The origin of the office of poet laureate

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BY

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ORIGIN OF THE OFFICE OF POET LAUREATE.

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In a recently published work the author has presented biographical details of the Poets Laureate of England; the object of this paper is to place before the Royal Historical Society in a concise form all the reliable information he has obtained as to the origin of the office. From the appointment of Chaucer about five hundred years have elapsed, and during that period a long line of poets have held the title of Laureate. For the first two hundred years they were somewhat irregularly appointed, but from the creation of Richard Edwards in 1561, they come down to the present time without interruption.

The selection of the Laureate has not always been a wise one, but the list contains the names of a few of our greatest authors, and the honour was certainly worthily bestowed upon Edmund Spenser, Ben Jonson, John Dryden, Robert Southey, William Wordsworth, and Alfred Tennyson. As the custom of crowning successful poets appears to have been in use since the origin of poetry itself, the office of Poet Laureate can certainly boast of considerable antiquity, and the laurel wreath of the Greeks and Romans was an envied trophy long before our Druidical forefathers held aloft the mistletoe bough in their mystic rites.

From what foreign nation we first borrowed the idea of a King of the Poets is doubtful, but in order to fully understand the title and the office as we now possess them, it is necessary to examine the traditions of other European countries, where the knowledge of letters existed, prior to their introduction
into this country. The ancient Greeks and Romans in their public games and ceremonies crowned their favourite bards with laurel. When Domitian held the Capitoline Games he himself placed the laurel wreath upon the head of the successful author; Statius was thrice crowned in this manner. The custom was observed in Rome until about 393 A.D., when Theodosius suppressed it as a heathen practice, though surely of a harmless description. In the Middle Ages the Romans publicly conferred the title of Laureate upon Francis Petrarch in 1341, and particulars of the ceremonies then observed have been preserved.

Petrarch visited the court of Robert King of Naples, by whom he was much admired, and at whose suggestion he underwent an examination in history, literature, and philosophy. Having passed through this preliminary ordeal with éclat, King Robert wrote to the Roman Senate urging them to offer the laurel to Petrarch, and the notification of their intention to do so was sent to the poet at Vaulcuse, in August, 1340. King Robert presented his state robe to Petrarch, desiring him to wear it on the day he should be crowned; the poet proceeded to Rome, on the 8th of April, 1341, he was publicly crowned on the Capitoline Hill and proclaimed Poet Laureate and Historiographer.

The following was the formula used on the occasion by the Count d'Anguillara when he placed the laurel on the poet's brow:

"We, Count and Senator for us and our College, declare Francis Petrarch, great poet and historian, and for a special mark of his quality of poet, we have placed with our hands on his head a crown of laurel, granting to him by the tenor of these presents, and by the authority of King Robert, of the Senate and the people of Rome, in the poetic as well as in the historic art, and generally in whatever relates to the said arts, as well in this holy city as elsewhere, the free and entire power of reading, disputing, and interpreting all ancient books, to make new ones, and compose poems, which, God assisting, shall endure from age to age."

Petrarch acknowledged the honour in a sonnet he then
recited, he placed his chaplet on the high altar of St. Peter's Church, and returned home.

Another equally celebrated Italian Poet Laureate was Torquato Tasso, born at Sorrento, near Naples, on the 11th March, 1544, and educated in the university of Padua.

His career was a chequered one, his poems brought him fame, and he found much favour at the Court of Alfonso, Duke of Ferrara, but at times a restless spirit urged him to wander about the country in a state bordering upon destitution, and finally he became so peculiar in his habits that he was for some years detained in a lunatic asylum. On his release he resumed his wandering career; his fame as the author of Jerusalem Delivered had, however, reached Rome, and Pope Clement VIII. sent an invitation to Tasso, then at Mantua, and in November, 1594, Tasso arrived in Rome, where he was received with much distinction by the Pope, who intended to confer the laureate crown upon him in the Capitol.

"'I will give to you the laurel crown,' said Clement, 'that it may receive as much honour from you as it has conferred upon those who have had it before you.'"

Preparations were made for the ceremony, which was fixed to take place on the 25th day of April, 1595, but during the winter Tasso's health rapidly declined, and he died on the very day appointed for his coronation, in the monastery of St. Onofrio, at the age of fifty-two.

About 1514, Pope Leo X. named a wretched Neapolitan poetaster, one Camillo Querno, Archipoeta.

The inauguration was attended by much ceremony, probably only intended as a burlesque, but it affected the poet to tears. His crown was composed of a spray of the time-honoured laurel, with vine leaves, emblematic of Bacchus, God of wine, and the fine arts, and cabbage, which, according to an old superstition, was an antidote to drunkenness; history, however, records that in this instance it failed to keep the poet sober.
This man appears to have been the butt of the Roman nobles, who incited him to repeat one of his works, an almost interminable epic poem entitled *Alexias*; emboldened by this encouragement Querno incautiously boasted his power to make extempore verses for a thousand poets, when he was reminded that he also drank sufficient for a thousand bards as good as he.

