

Annette T. Rubinstein

# THE GREAT TRADITION IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

**From Shakespeare to Shaw**

VOLUME I

英国文学的伟大传统

从莎士比亚到肖伯纳

**THE GREAT TRADITION IN<sup>v. 2</sup>  
ENGLISH LITERATURE  
FROM SHAKESPEARE TO SHAW**

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**Volume I**

**William Shakespeare to Jane Austen**

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**by**

**Annette T. Rubinstein**

**Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press  
Beijing**

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**Modern Reader Paperback Edition 1969, 1980**

**Reprinted in 1988 by**

**Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press  
19 Xisanhuan Beilu, Beijing, China**

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### THE GREAT TRADITION IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

#### VOLUME II

ROBERT BURNS TO BERNARD SHAW  
*includes the Index to both volumes*

*In 1982–1983 when I first spent a year teaching in the People's Republic of China I was both amazed and pleased to find that almost all advanced English students were familiar with my somewhat polemical 900 page survey of English literature, published in the United States thirty years earlier.*

*Many colleagues and students complained that there was no comparable study of American literature available, so I promised to begin work on one as soon as I returned home.*

*The result — American Literature: Root and Flower (1775 – 1955) — has just been published as a two-volume paperback by the Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press in Beijing. Now the editors have asked my permission to re-issue The Great Tradition in English Literature: From Shakespeare to Shaw in a similar format.*

*I am, of course, very happy to think that both the English and the American book will be available for a new generation of Chinese students and many other readers here. I hope that this acquaintance with some of the best, most concerned, most independent Western minds of the past four centuries will help build an understanding of what is truly admirable — and what is not — in the two great English-speaking nations.*

Annette T. Rubinstein

Beijing, 1988

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For arrangements made with various authors and publishing houses whereby certain copyrighted material was permitted to be reprinted, and for the courtesy extended by them, the following acknowledgments are gratefully made:

D. Appleton & Co., *Bernard Shaw: Playboy and Prophet* by Archibald Henderson; Jonathan Cape, *The Aesthetic Adventure* by William Gaunt; Chanticleer Press, Inc., *John Milton* by Rex Warner; Chatto & Windus, Ltd., *Milton* by E. M. Tillyard; The Citadel Press, *The Hidden Heritage* by John Howard Lawson; William Collins Sons & Co., Ltd., *The Life of William Cobbett* by G. D. H. and M. Cole; Columbia University Press, *John Bunyan, Mechanick Preacher* by W. Y. Tindall; Cresset Press, Ltd., *Jane Austen and Some Contemporaries* by Mona Wilson; Dodd, Mead & Co., *Charles Dickens* by G. K. Chesterton; Gerald Duckworth & Co., Ltd., *Huxley* by E. W. MacBride; Victor Gollancz, Ltd., *Bernard Shaw: Art and Socialism* by E. Strauss; Harcourt, Brace & Co., Inc., *The Poet in the Theatre* by Ronald Peacock, *The Common Reader* by Virginia Woolf; Harper & Brothers, *Color* by Countee Cullen, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* by Emily Dickinson; Hodder & Stoughton, Ltd., *Men of Letters* by Dixon Scott; Horizon Press, *Modern Greek Poetry* by Rae Dalven; Hutchinson & Co., Ltd., *Introduction to the English Novel* by Arnold Kettle; International Publishers, *The Novel and the People* by Ralph Fox; The Kenyon Review, "Fiction and the 'Matrix of Analogy'" by Mark Schorer; Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., *Shelley* by Neuman Ivy White; John Lane, The Bodley Head, Ltd., *George Bernard Shaw* by G. K. Chesterton; Lawrence & Wishart, Ltd., *Charles Dickens—The Progress of a Radical* by T. A. Jackson, *A People's History of England* by A. L. Morton, *Crisis and Criticism* by Alick West, *A Good Man Fallen Among Fabians* by Alick West; The Macmillan Co., *Shakespeare and the Rival Tradition* by Alfred Harbage, *Collected Poems* by Thomas Hardy, *History of English Literature* by Legouis and Cazamian, *Science and the Modern World* by A. N. Whitehead; Macmillan & Co., Ltd., *Political Characters of Shakespeare* by John Palmer; McGraw-Hill Book Co., Inc., *Shakespeare Without Tears* by Margaret Webster; Methuen & Co., Ltd., *John Bunyan—Maker of Myths* by Jack Lindsay; New Statesman & Nation, "The Economic Deter-

