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ESSAYS
ON
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Essays on Milton

Essays on Milton

BY

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Preface

THE essays contained in this volume have been prepared in the belief that some such help is needed either for a first study or a serious reading of Milton's poetry and prose. No one of the essays professes to be a minute study of the subject under discussion. In consequence, footnotes have been given only where they have seemed absolutely essential; and no formal bibliography is included, since the author hopes to publish soon a topical bibliography of Milton. For kind permission to reprint the chapter, "The Theme of *Paradise Lost*," thanks are due the editors of the *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*. If the essays prove of assistance as an introduction to the work of Milton, their object will be attained.

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Chapter I

Milton, the "Last of the Elizabethans"

ALTHOUGH the quickening impulse of the Renaissance had scarcely begun, in 1575, to revive the flagging spirit of English poetry, and although civil and religious dissensions deflected from literature talents that otherwise would have been devoted to her service, so that the first real harvest of the new poetry was delayed until the sixteenth century was three quarters past, nevertheless, before the close of the queen's reign in 1603, two forms of poetry were raised to an excellence never since equalled. The glorious fruitage of the Elizabethan age was in drama and lyric. Much as English poetry may owe to the contributors to *Tottel's Miscellany*, their sonnets and lyrics seem crude indeed beside the matchless verse of the closing years of the century. Equally marked is the difference between the rude comedy and tragedy that England could offer the queen at her coronation and the great plays that were brought for her pleasure from the Bankside to Whitehall before her death. During these few

decades, progress both in lyric and drama was phenomenal. An Elizabethan song-book is filled with lyrics charming for their simplicity, melody, and fervor; and the music-lover who looks before and after thinks unconsciously of "bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang." In dramatic literature progress was equally marked; tragedy responded to all the throbbing emotion and vivid imagination of the day, and comedy gave its interpretation of life, either beautifully poetic in its viewpoint or keen and observant in its realism. It was the age of both lyric and drama.

Although this quick maturing of the Elizabethan drama remains unparalleled, it is not beyond explanation. For two centuries and more Englishmen had found instruction and diversion in their plays, till the dramatic instinct was ingrained in their natures. Into the sacred drama had gone the highest knowledge and most earnest hope of those centuries. By long practice the first principles of play-writing and an appreciation of the art were learned and cultivated. Then came the Renaissance to quicken the native dramatic impulse. Dramatists were taught to ground their work firmly on human life; they were furnished new models and new forms of drama. Instantly, the crude comedy and tragedy that but yesterday had sufficed were cast aside; yet, fortunately, a spiritless imitation of the classical drama was just as decisively rejected. And the drama sprang to its great culmination.

It may be harder to explain the rapid development of the Elizabethan lyric. Its perfection, in the first place, lay in form more than in content. At its best, the Elizabethan lyric was marked by spontaneity and fervor, grace and charm, and ease and simplicity of movement. The poets in handling their meters showed a versatility that seems to belie the known facts regarding the newness of this kind of poetry in England. But the poorer lyrics are marred by artificiality and a fondness for strange conceits that betray ingenuity rather than genius in their authors. The song in praise of an imaginary mistress served as a stock theme on which one's skill might be proved. Yet even a reader who knows the worst as well as the best of Elizabethan verse, has one feeling toward the age more strong than any other — that the impulse for song throbbed in the pulse of all England with a force that would inspire poets to the highest achievements in lyric verse.

In other forms of poetry, however, the same power was not shown. Since the Renaissance had brought its vast enrichment to English thought only a few years before, time had not yet elapsed for a full fruition. New meters and a general knowledge of the quantitative principle of verse had been transmitted by the New Learning to the Tudor poets, as well as new forms of poetry like the sonnet and the ode, and new themes in the pastoral and the elegy. At the same time, there was in English hearts enough creative im-

pulse to check the craze for slavish imitation; the Areopagites might theorize on rhythm and exemplify their theories, but Spenser and the inspired English poets had their way. There was impulse, also, sufficient to assimilate much of the artistic acquisition. But in poetry other than drama or lyric the poets were obviously experimenting in a new art. Their classicism was not yet a natural part of their speech; in long efforts their sense of form was not yet sure, for the best in Virgil was but half appreciated. The pastoral, the ode, the elegy, and the epic were left for a later generation to perfect.

Soon the Elizabethan age gave way to the Caroline. The line of demarcation between the two is necessarily shadowy and broken; for the poetry of the one age differed from that of the other not in kind so much as in quality and power. In general, the Caroline authors carried those forms of poetry already perfected on beyond their culmination and down the further slope toward decay. It needs no argument to show that tragedy and comedy became labored and feeble; Brome and Cartwright compare poorly with Jonson and Dekker. It is harder to demonstrate the inferiority of the Caroline lyric. The greatest of the Caroline song writers preserve in part the high traditions they inherited. Carew at his best shows all of Jonson's fine sense of form; Herrick equals the greatest of his predecessors in ease and abandon to lyric impulse. But their work is un-