she "loved a *man*," and she had the magnificent tastes of the Tudors. She was a patron of the arts, passionately fond of shows and spectacles, and sensible to poetic flattery. In her royal progresses through the kingdom, the universities, the nobles, and the cities vied with one another in receiving her with plays, revels, masques, and triumphs, in the mythological taste of the day. "When the queen paraded through a country town," says Warton, the historian of English poetry, "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*. 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. 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 most elaborate of these entertainments of which we have any notice were, perhaps, the games celebrated in her honor by the Earl of Leicester, when she visited him at Kenilworth, in 1575. An account of these was published by a contemporary poet, George Gascoigne, *The Princely Pleasures at the Court of Kenilworth*, and Walter Scott has made them familiar to modern readers in his novel of *Kenilworth*. Sidney was present on this occasion, and, perhaps, Shakspeare, then a boy of eleven, and living at Stratford, not far off, may have been taken to see the spectacle; may have seen Neptune riding on the back of a huge dolphin in the castle lake, speaking the copy of verses in which he offered his trident to the empress of the sea; and may have

heard a mermaid on a dolphin's back
Uttering such dulcet and harmonious breath
That the rude sea grew civil at her song.

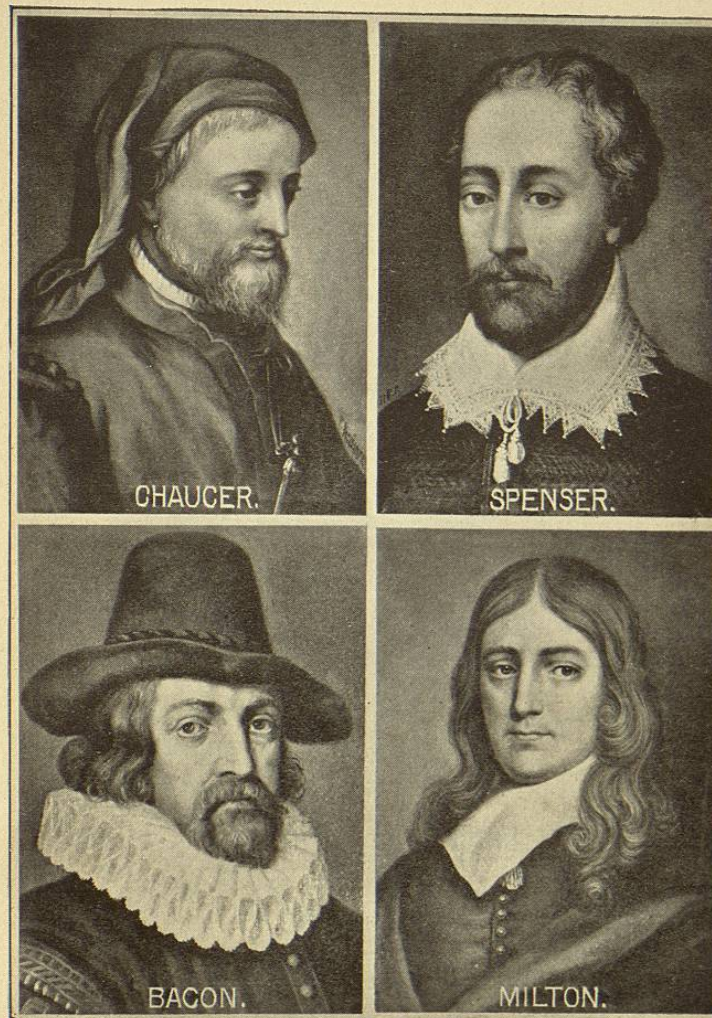
But in considering the literature of Elizabeth's reign it will be convenient to speak first of the prose. While following up Spenser's career to its close (1599) we have, for the sake of unity of treatment, anticipated somewhat the literary history of the twenty years preceding. In 1579 appeared a book which had a remarkable influence on English prose. This was John Lyly's *Euphues, the Anatomy of Wit*. It was in form a romance, the history of a young Athenian who went to Naples to see the world and get an education; but it is in substance nothing but a series of dialogues on love, friendship, religion, etc., written in language which, from the title of the book, has received the name of *Euphuism*. This new English became very fashionable among the ladies, and "that beauty in court which could not parley Euphuism," says a writer of 1632, "was as little regarded as she which now there speaks not French."

