The Literature of the Elizabethan Age

by Luella Jane Moore

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Suella Jane Moore
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The period of a nation's greatest literary glory almost always coincides with that of some important event in the nation's history. Great men have generally great minds and their thoughts are as valuable to posterity as their deeds. The victory of the Athenian army over that of Persia is celebrated in the glory of the age of Pericles. The age of Louis XIV was caused by a task prepared by the wars of the Reformation and the conquest of French arms in Germany. The age of Augustus followed the siege of Troy.

The Elizabethan age is, doubtless, the most important in English literature and, in seeking the cause which produced it we find it in the Reformation and the conquest of the Spanish Armada. Previous to this time there had been no purely English literature. Chaucer, the only great writer before the Elizabethan age borrowed
very extensively from other literatures, principally the French and Italian. The less important authors who followed him imitated him but produced nothing worthy of note. There was little encouragement to literary work at that time. It was neither lucrative nor honorable. Dealing as it did with foreign customs and thoughts, it failed to reach the hearts of the English people who did not encourage it. Some few wrote during this time in spite of discouragement. Others wrote but laid aside their productions. During the war there was very little time or inclination for literary work. Men's thoughts and energies were thoroughly devoted, were all directed towards the issue of the struggle. When at last the war closed they could not again settle down into the old, quiet routine. They must have some outlet for their energies. Many found this outlet in
literature. Accustomed to look only of the affairs of the present they wrote of them in a straightforward manner which was very popular. Elizabeth and James too were both learned and both writers of no mean ability. They encouraged their subjects to literary work, and, the fashion once set at court spread rapidly. The age produced an immense amount of literature much of which of course had very little merit.

The literature of this period is characterized by its delineations of human nature. Every phase of this wonderful subject is treated. The age afforded fields for the development of every virtue and every vice, every thought and impulse of which human nature is capable. Queen Elizabeth was almost pushed to achieve opposition to her people. Her resource was inefficacious to carry on any undertaking without their cooperation within their patriotism and love of adventure made them give.
Another characteristic of this period is the breadth of thought displayed. This was a quality almost indispensable to any one who dealt with Elizabeth. Her nature was such that no one could deal with her who had not a mind capable of understanding and coping with her whims. The relations with other nations too required that great minds should be at the head. Elizabeth was proud, capricious, and duplicitous, but a deep thinker.

The tendency of the national mind was unimaginative. Imagination lent a charm to the commonplace and novel prowess occurred of the day, and daring wicked things which would have been otherwise unnoticed, or noticed only to be ridiculed.

The literature of the Elizabethan age centres around three points: The Court, the Church and the Theatre. Of these the Theatre was at that time far the most potent, being
did almost the only means of communication between the writers and the people.

The English drama had existed long before this. As early as the twelfth century Miracle plays were used in teaching religion. These played upon the stage representations of the characters and events of the Scripture. Later the Moral plays were in vogue. They personified abstract qualities. The Interlude played its role as a vaudeville resembled more than the other, the modern play.

The first English comedy, Ralph Kibler's 'Boylb', was produced in 1540 by Nicholas Udall. It is written in rhymed verse and consists of five acts. In 1562 Sir Thomas Tackville produced 'Gostodece', the first tragedy. It was very well received but has little to commend it now, except that it is the first English play written in blank verse. Many plays follow these in quick succession. The theatre became one of the most popular records of the day. All literature
were racc sorted to furnish material for the English stage. Theatrical property was very illeisful and imperfect. Secrecy was unknown. All the parts were played by men and boys. Yet the theatre was bee immense influence.

Just before Shakespeare times there were a few play-writers who abandoned the classic style and wrote for the popular mind. Chief among these was Marlowe, a man of immense birth but great talent. Friends told him to Cambridge to study theology, but this reached his making him a skeptic. He returned to London, leading there a wild and dissolute life. He became a writer and actor. His first play "Davenburch" is "a strange compound of inspiration and desperation" and reveals much of his character. He broke all bonds of custom, writing as free and easy were the thoughts only he could form.

His "Faustus" is his greatest work. In many respects it equals Goethe's "Faust" which is drawn
As a poet he is almost unsurpassed. He was equally free and at ease in powerful, impassioned poetry, and in tender songs. His early and violent death— at the age of twenty-six—saddened England if one of her great set minds.

But Shakespeare is the name which over shadows all others in English literature. He is the greatest intellect England has ever produced. It has been said truly "the world knows nothing of her greatest men." We find this to be true of Homer, Virgil and Milton, and of Shakespeare. Of his life we know very little. Unlike most writers very little can be learned of him through his works. His characters are so numerous and varied that it is impossible to discover in which— if any—his true nature is portrayed. He was born in 1564 and received a limited education. About 1586 he went to London and, falling in with Marlowe
And his associates became an actor and an author. His first work as play writer was in the rewriting of old plays. Some of these are now published with his name. He was a great student of human nature, and was capable of sympathizing with it in any phase. He could place himself in any position and condition. With all the force and power of Marlowe, he adds to these a greater, nobler quality, that of reality. His characters, though of infinite variety, are all perfectly natural. He individualized classes, that he represented one individual Jack. He would take a bare uninteresting story or history and by his mighty genius raise it into a new world by his own creation.

