

ARTICLE III.

THE ROMANTIC ELEMENT IN ELIZABETHAN
LETTERS.

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"It is curious," writes an English author, "to trace the gradual transformation of historical literature. Its earliest type is invariably mythical or legendary and the form in which it then appears is universally poetical." This semi-historical, or romantic feature, as we shall call it, forms an important one at the very origin of English poetry as national in the days of Chaucer and is visible in marked expression in the Golden Age of English Prose and Verse, and even later still as the history develops. If we look for the explanation of its presence in Elizabethan days, it is not far to find. This opening era of our literature came so early in our national history as modern, and came, in some respects, so suddenly, and in such pronounced fullness of literary product, that there was scarcely time for the gradual transition from the Pre-Elizabethan and somewhat unsettled type to later and more settled forms. Though the age in its mental and literary excellence expressed in one sense the maximum of maturity, the well-developed manhood of the nation, in another sense the English people were as yet but in the freshness and buoyancy of youth, and thus in fullest sympathy with that spirit of romance so germane to the earlier years of national life and letters. No student can rightly read the literature of the sixteenth century

save as he bears this cardinal fact in mind, that he is dealing with a period that expresses, in one and the same literary product, the marks of maturity and immaturity, of fact and fancy, of history and poetry, of legend and myth, as also of science, philosophy, and didactic verse. Indeed, it is just here that we find one of the peculiar charms of this particular period, not found, to any such extent, in any later era, as the Augustan or Georgian, in each of which more stable and practical social conditions tend to make the literature more and more realistic. The Elizabethan Age is the Golden Age of Romance as well as of Reality, and of these in organic and national union, so that we are saved from both extremes — that of the merely prosaic and the merely poetic. Despite all the substantial literary productions of the century, such as Bacon's "Advancement of Learning," Hooker's "Ecclesiastical Polity," or Shakespeare's Historical Plays, — productions, indeed, on which the later superstructure of our literature mainly rests, — we cannot escape the conviction that we are here in a kind of fairy-land, where our imagination may have fullest play, and, yet, without danger of passing out beyond the credible and sensible.

A study of the special Evidences and Effects of this Romantic feature will be found to be of interest. These evidences are mainly found in what we may call the Reproduction of Mediævalism, the transference, in varied literary forms, of the legendary element of the centuries just succeeding the Conquest to the sixteenth century of English history. In prose and verse alike, — in epic and play and ballad and story, — in philosophy and history, and, even, in translations and criticisms and extended theological discussion, this love of the new and the striking is seen, and an added attractiveness thereby given to them all. It was a time when the dramatists,

as Shakespeare and his able contemporaries, were seeking, by every legitimate device, to set forth old truths in original and impressive and picturesque forms. Nor was this ideal confined to the dramatists. Bacon, as a philosopher, was desirous of propounding a new method of intellectual inquiry, both in physical and metaphysical spheres; and the "Novum Organum" appeared. The epic and lyric poets sought to give to the new world of England a graphic picture of the old, so as to make it a new world to them. Travelers and historians were not content to hold themselves to the strict details of the historic record, but gave their historic imaginations free scope in the statement and explanation of national events. In fine, Elizabethan literature, as a unified product, is itself the clearest evidence of Romanticism in external form, of the real chivalric spirit in authors and authorship. If we seek for concrete examples of the presence of this element, it will not be difficult to cite works and writers who signally evince it. We see it in Spenser's "Faerie Queene," as an allegory of human life and destiny; in Lyly's "Euphues and his England," where ethical truths are delineated in imaginative form; in Sidney's "Arcadia," so replete with legend and fancy; in Raleigh's "History of the World," so marked by the speculative element as to make it an historical romance; in Bacon's "New Atlantis," which Rawley, his biographer, rightly calls "a fable"; in Sackville's "Mirror of Magistrates," in which a portion of Dante's significant imagery is used to set forth the misfortunes of some of England's illustrious men; and even in Burton's "Anatomy of Melancholy," wherein the most serious discussions are so presented through the medium "of quaint and curious lore" that the volume might well be called, *The Anatomy of Absurdity*,—a serio-comic survey of human nature and life. The *Metrical Chronicles* of the age afford an illus-