Walter Scott introduced a Euphuist into his novel the *Monastery*, but the peculiar jargon which Sir Piercie Shafton is made to talk is not at all like the real Euphuism. That consisted of antithesis, alliteration, and the profuse illustration of every thought by metaphors borrowed from a kind of fabulous natural history. "Descend into thine own conscience and consider with thyself the great difference between staring and stark-blind, wit and wisdom, love and lust; be merry, but with modesty; be sober, but not too sullen; be valiant, but not too venturous." "I see now that, as the fish *Scolopidus* in the flood *Araxes* at the waxing of the moon is as white as the driven snow, and at the waning as black as the burnt coal; so Euphues, which at the first increasing of our familiarity was very zealous, is now at the last cast become most faithless." Besides the fish *Scolopidus*, the favorite animals of Lyly's menagerie are such as the chameleon, "which though he have most guts draweth least breath;" the bird *Piralis*, "which sitting upon white cloth is white, upon green, green;" and the serpent *Porphirius*,

"which, though he be full of poison, yet having no teeth, hurteth none but himself."

Lyly's style was pithy and sententious, and his sentences have the air of proverbs or epigrams. The vice of Euphuism was its monotony. On every page of the book there was something pungent, something quotable; but many pages of such writing became tiresome. Yet it did much to form the hitherto loose structure of English prose, by lending it point and polish. His carefully balanced periods were valuable lessons in rhetoric, and his book became a manual of polite conversation and introduced that fashion of witty repartee, which is evident enough in Shakspeare's comic dialogue. In 1580 appeared the second part, *Euphuës and his England*, and six editions of the whole work were printed before 1598. Lyly had many imitators. In Stephen Gosson's *School of Abuse*, a tract directed against the stage and published about four months later than the first part of *Euphuës*, the language is directly Euphuistic. The dramatist, Robert Greene, published, in 1587, his *Menaphon*; *Camilla's Alarm to Slumbering Euphuës*, and his *Euphuës's Censure to Philautus*. His brother dramatist, Thomas Lodge, published, in 1590, *Rosalynde: Euphuës's Golden Legacy*, from which Shakspeare took the plot of *As You Like It*. Shakspeare and Ben Jonson both quote from *Euphuës* in their plays, and Shakspeare was really writing Euphuism when he wrote such a sentence as "'Tis true, 'tis pity; pity 'tis 'tis true."

That knightly gentleman, Philip Sidney, was a true type of the lofty aspiration and manifold activity of Elizabethan England. He was scholar, poet, courtier, diplomatist, soldier, all in one. Educated at Oxford and then introduced at court by his uncle, the Earl of Leicester, he had been sent to France when a lad of eighteen, with the embassy which went to treat of the queen's proposed marriage to the Duke of Alençon, and was in Paris at the time of the Massacre of



Philip Sidney

St. Bartholomew, in 1572. Afterward he had traveled through Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands, had gone as ambassador to the emperor's court, and every-where won golden opinions. In 1580, while visiting his sister Mary, Countess of Pembroke, at Wilton, he wrote, for her pleasure, the *Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia*, which remained in manuscript till 1590. This was a pastoral romance, after the manner of the Italian *Arcadia* of Sanazzaro, and the *Diana Enamorada* of Montemayor, a Portuguese author. It was in prose, but intermixed with songs and sonnets, and Sidney finished only two books and a portion of the third. It describes the adventures of two cousins, Musidorus and Pyrocles, who were wrecked on the coast of Sparta. The plot is very involved and is full of the stock episodes of romance: disguises, surprises, love intrigues, battles, jousts and single combats. Although the insurrection of the Helots against the Spartans forms a part of the story, the *Arcadia* is not the real *Arcadia* of the Hellenic Peloponnesus, but the fanciful country of pastoral romance, an unreal clime, like the fairy land of Spenser.

Sidney was our first writer of poetic prose. The poet Drayton says that he

did first reduce
Our tongue from Lyly's writing, then in use,
Talking of stones, stars, plants, of fishes, flies,
Playing with words and idle similes.

Philip Sidney
Arcadia

Sidney was certainly no Euphuist, but his style was as "Italianated" as Lyly's, though in a different way. His English was too pretty for prose. His "Sidneian showers of sweet discourse" sowed every page of the *Arcadia* with those flowers of conceit, those sugared fancies which his contemporaries loved, but which the taste of a severer age finds insipid. This splendid vice of the Elizabethan writers appears in Sidney, chiefly in the form of an excessive personification. If he describes a field full of roses, he makes

"the roses add such a ruddy show unto it, as though the field were bashful at his own beauty." If he describes ladies bathing in the stream, he makes the water break into twenty bubbles, as "not content to have the picture of their face in large upon him, but he would in each of those bubbles set forth a miniature of them." And even a passage which should be tragic, such as the death of his heroine, Parthenia, he embroiders with conceits like these: "For her exceeding fair eyes having with continued weeping got a little redness about them, her round sweetly swelling lips a little trembling, as though they kissed their neighbor Death; in her cheeks the whiteness striving by little and little to get upon the rosiness of them; her neck, a neck of alabaster, displaying the wound which with most dainty blood labored to drown his own beauties; so as here was a river of purest red, there an island of perfectest white," etc.

