The Jacobean poets

Gosse Edmund
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Author: Gosse Edmund

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The Jacobean Poets

By EDMUND GOSSE

HON. M.A. TRINITY COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE

NEW YORK
CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS
1894
PREFACE.

In this volume, for the first time, an attempt has been made to concentrate attention on what was produced in English poetry during the reign of James I., that is to say, during twenty-two years of the opening of the seventeenth century.

It is hoped that a certain freshness may be gained by approaching the subject from this empirical point of view, rather than, as hitherto has been the custom, by including the poets of James, and even of Charles, under the vague and conventional heading of "Elizabethan." It would not be wise, doubtless, to make a general habit of regarding literary history through artificial barriers of this kind; but for once, and in dealing with a fragment of such a hackneyed period, it is hoped that it may be found beneficial. The unparalleled wealth of English poetry during the reign of James I. will certainly strike the student, and in many cases he may be surprised to find that "Elizabethans" of the hand-
books had not emerged from childhood, or published a single copy of verses, when Elizabeth resigned the seat of kings to her cousin of Scotland.

This little volume, then, is an attempt to direct critical attention to all that was notable in English poetry from 1603 to 1625. The scope of the work has made it possible to introduce the names of many writers who are now for the first time chronicled in a work of this nature. The author believes the copious use of dates to be indispensable to the rapid and intelligent comprehension of literary history, and he has forced himself to supply as many as possible; the student will, however, not need to be reminded that in the dramatic chapters these must in large measure be regarded as conjectural. When we consider the vagueness of knowledge regarding the detail of Jacobean drama even a generation ago, it is surprising that scholarship has attained such a measure of exactitude, yet the discovery of a bundle of papers might at any moment disturb the ingenious constructions of our theoretical historians.

In selecting illustrative passages for quotation, the aim has been to find unfamiliar beauties rather than to reprint for the thousandth time what is familiar in every anthology.

E. G.
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THE JACOBEAN POETS.

CHAPTER I.

THE LAST ELIZABETHANS.

Queen Elizabeth died on the 24th of March, 1603, and was conducted to the grave by the poets with innumerable “mournful ditties to a pleasant new tune,” as one of the frankest of the rhymsters admitted. There were “elegies” and “lamentations,” “luctus” and “threnodia,” at the disappearance from so large a scene of so dread a sovereign; and then, with the customary promptitude, there succeeded “panegyricks,” and “congratulations,” and “welcomes,” and “wedding garments” addressed by humble eager versifiers to “serenissimum et potentissimum Jacobum beatissimae Elizabethae legitime et auspiciatissime succedentem.” Before we consider what poetry was to be throughout the reign of the Scottish monarch so radiantly conducted to the throne of England, we may glance at what poetry had ceased to be by the time his predecessor died.
There is a danger which, of course, must be faced and admitted, in our recognizing a hard-and-fast line of demarcation between one epoch and another. Elizabethan faded silently into Jacobean, and no curtain descended in 1603 which divided the earlier age from the later. But we may with safety assert that certain general features marked English poetry under the one monarch, and did not mark it under the other. To compare selected passages is notoriously unjust; but without special unfairness it may be advanced that such a stanza as the following is characteristically Elizabethan—

Hark! hark! with what a pretty throat
Poor robin-redbreast tunes his note;
Hark! how the jolly cuckoos sing,
Cuckoo! to welcome in the spring;

and this no less characteristically Jacobean—

Who ever smelt the breath of morning flowers,
New-sweeten'd with the dash of twilight showers,
Of poundèd amber, or the flowering thyme,
Or purple violets in their proudest prime,
Or swelling clusters from the cypress-tree?
So sweet's my love, aye, far more sweet is he,
So fair, so sweet, that heaven's bright eye is dim,
And flowers have no scent, compar'd with him.

Of the two writers from whom quotation is here made, the later possessed the stronger genius, but in straightforwardness and simplicity the former has the advantage. What were lost were the clear morning note, the serenity, the coolness, and sober sweetness of poets who had no rivals in the immediate past. What were gained were passion, depth of thought, a certain literary cleverness (which was in itself a snare), and a closer pertinence to