minism of Jane Austen" by Leonard Woolf; The New Yorker, "Charles Dickens" by Martha Keegan; Oxford University Press, *Shelley, Godwin and Their Circle* by H. N. Brailsford, *The Dickens World* by Humphrey House; Philosophical Library, *Charles Dickens* by Jack Lindsay; Princeton University Press, *Prefaces to Shakespeare* by H. Granville-Barker, *Jane Austen, Irony As Defense and Discovery* by Marvin Mudrick, *The Court Wits of the Restoration* by J. H. Wilson; G. P. Putnam's Sons, *Ellen Terry and Bernard Shaw* by Ellen Terry; The Quarterly Review, "Jane Austen" by Reginald Farrer; Routledge & Kegan Paul, Ltd., *Biography of Bacon* by Mary Sturt; Henry Schuman, Inc., *Francis Bacon* by Benjamin Farrington; Scrutiny (Magazine), "Regulated Hatred" by D. C. W. Harding; Secker & Warburg, *William Blake: A Man Without a Mask* by J. Bronowski; Society of Authors (London), *William Morris As I Knew Him* by Bernard Shaw, *The Works of Bernard Shaw* by Bernard Shaw; George W. Stewart, Inc., *The Great Tradition* by F. R. Leavis; University of California Press, *Swift and Defoe* by John Frederick Ross; Viking Press, Inc., *Collected Works* by Dorothy Parker.

# The Elizabethan Age and the Bourgeois Revolution

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## THE ELIZABETHAN AGE

It is difficult for us today to imagine the reality and vigor of England's great Renaissance age, and of that early period of triumphant revolution which ushered in our modern world.

Sixteenth century England, and especially, its capital city London, were in the full enjoyment of a belated Renaissance, a humanist flowering of secular learning like that which had, a little earlier, reached Italy and France. But partly because of certain political events sketched below and the strong feeling of somewhat aggressive patriotism they engendered, partly because of the powerful current of the Reformation which had affected England almost as much as it did the Netherlands (and had inspired such martyred Protestant leaders as John Wyclif, William Tyndale, and Hugh Latimer) England wore its Renaissance with a difference. As the excellent French critic, Emile Legouis, says in his *History of English Literature*:

While in France the Renaissance was eminently aristocratic, in England it was always regardful of the masses. It preserved and increased the vogue of the ballads. The theatre, the home of the most magnificent product of the period, was accessible to all men, appealed to the humble as well as to the great.

A striking example of this English integration of the new Renaissance emphasis on learning with the older popular cultural traditions is shown by the development of the medieval morality play in the early sixteenth century. (In France, on the contrary, this flourishing medieval folk art died out entirely during the Renaissance, and after 1548 popular performances of the other

medieval religious plays, the mystery plays, were forbidden by law.)

One of the first of these new English morality plays was written by John Skelton in 1516. A famous humanist, noted as a Latinist and grammarian, and appointed tutor to the future Henry VIII, Skelton turned his back on the language of the court and university to write poetry in the still unrespected English vernacular. Thomas More's famous *Utopia*, for example, was written in Latin in 1516 and although widely known in his own time, was not translated into English until 1551. But Skelton said:

Though my rime be ragged,  
Tatter'd and jagged,  
Rudely raine-beaten  
Rusty and moth-eaten;  
If ye take wel therewith,  
It hath in it some pith.

His morality play, *Magnificence*, does not represent the medieval struggle between heaven and hell for the soul of man. It represents a kingly Renaissance hero, Magnificence, who is almost ruined by following the advice of bad counselors but is saved by the help of such good, but equally worldly, ones as Hope, Circumspection and Perseverance.

An even more interesting secular adaptation of the old religious form, printed anonymously three years later, is called *The Four Elements*. It has as its devil, Ignorance, and as its hero, Humanity, son of the "Natura Naturata" who is saved by his guardian, Studious Desire.

In the late forties *The Play of Wyt and Science* was performed. In this a noble father, Reason, wishes to marry his daughter, Science, to the poor and low-born Human Wit, son of Nature. He answers arguments about the disparity of the match:

Wherefore, syns they both be so meet matches  
To love each other, strawe for the patches  
Of worldly muckel syence [science] hath inowghe [enough]  
For them both to lyve.

In this play, too, one of the villains is Ignorance, born of Idleness.

About the same time another form of literature which deeply affected the developing Elizabethan drama began to appear.

