The Great Tradition in English Literature from Shakespeare to Jane Austen

by Annette T. Rubinstein

AN ILLUMINATING INTERPRETATION OF THE MAJOR FIGURES IN ENGLISH LITERATURE, REVEALING HOW THEY WERE ROOTED IN THE POLITICAL AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS OF THEIR OWN TIME.

"I view American literature much as Miss Rubinstein sees the older literature from which it sprang."

—Van Wyck Brooks

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From

SHAKESPEARE TO JANE AUSTEN


BY ANNETTE T. RUBINSTEIN

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For

JEAN RUBINSTEIN

Mother, Teacher, Comrade

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FOREWORD

The great tradition in English literature is the tradition of those great writers who could, as Shakespeare said, "sense the future in the instant." The future is always stirring beneath the heart of the present and it is therefore those who live closest to the heart of their own time who can most surely sense the pulse of the life-to-be.

The great tradition in English literature is the tradition of the great realists; that is to say, of the writers who know and are concerned with the vital current which moves steadily beneath the innumerable eddies and confusing crosscurrents of life's surface.

This feeling for the essential direction of history, this profound understanding of the significant events and potentialities of one's own age, has little relation to any skill at observing and reproducing its minutiae. Snobbish or sentimental writers like Pope, Thackeray and Trollope, angry and honest ones like Zola or Gissing or Morrison, can often create an impressive facsimile of the life led by the men and women whom they have had occasion to observe. But, as Bacon said in another context, "a crowd is not company; and faces are but a gallery of pictures; and talk but a tinkling cymbal, where there is no love." And it is in the love which makes them sensitively aware of their fellows' needs, in the respect they feel for man's potentialities, that the work of the great realists is rooted. It is this deep assurance of man's strength, this ardent concern for his rights, that has so often enabled them to "look into the seeds of time and say which grain will grow and which will not." It is this which paradoxically makes their work, written out of the most immediate care for contemporary events, most relevant to those of a far distant future.

This seemingly prophetic insight has taken many forms. One was the daring, closely reasoned scientific prevision of a Bacon or a Huxley. Another was the equally daring, less fully conscious, anticipation of a Blake or a Burns. At some periods we find that this central conviction of man's power to shape his own future expresses itself in the common religious mythology of his time, as with Bunyan. At other periods the writer is forced to create his own

myths as Dickens does in his metaphorical use of an apparently factual plot. Often the great humanist was also a fiercely indignant revolutionary like Milton or Hazlitt or Shelley; less often he shared the brief serenity of an optimistic postrevolutionary age like Defoe or Fielding or Jane Austen. But always the great writers have, in one way or another, participated in the essential struggles of their own times. The old miners' song has it, "They say in Harlan County, there are no neutrals here," and that is also so in the great world of art.

True, it has long been a dogma in the academies that art and politics are two separate worlds; that the value of a work of art is unaffected by the artist's relation to the social movements of his own time, his concern with human needs, or his hopes of future progress. And in the last three quarters of a century the artist himself has too often concurred in this belief. But his acceptance of his separation from society, whether melancholy or defiant, was always only a special instance of that alienation of man from himself which has characterized the end of the great bourgeois epoch.

The representative art of the great epochs of human culture have always been political and partisan. Aristotle defined man as *the* political animal, and surely the most human of men—the great artist—are not the least political.

The following pages attempt a rapid survey of one of the greatest of such epochs—that of the expanding bourgeois world in its hopeful youth and its troubled but still rich maturity. The twenty-odd major figures here examined are all chosen from those acknowledged, by the most conservative academicians and critics, to be the greatest writers of their own times, and among the greatest of all time. Yet almost invariably scholarly discussions as well as popular biographies and anthologies minimize, distort, or altogether ignore the political concern and activity which lay at the root of the art they praise. And so, inevitably, they misunderstand and misrepresent vital elements in it, no matter how great their admiration.

A full consideration of the life and work of any of these major figures in the history of English literature soon shows us just how clear, conscious and complete the great writer's consistently progressive partisanship in the political and social conflicts of his own time has always been. But it is difficult for the nonacademic reader to find the time and factual material for such a consideration, and the nonpolitical literary student too often himself unquestioningly accepts the retired tradition of the academies.

This book grew out of one student's attempt first to learn in

concrete detail, and then to teach in convincing summary, the part played by the great writers in man's continuing fight for freedom.

It begins with a brief synopsis of the social and political background for the great literature of Shakespeare and his contemporaries, and proceeds to a more detailed consideration of perhaps the two most important Elizabethans—Shakespeare himself and Bacon.

Each of the four succeeding sections similarly opens with a rapid sketch of its age, with emphasis upon those aspects of its history most directly related to the literary development of the period, and proceeds to a more specific consideration of its most representative figures.

There has been little attempt to impose any formal uniformity on the material presented. In some instances a rather full biographical account seemed desirable; in others more space has been devoted to a consideration of certain specific works. Nor is the length of any one chapter an indication of the relative importance of the writer to whom it is devoted. Here again the story to be told determined the manner of its telling. For example, the tragic fact that Keats died at twenty-six, after barely six writing years, made it possible to treat his life and work in less than half the space demanded by Hazlitt or Dickens or Shaw.

In many of the discussions my conclusions as to a writer's political and social attitude necessarily run counter to the conventional impression, so I have thought it best to use the impeccable evidence of direct quotation as far as possible. There are, therefore, substantial extracts from personal letters and diaries as well as from more deliberate literary works included in every chapter but the one on Shakespeare, and even in that there is an unusual amount of such quotation from more or less intimate contemporary sources. I believe that anyone judicially considering these great writers' own statements must conclude, whatever his own opinion may be, that they all felt "that those who are above the struggle are also beside the point."

Finally, although the book presents a continuous development, each of the five major sections of which it is composed can really be read as an independent unit. It may, in fact, be advisable for those readers not well acquainted with the earlier periods of English history and literature to begin with the discussion of the more familiar modern world in the third section, and then to turn back to the Elizabethan Age.

To those lovers of literature who already "think continually of

those who are truly great," the book's approach may suggest a different interpretation of familiar beauty, and reveal another dimension in the well-known lives of many long beloved masters. To those men and women who are themselves deeply immersed in the political life of our stirring and difficult age it will, I think, introduce new allies and fresh sources of strength. That, at least, is the hope with which I here complete this long and rewarding labor of love.

ANNETTE T. RUBINSTEIN

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THE GREAT TRADITION IN ENGLISH LITERATURE
FROM ROBERT BURNS TO BERNARD SHAW
will include the index for both volumes

The Great Tradition in English Literature
From
SHAKESPEARE TO JANE AUSTEN

The Elizabethan Age and the Bourgeois Revolution

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 mucke! 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 mechanicks—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 shipbuilders, 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.