tration of this imaginative spirit scarcely second to the poetry. In Hakluyt's "Voyages" and Purchas's "Pilgrims," in Stow's "Annals of England" and Camden's "Britannia," in Smith's "General History of Virginia," and in Froissart, Fabyan, Hall, and Holinshed, the poetic element is so mingled with the prose, the pictorial with the didactic, as to lend to the annals something of the picturesqueness of romance, and to lead the reader to forget that he is in the province of history proper. The era was full of myth and marvel; of folk-lore and fairy-tales; of pageants and revels and attractive traditions. It was a veritable Paradise of Dainty Devices. Travelers from Europe and the East swelled the sum-total of this record of adventure, and thus did, in Elizabeth's time, what Sir John Mandeville did for the fourteenth century. What was not seen was imagined. No story of travel was left untold simply by want of date and fact to substantiate it. The result, of course, was a semi-mythical body of literature, made up of a combination of English and Continental traditions, so that, as we read, we are reminded of William of Malmesbury; of Geoffrey of Monmouth; of Layamon, and of Robert of Gloucester; of Lydgate and Malory; of the "Chanson de Roland," of the "Roman de la Rose" and "Amadis de Gaul"; of Ariosto and Tasso and Ronsard and Cervantes, — in fine, of all preceding books and authors, where fact and fancy contend for supremacy and where, at the end, fancy controls. Frobisher and Drake and Sir Walter Raleigh were, in these respects, the authorities of the day. As later in the history of our letters, at the opening of what is distinctively called the Romantic Era, so now, Old English ballads and songs were revived, and the days of the Scottish Border Minstrelsy were anticipated by a century. Indeed, the Elizabethan Age, thus interpreted, is our first Romantic Era, so pronounced and typical, that when Fox wrote

his "Martyrology" he evinced it; when Sidney and Webbe and Puttenham wrote on the Art of Verse they evinced it. In fact, the "judicious" Hooker, who was contending against the stout opposition of the Reformers for the maintenance of the Anglican Ecclesiastical Polity, was almost the only author of note whose writings are devoid of this semi-historical element. It need not be said that poetry, and especially the drama, was suffused with this imaginative quality. It is seen in Shakespeare not only in "A Midsummer-Night's Dream," "Much Ado about Nothing," "All's Well that Ends Well," and "The Winter's Tale," but in such dramas as "The Tempest" and "Macbeth," and even in the Historical Plays, such as "Henry the Eighth." As has been said by Moulton, "Romances are the raw material out of which the Shakespearian drama is manufactured." It is known as "The Romantic Drama, one of its chief distinctions being that it uses the stories of Romance, together with histories treated as story-books, as the sources from which the matter of the Plays is taken." The dramatization of the stories constituted one of the expressions of Shakespeare's genius. So, among his contemporaries we find a similar pictorial type. "Spenser," says Mr. Brooke, "reflected in his poems the romantic spirit of the English Renaissance," to which we may add, that sixteenth-century verse as a whole reflected it.

If we accept Brooke's fourfold division of Later Elizabethan Verse, — "that of Love, Patriotism, Reflection, and Struggle," — this symbolic feature appears in each. The Age of the Revival of Learning was, also, an age of the Revival of Myth and Legend. The Reformation of the sixteenth century was far more than a Protestant Reaction against Roman Catholicism. It was, also, a reinvestment of much that was old with new life and more attractive form, a poetizing, in a sense, the en-

tire content of contemporary literature. One signal reason why the drama was so prominent in this age is found in the fact that it, above all other forms of verse, was able to combine the mediæval and the modern, the classical and the native, the romantic and the realistic, in such wise that the literary product was seen to be unique and complete. No form of prose could do it, nor could the epic with its narrative groundwork do it so successfully. The drama only could do it, while within the province of the drama itself, it was reserved for the genius of Shakespeare to effect the fusion so completely as to establish his dramatic rank as supreme, so that the most acute dramatic critic cannot yet distinguish the romantic from the real in Shakespearian art. The union is indissoluble. One of the most interesting expressions of this Romanticism is seen in the new impulse that it gave to the production of Lyric Verse, if, indeed, it did not directly induce it, as one of the characteristic forms of modern poetry. Mr. Symonds, in his "Essays, Speculative and Suggestive," writes of the Elizabethan period, "After the drama and closely associated with it came those songs for music in which the English of the sixteenth century excelled." He speaks of them as "a copious and splendid lyric," and contends that the later lyrists of Georgian and Victorian days, though naturally surpassing their predecessors, were not unwilling to acknowledge their indebtedness to these earlier idyllists. The spirit of the time was favorable to such an order of verse. It was, by way of emphasis, the age of life and sentiment, when thought and feeling and varied activity were inseparably blended, the Golden Age of man and human hopes. No age before or since has been more signally marked by spontaneity — mental and literary, personal and national. The era of restriction and intellectual servility had given way to a new and wider order, and the result was, as a recent critic has