"Archipoeta facit versus pro mille poetis!
Et pro mille alis archipoeta bibit!"?

The perquisites allotted to this individual were the leavings of the Pope’s dishes and flagons, whilst all the circumstances of his appointment were so absurd that Englishmen would long since have forgotten his name but for Alexander Pope’s well known lines in the Dunciad:—

"Not with more glee, by hands Pontific crown’d,
With scarlet hats wide-waving circled round,
Rome in her Capitol saw Querno sit,
Throned on seven hills, the Antichrist of wit."

The present Poet Laureate of the kingdom of Italy is Signor Giovanni Prati, a poet whose works are greatly admired by his countrymen. This gentleman was born at Dascindo, January 27, 1815, he studied law at Padua, and was elected a member of the Italian Parliament in 1862.

In the empire of Germany the office appears to have been regularly maintained; the honour of laureation was usually conferred by the State, or by some university, and was by no means confined to one poet at a time, as has usually been the case in England. Latterly indeed the title was so lavishly bestowed by the German Emperors as to bring it into contempt, and numerous satires were directed against those who received and those who conferred the dignity.

The first Poet Laureate of the German empire, of whom mention can be found, was Conradus Celtes Protuccius, who was created by the Emperor Frederick III. about the year 1466. This Laureate afterwards received a patent from Maximilian I., naming him Rector of the College of Poetry and Rhetoric in Vienna, with power to confer the laurels on
approved students. Thus was the office handed down, the laurels being conferred either by Imperial authority under the Emperor’s own hand, or by the Counts Palatine, or by others having official instructions and full authority. The poets were crowned with sprays of the tree of their old patron Phœbus, and the ceremony was invested with considerable importance. Apostolo Zeno (1669-1750), the Venetian composer and father of the Italian opera, was one of the most notable men who received the title *Il Poeta Cesareo*.

His successor was the still more celebrated Pietro A. D. B. Metastasio (1698-1782), upon whom the Emperor Charles VI. conferred the title in 1729, with a pension of 4,000 guilders. Frederick, another of the German Emperors, presented the laurels to Pope Pius II., as a mark of his appreciation of that Pontiff’s writings.

The University of Strasbourgh enjoyed the special privilege of creating Laureates, and availed itself of its prerogative with more freedom than discrimination. Probably the candidates for the laurels had to pay very heavy fees for the honour, which was doubtless considered in the light of a diploma, or degree, as we find that in the year 1621 no less than three Poets Laureate were created. The formula used on the occasion by the Chancellor of the University of Strasbourgh was as follows:—

“*I create you, being placed in a chair of state, crowned with laurel and ivy, and wearing a ring of gold, and the same do pronounce and constitute, Poets Laureate, in the name of the Holy Trinity, the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.*”

John Selden, in his work on “Titles of Honour,” gives an interesting account of the manner in which the ceremony of investing a poet with the laurels was performed at Strasbourgh in 1616 by the Count Palatine, Thomas Obrechtus. The recipient—Joannes Paulus Crusius—attended at the time and place appointed by the public proclamation of the Count, and the assembly being full, Crusius commenced the proceedings by reciting a petitioning epigram. The Count Palatine then
delivered a long oration in praise of the art of poetry, and addressed Crusius in a Latin exordium. Then Crusius recited a poem consisting of 300 verses, which were called in the ceremony of the creation specimens pro impetranda Laures, and were composed upon a subject selected by the candidate. Count Obrechtus now displayed his patent as Count Palatine granted by the Emperor, citing from it the clause which conferred the power of creating Poets Laureate.

Crusius then took an oath of allegiance to the Emperor and his successors, whereupon the Count crowned him with laurels, and proclaimed him Poetam et Vatem Laureatum. A gold ring was placed upon his finger, and the Count made a speech exhorting Crusius to uphold the dignity conferred upon him. The Laureate replied in another poetical recitation expressive of his thanks, and of his desire to preserve the honour of the office, upon which the ceremony ended, as one would imagine to the great delight of the fatigued spectators.

The French do not appear to have adopted the title of Poet Laureate, nor have they applied it to any of their writers. Some of their historians have entitled Pierre de Ronsard (1524-1586), the Regel poet, but this would seem to have been but an idle compliment.

During the Middle Ages a curious institution existed known as Les Feux floraux, consisting of poetical competitions or tournaments, the prizes consisting of flowers fashioned in gold and silver. Clemence Isaure, Countess of Toulouse, revived these poetical contests in 1498, which henceforth were held annually in May. The conquerors were crowned with chaplets of natural flowers, degrees were conferred, and he who had three times won a prize was created a Docteur en gaye Science, the instrument of creation being in verse. Clemence Isaure, by her will, left a sum of money to be expended in prizes, which continued to be contested for until the floral games were suppressed in 1790. Napoleon re-established them in 1806, and the successful poems have been published from time to time. These games derived a certain air of importance from the fact that in 1694 Louis XIV.