The sources from whence he drew his play, were the same that the other authorized. But how different was his use of them and the result obtained! His plays are living realities, build
to all men and ages. It is difficult to determine the order in which his plays were produced. Judging from the apparent development of his mind as illustrated by them it is probable that "Love's Labour's Lost" and "The Comedy of Errors" were among the first to be produced and that "Othello" and "The Merchant" were among the last. This however can not be proved.

His work took none of its grace and sweetness and fire with the advance of time. The only change was in the increase of power and his grasp of human nature.

Next to Shakespeare in the English drama stands Ben Johnson. He was to England what Shakespeare was to the world. He represented in his plays only what he saw about him at that time and though very good his work could not equal that of the master-mind. His first play, "Every Man in His Humor" was his best. It was played in 1598 with Shakes
peace as one of the principal characters. His plots were always original and in this he excels even Shakespeare. He lived sixty-three years, producing during that time many good works. To him we owe the Masque, an allegorical representation for festive occasions, remarkable for its grace and lightness. One of his most graceful and tender works, "The Sad Shepherd," was one of his last. Like Shakespeare, Johnson grew quieter as he grew older.

Beaumont and Fletcher bore more resemblance to Shakespeare than did Johnson. They were firm friends and produced most of their works in concert though it is probable that Fletcher was the greater genius. It has been said that Beaumont's work in the partnership consisted principally in holding in check the volatile fancy of his companion. They produced many excellent works. Their plots are true and irregular but their style is fresh and
vigorou. Beaumont was slow and careful. His judgement was much esteemed. His perception was finer. His expression more delicate though less pleasing than Fletcher's. Yet Fletcher excelled his fertility and in force. He survived Beaumont ten years and in that time produced a great many plays which have, however, little merit. His writings were always injudicious and reckless and are almost all marred by a want of grace. Some of his poetry is exquisitely sweet and tender.

Philip II. succeed him in the popular esteem. His work was graver and more elevated in character. Almost nothing is known of his life which was probably mostly spent in struggling against poverty. His writings though in many respects defective, in the expression of dignity and virtue are unsurpassed.

The Ford is a dramatist of very different
characters from any other of Shakespeare's successors. His forte is in expressing the emotions of the heart. In this he is almost equal to Shakespeare. Out of this field rest's coarse, licentious and extravaganter. His finest plays are "The Browns of Hunsheath", "Lover's Sacrifice", "The Brother and Sister" and "The Broken Heart." He won the hearts of all the people by their tender grace of his works.

The name of Spenser is the greatest among the court poets. There were many other poets during the Elizabethan age of none of these coming of much notice. Blackwells may be mentioned as the greatest between Chaucer and Spenser. He was born in 1537 and educated at both Cambridge and Oxford. In 1559 he with his other writers produced the "Mirror for Magistrates," the only valuable part of which is Blackwells. In this he shows that he had great poetical ability. But it gave him to pleasure.
to exercise his talent and he soon turned his attention to statesmanship.

Of Spenser's life we know but little. He was born in 1552 and as his parents were poor he received his education as a charity student at Cambridge. He began literay work at the age of twelve or thirteen years. Disappointed by love he went to the Court where he met Sir Philip Sidney in 1576. In that year he published the "Shepherd's Calendar" which made him the first poet of the day.

The "Faerie Queene" is his principal piece. It was designed to consist of twelve books, representing the twelve virtues of Aristotle contending against their opposing vices - each represented by some knight who vies for the favor of the "Faerie Queene". But six of these books were finished. The style is delicious resembling in its musical flow the Italian poetry. Description is his forte. His "Faerie Queene" has
true designated as works of fiction. In some particulars it is shockingly incongruous and it is rather transparent, but its pictures and tenderness make it one of the most famous works of the age. There is nothing inferior, violent or ugly in it. He published several of his earlier poems, all showing the tenderness and delicacy of his nature. "The Epithalamium", his marriage song, has been called "the most glorious love song in the English tongue". He died in 1599, mourned by all England.

Among the minor poets of that age were Thomas and Giles Fletcher. They imitated Speer, each attempting an allegorical form but with very poor success.

Saracen language was distinguished for the purity, simplicity and elegance of his language but he lacks force and life.

Michael Drayton was a very prolific writer and his writings were not of much value.
Many of his shorter poems are sweet and graceful but his longer ones are trivial and confused.

Warwick's merit is that of a story-teller. His works are known to scarcely a few but the name of the writer.

John Donne was as voracious student. His studies included Law and Theology. He was in his early years a sceptic, but later his views changed and he entered the Church, becoming one of the ablest preachers of the time. His writings, sermons and poems had some good qualities but were marred by a too great display of his extensive knowledge.

