The Literature of the
Elizabethan Age

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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 culminated in the glory of the age of Pericles. The age of Louis XIV was caused by a war 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 of 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
by the French and Italian. The less important au-
thors who followed him imitated him but produc-
ed nothing worthy of note.
There was little encouragement to literary work
at that time. It was neither lucrative nor honor-
able. Dealing as it did with foreign custom and
thoughts it failed to reach the hearts of the Eng-
lish people who did not encourage it. Some
few wrote during this time in spite of discour-
agement. Others wrote but laid aside their pro-
ductions. During the war there was very
little time or inclination for literary work.
Men's thoughts and energies, now thoroughly
awakened, were all directed towards the cause
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 think 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 account 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 powerless to achieve opposition to her people. Her revenue was insufficiency to carry on any undertaking without their cooperation. Within their patriotism and love of adventure made their 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 despotic but a deep thinker.

The peculiarity of the national mind was unimaginative. Imagination lent a charm to the commonplace and most prosaic occurrences of the day, and dwelling 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 in
and almost the only means of communication between the writer 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 in the intervals of a pageant. It seemed more than the other, the modern play.

The first English comedy, Ralph Abercromby Soiler, was produced in 1540 by Nicholas Udall. It is written in rhymed verse and consisted of five acts. In 1562 Sir Thomas Sackville produced "Gorboduce"-the first tragedy. It was very well received but has little to recommend 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 recreations of the day. All literature
were accustomed to furnish material for the English stage. Theatrical property was very scarce at the time and imperfect. Secrecy was unknown. All the parts were played by men and boys. Yet the theatre was the immense influence.

Just before Shakespeare's time 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 sent him to Cambridge to study theology, but this resulted in making him a skeptic.

He returned to London, leading there a wild and dissolute life. This became his writer and actor. His first play, "Davenbury's" is "a strange compound of inspiration and desperation" and reveals much of his character. He breaks all bonds of custom, writing at his own easy rate and the thoughts only he could form.

His "Faustus" is his greatest work. In many respects it excels Goethe's "Faust" which is drawn
from it. As a poet he is almost unsurpass-
ed. He was equally free and at ease in pow-
erful, impassioned poetry, and in tender song.
His early and violent death— at the age of
twenty-three— robbed England of one of her great-
est minds.
But Shakespeare is the name which over-
shadowed all others in English literature. He
is the greatest intellect England has ever pro-
duced. It has been said truly “the world
knows nothing of her greatest men.” We find
this to be true of Horace, 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 charac-
ters are so numerous and varied that it is impos-
sible to discover in which— if any— his own na-
ture 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, which had represented one individual. He would take a bare uninteresting story or history and by his mighty genius make it into a new world by his own creation.

The sources from whence he drew his play, were the same that the other author used. But how different was his use of them and the result obtained! His plays are living realities, built
to all men and all 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 these 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 or 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, produc-
ing during that time many good works. To
this 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 Shep-
 herd" was one of his best. Like Shakespeare
Johnson grew quieter as he grew older.
Beaumont and Fletcher were more resem-
blance to Shakespeare than did Johnson. They
were firm friends and produced most of their
work in concert though it is probable that Pitch-
er 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 love-
and irregular but their style is fresh and
vigorously. Beaumont was slow and careful. His judgement was much esteemed. His perception was finer. His expressions were delicate though less Phœbus than Fletcher's. But Fletcher excelled in fertility and in force. He survived Beaumont ten years and in that time produced a great many plays which had, however, little merit. His writings were always insipid and琐 less and are altogether marred by a lamentable vice. Some of his poetry is exquisite. But it is rare.

Philip N. Alleyne succeeded 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
character is almost richer 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 courtes, deceptions and extravagance. His finest plays are "The Show Misancholy", "Love'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 men may be much notice. Blackville may be mentioned as the greatest between Chaucer and Spenser. He was born in 1556 and educated at both Cambridge and Oxford. In 1579 he with his other writers produced the "Mirror for Magistrates" the only valuable part of which is in Blackville's. In this he shows that he had great political ability. But it gave him to pleasure.
to exercise his talent and he soon turned his attention to statesmanship.

Of his early 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 litera and wrote at the age of sixteen or seventeen years. Disappointed by love he went to the North 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 masterpiece. It was designed to consist of twelve books, representing the twelve virtues of Aristotle contesting against their opposing vice—each represented by some knight who wins for the favor of the Faerie queen. But only 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 pictures. In some particulars it is shockingly incongruous and it is rather tiresome, but its witfulness and tenderness make it one of the most famous works of the age. There is nothing inventive, violent or ugly in it. He published several of his smaller poems, all showing the tender 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 modernised by all England.

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

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

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

Warren's merit is that of a story teller. His works are known to readers who hardly know even the name of the writer.

John Donne was a 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 times. 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 "Drawing", the other on the "Immortality of the Soul." Both are argumentative poems.

Sir Henry Wotton is known through the well-known sayings, "The Character of a Happy Life." George Herbert treats religious subjects but in a cold passionless way.
The court-literature of the Elizabethan age was not all poetry. prose formed its main 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 court became 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 petted and faddled 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 pure and strong.
In 1581 he retired 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 Flushing. He received his death wound in the battle at Jutphus and by an act of their distress wished himself "done in." Dying himself, he passed the cup of water unlaid 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 untrodden. He was distinguished at school but left early and spent some years in the army. Rising of this late he worked his way into the grace of the Queen who soon made him Prince favor.
suffered the Queen's displeasure by marrying one of her maids of honor but was soon restored to favor. In 1595 he instituted a search for El 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 Eldorado.' 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, bridging 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 never really 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 thus advanced steadily but slowly until, at last, he became Lord High Chancellor. This position, however, he did not long retain, for he was accused and proved guilty of corruption which he so strongly denounced in one of his essays. He was thrown out of office and allowed to spend the last years of his life in pennury 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 1597 contained only ten, so that in 1620 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 despised what a noble life should be and yet there is hardly one vice or blemish which he denounces 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 1636 he was appointed Master of the Temple but at his own request was removed to as his destination office. He was very successful in his work. He labored under the disadvantages of a sickly body and a weak voice but his modest eloquence was heard and felt. His mind was deep and comprehensive. His style was terse and powerful. Thoroughly immersed in his work he threw his whole soul into it.

His "Ecclesiastical Polity" is the greatest theological work of the period. It was originally written in a controversy over church matters. The work is incomplete, owing to the carelessness or design of his six years in the wife, but enough of it remains to give it the place it deserves in English literature.
In this I have attempted to give an account of the principal writers of the Elizabethan age with their characteristics. No some of them I have not been able to do full justice. Others are already most forgotten and their places have been filled by others. But such Shakespeare, Bacon and Spenser still live in their works and no future authors can ever supplant them.