In 1548 Edward Hall published his *Chronicles* which treated the history of the Civil Wars of Lancaster and York (the Wars of the Roses) and the reigns of Henry VII and VIII. Shakespeare's two great series of History Plays, which we will soon consider, drew much of their material from these very popular *Chronicles*.

In 1561 another *Summarie of English Chronicles* was printed and ran into eleven editions in the following half century.

From 1578-1586 Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles*, to which Shakespeare was also greatly indebted, appeared and were enthusiastically received by a public deeply interested in political affairs and avid for any lessons that might be learned from history.

The history which those who could not read were soon eagerly following on the bare Elizabethan stage was indeed a thrilling one.

The intoxication of freedom from feudal ties, and the excitement of the new horizons and possibilities which were opening up before the rising young bourgeoisie all over England, were already the very breath of the great Elizabethan Age when Elizabeth came to the throne in 1558.

Her grandfather, Henry VII, founder of the Tudor dynasty, had with his victory ended the hundred and fifty year fratricidal "Wars of the Roses" in which the feudal nobility had been largely destroyed. His need for support and his fear of any reviving rival power in the remnants of the old nobility made his Tudor monarchy from the beginning closely ally itself with the growing new power and wealth of the "middle class." His policies naturally fostered this growth and in many respects met the needs and paralleled the thinking of the most advanced sections of the bourgeoisie.

For example, the only way in which the notoriously thrifty Henry VII willingly spent royal funds was in bounties to encourage shipbuilding. And a century before Geoffrey Chaucer had already noted that, of all the pilgrims en route to Canterbury, only the prosperous "new man"—an active bourgeois merchant—was typically concerned about the neglect of England's sea power.

Henry's son, Henry VIII, had, in the course of England's opposition to Spain, then the center of European reaction, been led to defy the medieval power of the Catholic Church. With amazingly general support and virtually no internal opposition he had succeeded in asserting England's independence of that till then almost unchallenged supernational feudal authority.

By his confiscation and immediate piecemeal resale of the vast church estates, Henry VIII had enormously increased the power

of the new monied men, now become landowners as well as merchants, had greatly stimulated trade, and had accelerated the formation of a new nobility whose origins were bourgeois and whose class interest promised loyalty to the throne, which then also meant to the principle of national unity.

At Henry VIII's death in 1547 commerce had grown so enormously that, according to some accounts, the population of London was quadrupled within one generation. The noble Council of Regency, appointed to rule in the name of his young son, did not have, among all its sixteen members, a single one whose title dated back even to the beginning of the century!

It is easy for us today to overlook the genuine advance involved in this substitution of a bourgeois for a feudal nobility.

But we must remember that when we speak of the Elizabethan Age as a revolutionary one we do not refer to a revolution of the miserably poor peasants or of the surprisingly large number of even more miserable "sturdy vagabonds"—the future mechanics—forced off the land by early capitalist farming.

As Barrows Dunham's profound and witty *Giant in Chains* reminds us: "Feudalism fell . . . not by strength of the class which it directly exploited, but by strength of another class with which it merely interfered." This other class was, of course, the small but rapidly increasing bourgeoisie—some skilled craftsmen, some ship-builders, some professionals, and above all the merchants.

And in many ways the demands made by this class were more progressive than its predominant composition would lead one to expect.

For, as the history of our own American Revolution and that of the French Revolution have amply illustrated, whenever any such middle class begins to struggle for its own emancipation and the freedom to develop itself, it must, at the beginning, state its case so as to seem to include universal emancipation and freedom of development. That it, as a class, invariably recoils in horror from this broad program as soon as the realization becomes a practical possibility, does not affect the statement's initial validity. And so, in the Elizabethan statement of the essential dignity of generic man, (a statement made in varying ways by Renaissance humanism everywhere at the beginning of the bourgeoisie's assumption of power), we find a universality from which three centuries of bourgeois power were to retreat, leaving its actual realization to a later more comprehensive revolution.

The reality of Tudor progress was emphasized when Edward

VI's death in childhood, and the accession of Elizabeth's older half-sister, the Catholic Mary, ushered in a bloody five years' attempt to reverse the movement of history.

The essential futility of this attempt is evident in the fact that there was never, during her entire reign, any concrete proposal to return even an acre of the confiscated land to the church! But a few of the most public spirited and courageous Protestant Church leaders, and over three hundred small farmers and artisans were burnt at the stake for refusing to disown their heresy. One of these, the brilliant Bishop Latimer, himself a small farmer's son, cried out as the fire was lit, to his colleague and companion in death:

Play the man, Master Ridley; we shall this day by God's grace, light such a candle in England, as I trust shall never be put out.