Sir John Davies left us two poems—one on "Dancing", the other on the "Immortality of the Soul." Both are archaestic and pedantic.

Sir Henry Wotton is known through the well-known treatise, "The Character of a Happy Life," George Herbert, treats of religious subjects but in a cold particular way.
The court literature of the Elizabethan age was not all poetry. Prose formed its small part of it. The prose romance "Euphues" published by John Lyly in 1578 took England by storm. Its style and language were stilted but found favor at court and abroad because quite the fashion.

Sir Philip Sidney was born in 1554. He was remarkably studious as a child and was carefully educated. At the age of 17 he was sent to the continent to study. He came back highly accomplished. He was brave, honorable, and just. He had been intended for public life but he was jilted and jolled at court as universal favorite. At length tired of this idle life he retired to Wilton and there wrote the "Arcadia" the greatest prose work which had yet appeared. It was rather fantastic and tedious but its underlying principles were fine and strong.
In 1581 he retired from Parliament and soon after wrote his "Apology for Poetry" in reply to Sir Philip Sidney. It is a work remarkable for the beauty and purity of its language. In 1585 the Queen appointed him Governor of Falmouth. He received his death wound in the battle of Cadiz and by an act of true distinction wished himself "King." Dying himself he gave the cup of water not to a dying soldier near him with the words, "My necessity is greater than mine."

Sir Walter Raleigh was the most comprehensive spirit of the age. Poet, historian, statesman, commander, he could do any thing he attempted and he left few fields untried. He was distinguished at school but rose early and spent some years in the army. Rising of this tide he worked his way into the grace of the Queen who soon made him Prince Favorit. In 1585 she granted him the right to col-
ruins and poverty parts of North America. He incurred His Majesty's displeasure by marrying
one of his maids of honor but was soon restored
to favor. In 1595 he instituted a search for
Ed Dorado which he firmly believed to exist. On his
return to England he published an account of
"The Discovery of the Large, Rich and Beautiful
Empire of Guiana." While James came to the
throne Raleigh's popularity was at an end.
He was soon tried for treason and thrown
into prison. There he wrote his History of the World,
his greatest work. He began with the creation
 dredging in his knowledge of theology, philosophy
and metaphysics. The style is clear and straightforward.
A Treatise of all nations, closing with the
fall of the Macedonian Empire 176 B.C.
He intended to write an English epic but
he had time to produce only a few miscellaneous
poems. He was one of the most gifted speakers of
the age. Few could withstand his eloquence.
Bacon ranks next in importance to Shakespeare among the Elizabethan writers. He was born in London in 1561. At this time he entered Cambridge and three years later went to France to study statecraft. He was not very far called by the death of his father. Then he spent some time in the study of law and was finally admitted to the bar where he was very successful. He aspired to office but was held back by a powerful enemy. He was finally admitted to the house of commons and then advanced steadily but slowly until, at last he became Lord High Chancellor. His position, however, he did not long retain, for he was accused and proved guilty of corruption which he strongly denied. In one of his essays, he was thrown out of office and allowed to spend the last years of his life in poverty and disgrace. His writings were varied. He devoted much time to Philosophy and discovered several important facts and suggested
many others. In his Novum Organum he tried to teach the methods of investigation but was hardly successful. He is best known through his Essays. The edition published in 1697 contained only ten, so that of 1625 the number was increased to fifty seven. These essays are extremely original and in a style peculiar to Bacon. Though they are very brief, their substance is so great and their meaning so subtle that after repeated readings one new meaning may be found.

His writings were strangely at variance with his life. He seems to have appreciated what a noble life should be and yet there is hardly one vice or blunder which he decries that he does not himself possess. His views changed somewhat as time advanced and his ideas of human nature grew nobler. This may be seen by comparing the different editions of his essays.

It remains for me to speak of the literature,
of the church. I have already mentioned Donne. I will speak now only of Hooker, the greatest
divine of the age. He devoted fourteen years to
his preparation for the ministry. In 1680 he
was appointed Master of the Penitentiary, but at
his own request was removed to its Penitentiary
office. He was very successful in his work. He
laboured under the disadvantages of a sickly
tody and a weak voice but his modest
cloquence was heard and felt. His mind was
deep and comprehensive. His style was
tenue and powerful. Thoroughly earnest in his work
he threw his whole soul into it.

His "Ecclesiastical Polity" is the greatest theo-
logical work of the period. It was originally
written in a controversy on church matters.
The work is incomplete, owing to the care-
cessures or design of his successor the wife,
but enough of it remains to give it the
place it deserves in English literature.
22.

In this I have attempted to give an account of the principal writers of the Elizabethan age with their characteristics. Some of these I have not been able to do full justice. Others are already most forgotten and their places have been filled by others. But Shakespeare, Bacon and Spenser still live in their works and no future authors can ever replenish these.
Sulla J. Moore.
Senior Theeio.
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