expressed it, "that each man wrote . . . out of himself and sang spontaneously." All this was in the direct line of lyrical expression, as the poetry of human sentiment, of imagination in life and letters. When Whittier sings of "the spacious times of great Elizabeth," his reference is to this broadening of the bounds of thought and life, whereby the best energies of the poets were enfranchised, and a "copious lyric" naturally issued. It was an age of ideals, of impassioned activity; of ambition and aspiration and bold adventure; in a word, of romanticism, safely guarded and guided, as it was, by the more practical and stable elements of the era. Such are some of the evidences of this mythical, semi-historical trend and temper in the opening century of modern English, by reason of which what Hazlitt calls "the Literature of the Age of Elizabeth" can never entirely lose its attractiveness. As radically as our literature may change as the centuries go by, this earlier age will never lose its hold upon us by reason of this pronounced romantic element. A further question here emerges as to the effects, immediate and remote, of this specific element.

One of the first and most distinctive results of this Romantic Type and Movement appears in the new interest that was at once imparted thereby to the literature of the Elizabethan Age. The thoughtful and practical Roger Ascham was setting forth wholesome truth in the pages of his "Toxophilus" and "Schoolmaster"; Knox and Fox and Jewell were writing on behalf of ecclesiastical and civil reform; the sedate Richard Hooker was stoutly defending the doctrine and polity of the established church; Chapman was busy in his translation of the classical authors, while Bacon was penning histories and miscellanies and systems of philosophy for the widening of the bounds of human knowledge. All this was prosaic and didac-

tic in its type — an educational method of authorship in an age of high intellectual ability. Just here, this specifically attractive romantic element entered to infuse a new and more vivacious spirit into the developing literature, so as to make that readable and popular which in itself was only substantial and instructive. Fairy-tales and sonnets of pure sentiment now appeared in close connection with weightier authorship and, often, from one and the same author. The wits and satirists and playwrights of the period wrote tragedies and comedies under the influence of this freer and more adventurous spirit. When Spenser wrote his “View of the Present State of Ireland,” though he penned it in prose, he did it so as to give it the semi-historical cast and effect. The theme itself was suggestive of the legendary and marvelous as well as of the historical, and was thus but a representative example of these multiplied topics of the time which seemed to lie, in part, at least, within the province of the mythical. Elizabethan Literature for this reason, if no other, cannot be said to be dull or devoid of the popular factor. It will always be what Matthew Arnold insists every literature should be — “interesting,” sufficiently so to awaken and hold the intelligent attention of every fair-minded reader. Though it was the age of Euphuism with its affectations and forced conceits, these exaggerations were confined to Lyly and the secondary authors, their presence in Spenser and Bacon and Jonson and Shakespeare being so exceptional as scarcely to admit of serious mention.

An additional result of this Romanticism is found in the large supply of literary material it afforded to the authors of this and subsequent eras. What we might well call the capital stock of English letters was thus greatly increased. From Greece and Rome, from Spain and Italy and the Orient, much of this mythical material came, and, though often in crude and

ill-assorted forms, came when it was most needed. One of the tests of the classification of the authors of the day is found in the genius and lack of genius to utilize this wealth of subject-matter offered at hand. Even of Shakespeare it has been held by the most severe criticism that his superiority to his contemporaries lay as much in the masterly manner in which he utilized such existing material as in the absolute origination of such material. To the inferior order of mind this accumulated mass of legend and story and song seemed to be but a useless collection of unconnected data, the *disjecta membra* of older literatures and civilizations. The England of the sixteenth century was a kind of national receptacle for all the floating data, authentic and unauthentic, that Europe and the East had to offer. No small amount of that literary treasure which makes up what is known as the Golden Age was thus the free-will offering of the nations and was so rich and copious a legacy as still to be of service. Writers of the Victorian Age, such as the Brownings and Morris and Tennyson, have drawn at will from these same prolific sources and the centuries are thus united. As the philosophers direct us back to Kant, so Milton and his successors bid us look back to the days of the Virgin Queen for suggestion and inspiration and attractive literary capital. Were this imaginative element to be eliminated from the prose and verse of the period, much of its charm and power would disappear. The fact that the authorship of the Shakespearian Drama is, still, in many minds an open question, lends additional romance to a century already marked by the historico-legendary feature. A more specific result of this romantic element is found in the beginnings of English prose fiction, in romance proper, as a distinctive form of literature. It is not now in place to open the discussion as to the exact historical origin of the English novel. Suffice it to say