The unpopularity of these persecutions was capped by Mary's marriage to the feared and hated king of Spain. Only the knowledge of her fatal illness prevented an uprising in 1558.

Elizabeth's accession was therefore welcomed with great relief and enthusiasm by almost all sections of the population. Even the large number of sincere Catholics were in general more afraid of Spanish domination and renewed civil war than they were of the results of a return to the very "Anglo-Catholic" Episcopalianism of Henry VIII. The event proved them correct. Elizabeth herself was, like her father and grandfather, untroubled with any particular religious convictions, and she was even more superbly gifted with the political sense that created the Tudor "absolutism by consent."

The church settlement she effected was planned to antagonize as few people as possible. The definitions of dogma were deliberately left vague, and the words of the Church services were carefully written so as to make several alternative interpretations equally plausible. A. L. Morton, in his *A People's History of England* summarizes her achievement:

In the Elizabethan settlement Protestantism assumed the form most compatible with the monarchy and with the system of local government created by the Tudors. The parson in the villages became the close ally of the squire and almost as much a part of the State machine as the Justice of the Peace.

Elizabeth was thus in the happy position of a ruler attuned both temperamentally and intellectually to the tastes as well as the needs of her time.

Her keen interest in exploration and travel and her acknowledged partiality for the grizzled old—as well as the daring young—sea dogs was another taste she shared with the citizens of her city.

This is clear from the tremendous number of travel books and stories of heroic exploits and distant explorations carried on by such curious and unconventional Englishmen as Sir Francis Drake or Sir Walter Raleigh. These books seldom had much literary merit, but they were a vital part of the exciting ferment of an age that bred so great a literature. We must not forget Shakespeare's many references to the "still-vest Bermoothes," the "Antipodes and men whose heads beneath their shoulders grow," and the equally plausible "sea coast of Bohemia."

While the English Renaissance was thus fed by many other streams beside the flow of literature from the ancient world, rediscovered by fifteenth century European culture, it was, of course, largely indebted to that source as well.

After the middle of the sixteenth century there was a flood of translations of Greek and Latin classics, and of the fruits of the earlier Italian and French Renaissance. It was in 1578 that George Chapman published the translation of Homer which John Keats has immortalized for us. Anyone taking the trouble to compare Chapman's version with Pope's elegant and irrelevant eighteenth century one will add a new respect for Elizabethan scholarship to his admiration of Elizabethan poetry.

The great burst of lyric poetry by such sonneteers as Sir Philip Sidney, Sir Thomas Wyatt, and the Earl of Surrey, and the richly pictorial narrative poetry of the *Faerie Queene* by that poet's poet, Edmund Spenser, are all well-known evidences of the Elizabethan age's exuberant vitality.

Less interesting to us today, but also extremely important in the development of our modern English, are the ornate and fantastic early prose narratives like John Lyly's *Euphues* and Sidney's *Arcadia*. But such early literary criticism as Sidney's noble *Apologie for Poetrie* in which he maintains the poet's dignity as the first lawgiver of society, and its prophet, are still important for their content as well as their style.

There are other less known theoretical works which are equally valuable for those who wish fully to realize the meaning of humanism and its respect for man—an attitude absolutely fundamental to any real understanding of Shakespeare's greatness. For example, we may glance at *The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* by Richard Hooker,

which he had been working on for many years and which was published immediately after his death in 1600.

Hooker was the son of a poor man, destined for an apprenticeship, whose extraordinary brilliance attracted his schoolmaster's attention and won him a scholarship to Oxford. Graduated with high honors in the early seventies, he refused preferment and asked for a small country living where he might "behold God's blessings spring out of my mother earth and eat my own bread without oppositions."

There he devoted himself largely to the huge work he left unfinished at his death. Quiet and conservative in tone, it nevertheless shares the major attitude of his tumultuous and progressive age, its faith in active reason, in man's power to affect the world, and in his full responsibility for whatever he may choose to do or leave undone. A characteristic passage reads:

Man in perfection of nature being made according to the likeness of his Maker resembleth Him also in the manner of working: so that whatsoever we work as men, the same we do wittingly work and freely; neither are we according to the manner of natural agents any way so tied but that it is in our power to leave done the things we do undone.