The *Arcadia*, like *Euphues*, was a lady's book. It was the favorite court romance of its day, but it surfeits a modern reader with its sweetness, and confuses him with its tangle of adventures. The lady for whom it was written was the mother of that William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke, to whom Shakspeare's sonnets are thought to have been dedicated. And she was the subject of Ben Jonson's famous epitaph.

Underneath this sable herse
Lies the subject of all verse,
Sidney's sister, Pembroke's mother;
Death, ere thou hast slain another
Learn'd and fair and good as she,
Time shall throw a dart at thee.

Sidney's *Defense of Poesy* composed in 1581, but not printed till 1595, was written in manlier English than the *Arcadia*, and is one of the very few books of criticism belonging to a creative and uncritical time. He was also the author of a series of love sonnets, *Astrophel and Stella*, in which he paid Platonic court to the Lady Penelope Rich

(with whom he was not in love), according to the conventional usage of the amouirists.

Sidney died in 1586, from a wound received in a cavalry charge at Zutphen, where he was an officer in the English contingent sent to help the Dutch against Spain. The story has often been told of his giving his cup of water to a wounded soldier with the words, "Thy necessity is yet greater than mine." Sidney was England's darling, and there was hardly a poet in the land from whom his death did not obtain "the meed of some melodious tear." Spenser's *Ruins of Time* were among the number of these funeral songs; but the best of them all was by one Matthew Royden, concerning whom little is known.

Another typical Englishman of Elizabeth's reign was Walter Raleigh, who was even more versatile than Sidney, and more representative of the restless spirit of romantic adventure, mixed with cool, practical enterprise that marked the times. He fought against the queen's enemies by land and sea in many quarters of the globe; in the Netherlands and in Ireland against Spain, with the Huguenot army against the League in France. Raleigh was from Devonshire, the great nursery of English seamen. He was half-brother to the famous navigator, Sir Humphrey Gilbert, and cousin to another great captain, Sir Richard Grenville. He sailed with Gilbert on one of his voyages against the Spanish treasure fleet, and in 1591 he published a report of the fight, near the Azores, between Grenville's ship, the *Revenge*, and fifteen great ships of Spain, an action, said Francis Bacon, "memorable even beyond credit, and to the height of some heroical fable." Raleigh was active in raising a fleet against the Spanish Armada of 1588. He was present in 1596 at the brilliant action in which the Earl of Essex "singd the Spanish king's beard," in the harbor of Cadiz. The year before he had sailed to Guiana, in search of the fabled El Dorado, destroying on the way the Spanish town of San

Walter Raleigh
History of the World

José, in the West Indies; and on his return he published his *Discovery of the Empire of Guiana*. In 1597 he captured the town of Fayal, in the Azores. He took a prominent part in colonizing Virginia, and he introduced tobacco and the potato plant into Europe.

America was still a land of wonder and romance, full of rumors, nightmares, and enchantments. In 1580, when Francis Drake, "the Devonshire Skipper," had dropped anchor in Plymouth Harbor, after his voyage around the world, the enthusiasm of England had been mightily stirred. These narratives of Raleigh, and the similar accounts of the exploits of the bold sailors, Davis, Hawkins, Frobisher, Gilbert, and Drake; but especially the great cyclopedia of nautical travel, published by Richard Hakluyt in 1589, *The Principal Navigations, Voyages, and Discoveries made by the English Nation*, worked powerfully on the imaginations of the poets. We see the influence of this literature of travel in the *Tempest*, written undoubtedly after Shakspeare had been reading the narrative of Sir George Somers's shipwreck on the Bermudas or "Isles of Devils."

Raleigh was not in favor with Elizabeth's successor, James I. He was sentenced to death on a trumped-up charge of high treason. The sentence hung over him until 1618, when it was revived against him and he was beheaded. Meanwhile, during his twelve years' imprisonment in the Tower, he had written his *magnum opus*, the *History of the World*. This is not a history, in the modern sense, but a series of learned dissertations on law, government, theology, magic, war, etc. A chapter with such a caption as the following would hardly be found in a universal history nowadays: "Of their opinion which make Paradise as high as the moon; and of others which make it higher than the middle regions of the air." The preface and conclusion are noble examples of Elizabethan prose, and the book ends with an oft-quoted apostrophe to Death. "O eloquent, just

and mighty Death! Whom none could advise, thou hast persuaded; what none hath dared, thou hast done; and whom all the world hath flattered, thou only hast cast out of the world and despised; thou hast drawn together all the far-fetched greatness, all the pride, cruelty, and ambition of man, and covered it all over with these two narrow words, *hic jacet*."