that the generally assigned date of its first appearance in the writings of Daniel Defoe, in the opening years of the eighteenth century, must be received with modification. Though it is, in a sense, true in the light of the most technical definition of the novel, as a product of high literary merit, it will be found that if the phrase "prose fiction" be interpreted in a larger and somewhat allowable sense, as the expression of romanticism in prose, the beginning must be found far earlier in our literary history, specifically, in Sidney's "Arcadia," of the sixteenth century. Whatever else it is or is not, it is certainly a romance. As we learn from Ben Jonson's remark to Drummond, its author intended to make it a pure English romance, with King Arthur as its hero. If, as Stigant asserts, Sidney "was the first writer of good English prose," we have the origin of English prose and English fiction in one and the same author and book. As we have seen, the spirit of the age was friendly to fiction. Just as Spenser, instead of writing an epic, as Milton did later, wrote, in keeping with the time, a Metrical Romance, so, Sidney naturally subordinated history to legend, and did for England what Lope de Vega and Sanzaro in their "Arcadias" did for Southwestern Europe. Musidorus, Prince of Thessalea; Pyrocles, Prince of Macedonia; the shepherds Clarus, Strephon, Kalander, Pamela, and Philoclea stand forth as characters, as clearly as Tom Jones and Pamela, and, in their way, they play their respective parts as well. In fact, as to the origin of fiction, some have plausibly traced it to Lyly's "Euphues and his England," a decade in advance of the "Arcadia." These two productions are singularly connected, as we read from Symonds, Sidney's biographer. "It is not improbable that Lyly's 'Euphues' suggested to Sidney the notion of writing a romance in a somewhat similar style." Even farther back than this have the

critics taken us to the equally romantic days of Chaucer, in his "Tale of Meliboeus," or back to Malory's Knights of the Round Table, in 1470, and More's "Utopia," or Ideal Commonwealth. However this may be, fiction appeared in concrete form and may be said to lay the basis for all subsequent efforts in that direction.

A question of special interest arises here as to the literary and logical relations of dramatic authorship and fiction, as to what each gives to the other and receives from it. Victor Hugo's "Les Miserables" and "Ninety-Three" are dramas in the form of fiction, while Jonson's "Masques" and Shakespeare's "Midsummer-Night's Dream" and other comedies are fiction in the form of dramas. Eliminate the fictitious or romantic element from Milton's "Comus" or the dramatic element from Cooper's "Spy" and an essential literary factor is taken from each. Bulwer's novel "Harold" and Tennyson's drama "Harold" often meet and interact, nor can the point where the tragic ends and the narrative begins be accurately discriminated by the most observing eye. Hence, the fact of interest as to the age before us is, that each alike, the drama and fiction, expresses the romantic element so germane to the time, though expressing it in different form and measure. The only wonder is, that in a period so full of the spirit of romanticism, fiction should not have obtained a firmer footing, a partial explanation lying in the fact that it dominates prose and not verse, and that verse was the natural medium in which this half-historical feature best expressed itself. Such, in brief, may be said to be the evidences and effects of the spirit of Romance in Elizabethan letters, seen in poetry, especially, and yet in all the forms of literary product.

It would be a study of no little interest to mark the presence and trace the gradual historic development of this romantic

feature in English prose and verse after the time of Elizabeth. If we have from Cowley didactic essays on agriculture and avarice, we have semi-poetic essays on what he calls "A Discourse by Way of Vision Concerning the Government of Cromwell," as, also, his picture of an ideal college, in his essay entitled "A Proposition for the Advancement of Experimental Philosophy." So, in Herrick's "Hesperides"; in Walton's "Complete Angler"; in Bunyan's "Pilgrim's Progress" and "Holy War"; in Swift's "Tale of a Tub" and "Battle of the Books." Even in philosophy it appears, as in the idealism of Berkeley; in Defoe and the later novelists; in all English folk-lore unto the days of Tennyson, one of whose poetic triumphs it was to recall the Victorian Age to the times of King Arthur and the Round Table, and so connect the most matter-of-fact era of modern letters with the most mythical era of the past. In fact, there is in English letters but one thing more real than realism and that is romanticism, the innate and irrepressible tendency to give to imagery the essential force of fact, to reduce history itself to the descriptive, pictorial, and representative.