Another more obscure ecclesiastical writer, Thomas Starkey, also uses religious terminology to express his regard for the divinity of man's reason:

Thus, if we with ourself reason, and consider the works of man here upon earth, we shall nothing doubt of his excellent dignity, but plainly affirm that he hath in him a sparkle of Divinity, and is surely of a celestial and divine nature, seeing that by memory and wit also he conceiveth the nature of all things. For there is nothing here in this world, neither in heaven above, nor in earth beneath, but he by his reason comprehendeth it. So that I think we may conclude that man by nature, in excellence and dignity, even so excelleth all other creatures here upon earth, as God exceedeth the nature of man.

These quotations are generally characteristic of Renaissance humanism, but the emphasis on society as an indivisible entity, which alone made it possible for men to realize their potentialities, is more specifically characteristic of the English culture of the period. Even in England there were many great men like Shake-

speare's brilliant predecessor, Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593), who stressed the new freedom of individual development as opposed to the older sense of community, but the typical sixteenth century English thought is here better represented by such writers as Hooker, Starkey, and of course Shakespeare himself.

Starkey, for example, says:

. . . we should have a multitude of people convenient to the place, flourishing with all good abundance of exterior things required to the bodily wealth of man, the which living together in civil life, governed by politic order and rule, should conspire together in amity and love, everyone glad to help another to his power, to the intent that the whole might attain to that perfection which is determined to the dignity of man's nature by the goodness of God, the which is the end of all laws and order, for which purpose they be writ and ordained.

And Hooker adds:

. . . forasmuch as we are not by ourselves sufficient to furnish ourselves with a competent store of things needful for such a life as our nature doth desire, a life fit for the dignity of man; therefore to supply these defects and imperfections which are in us living single and solely by ourselves, we are naturally induced to seek communion and fellowship with others. This was the cause of men's uniting themselves at the first in politic societies, which societies could not be without government, nor government without a distinct kind of Law. Two foundations there are which bear up public societies; the one, a natural inclination whereby all men desire sociable life and fellowship; the other, an order expressly or secretly agreed upon touching the manner of their union in living together.

Yet for all the variety of Elizabethan literature, its great glory and supreme gift to the world was unquestionably its theatre—still the source of the greatest drama the English-speaking stage has ever known.

This theatre had, as we have seen, roots reaching back to the folk productions of the medieval morality plays, which had been presented by guilds in every sizable English town for centuries. But in its Elizabethan reincarnation this theatre was uniquely the product of late sixteenth century London, and so intimately affected by the queen and her court that we must consider a little

more closely the position of the last of the Tudors and her relation to the people Shakespeare's theatre served.

Queen Elizabeth herself was an enlightened representative of her age and seemed surprisingly well aware of the contemporary movement of history. Absolute in power but flexible in policy, aware of the real importance of wealth and careless of military glory, personally interested in her country's welfare and indifferent in matters of religion, she deliberately appealed to widespread support among the common people and jealously repressed the rise of any powerful factions in the nobility. She served during the last third of the sixteenth century as a dramatic center and symbol for a rare—and brief—period in which the real interests of the most progressive class in the country were also the dominant ones of the country, and expressed themselves as those of the nation itself.

In 1608, five years after her death, that great thinker and shrewd observer, Francis Bacon, wrote some notes "On The Fortunate Memory of Elizabeth, Queen of England." These were presented to King James, a ruler under whom Bacon received the rewards and recognition Elizabeth never gave him, and a king who made barely a pretense of any respect or affection for his predecessor. He certainly was not to be favorably impressed by any praise bestowed upon her, and Bacon certainly knew it. We may, therefore, fairly accept what Bacon wrote in this brief essay as the honest and considered opinion of a competent judge who had had unusual opportunities for personal observation.

Elizabeth both in her nature and her fortune was a wonderful person among women, a memorable person among princes. . . .

The government of a woman has been a rare thing at all times; felicity in such government a rarer thing still; felicity and long continuance together the rarest thing of all. Yet this Queen reigned forty-four years, and did not outlive her felicity. . . .

Observe too that this same humour of her people, over eager for war and impatient of peace, did not prevent her from cultivating and maintaining peace during the whole time of her reign. And this her desire of peace, together with the success of it, I count among her greatest praises; as a thing happy for her times, becoming to her sex, and salutary for her conscience. . . .

Upon another account also this peace so cultivated and