Although so busy a man, Raleigh found time to be a poet. Spenser calls him "the summer's nightingale," and George Puttenham, in his *Art of English Poesy* (1589), finds his "vein most lofty, insolent, and passionate." Puttenham used *insolent* in its old sense, *uncommon*; but this description is hardly less true, if we accept the word in its modern meaning. Raleigh's most notable verses, *The Lie*, are a challenge to the world, inspired by indignant pride and the weariness of life — the *saeva indignatio* of Swift. The same grave and caustic melancholy, the same disillusion marks his quaint poem, *The Pilgrimage*. It is remarkable how many of the verses among his few poetical remains are asserted in the manuscripts or by tradition to have been "made by Sir Walter Raleigh the night before he was beheaded." Of one such poem the assertion is probably true — namely, the lines "found in his Bible in the gate-house at Westminster."

Even such is Time, that takes in trust,
Our youth, our joys, our all we have,
And pays us but with earth and dust;
Who in the dark and silent grave,
When we have wandered all our ways,
Shuts up the story of our days;
But from this earth, this grave, this dust,
My God shall raise me up, I trust!

The strictly *literary* prose of the Elizabethan period bore a small proportion to the verse. Many entire departments of prose literature were as yet undeveloped. Fiction was represented — outside of the *Arcadia* and *Euphues* already

mentioned—chiefly by tales translated or imitated from Italian *novelle*. George Turberville's *Tragical Tales* (1566) was a collection of such stories, and William Paynter's *Palace of Pleasure* (1576–1577) a similar collection from Boccaccio's *Decameron* and the novels of Bandello. These translations are mainly of interest as having furnished plots to the English dramatists. Lodge's *Rosalind* and Robert Greene's *Pandosto*, the sources respectively of Shakspeare's *As You Like It* and *Winter's Tale*, are short pastoral romances, not without prettiness in their artificial way. The satirical pamphlets of Thomas Nash and his fellows, against "Martin Marprelate," an anonymous writer, or company of writers, who attacked the bishops, are not wanting in wit, but are so cumbered with fantastic whimsicalities, and so bound up with personal quarrels, that oblivion has covered them. The most noteworthy of them were Nash's *Piers Penniless's Supplication to the Devil*, Lyly's *Pap with a Hatchet*, and Greene's *Groat's Worth of Wit*. Of books which were not so much literature as the material of literature, mention may be made of the *Chronicle of England*, published by Ralph Holinshed in 1580. This was Shakspeare's English history, and its strong Lancastrian bias influenced Shakspeare in his representation of Richard III. and other characters in his historical plays. In his Roman tragedies Shakspeare followed closely Sir Thomas North's translation of Plutarch's Lives, made in 1579 from the French version of Jacques Amyot.

Of books belonging to other departments than pure literature, the most important was Richard Hooker's *Ecclesiastical Polity*, the first four books of which appeared in 1594. This was a work on the philosophy of law, and a defense, as against the Presbyterians, of the government of the English Church by bishops. No work of equal dignity and scope had yet been published in English prose. It was written in sonorous, stately, and somewhat involved periods, in a Latin

rather than an English idiom, and it influenced strongly the diction of later writers, such as Milton and Sir Thomas Browne. Had the *Ecclesiastical Polity* been written one hundred, or perhaps even fifty, years earlier, it would doubtless have been written in Latin.

The life of Francis Bacon, "the father of inductive philosophy," as he has been called—better, the founder of inductive logic—belongs to English history, and the bulk of his writings, in Latin and English, to the history of English philosophy. But his volume of *Essays* was a contribution to general literature. In their completed form they belong to the year 1625, but the first edition was printed in 1597 and contained only ten short essays, each of them rather a string of pregnant maxims—the text for an essay—than that developed treatment of a subject which we now understand by the word essay. They were, said their author, "as grains of salt, that will rather give you an appetite than offend you with satiety." They were the first essays, so called, in the language. "The word," said Bacon, "is late, but the thing is ancient." The word he took from the French *essais* of Montaigne, the first two books of which had been published in 1592. Bacon testified that his essays were the most popular of his writings because they "came home to men's business and bosoms." Their alternate title explains their character: *Counsels Civil and Moral*, that is, pieces of advice touching the conduct of life, "of a nature whereof men shall find much in experience, little in books." The essays contain the quintessence of Bacon's practical wisdom, his wide knowledge of the world of men. The truth and depth of his sayings, and the extent of ground which they cover, as well as the weighty compactness of his style, have given many of them the currency of proverbs. "Revenge is a kind of wild justice." "He that hath wife and children hath given hostages to fortune." "There is no excellent beauty that hath not some strangeness in the proportion."

Francis Bacon
Essays