

Lyrical Poetry in the Elizabethan Age

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The Elizabethan period, in the whole history of the English lyric, is rightly considered the great period in which lyrical forms and rhythms were given a proper shape and form. Form and expression were joined together and the lyrics became an expression of the soul. Songs were sung in halls and parlours and trolled along the roads. Songs translated from foreign songs were adapted, while others were composed with dexterity and skill. Songs of various kinds - love songs, religious songs and fantastic songs - were composed in every mood - grave, mocking, sentimental and cynical. They were sung to the accompaniment of virginals, the spinnet of that day. The subject in a lyric poem, of course, is of less account than in any other kind of poetry. The feeling, the music, the mood, is everything. Simple and perpetually recurrent is the range of themes in any collection of Elizabethan lyrics; pastoral and pastoral piping, presenting spring, May-time and maying, shepherds' feasts, shepherds' loves and the joys of country-life; ditties of carelers delight and blithe, praises of contentment and ease, flowers and birds, fairy life, songs of pagan gods and myths.

Love is the first subject of the Elizabethan lyrics. In the sonnets it is refined and elaborate and romantic, as with Spenser and Sidney, or deep and passionate and perplexed as with Shakespeare.

The song-lyric, as developed in accord with the musical art of the time, is too light an instrument to utter the deeper notes of passion, and its theme is fanciful love, love that laughs and entreats and sighs from very blithness of soul. It is a pagan love and Renaissance love, and the love of English man and maiden, that sounds through these lyrics nothing deeply sentimental or medieval.

After love there are many themes treated in many moods; but in the Elizabethan period, with a few significant

exceptions, love is the expected theme, the point de repere of all lyrical verse. Its apotheosis is reached in Spenser's Hymn in Honour of Love.

Sir Philip Sidney wrote a number of songs of which the following are worthy of notice - "To you, to you all all song of praise is due..." "Only joy! Now is here you are." "Ring out your bell." The songs of Sidney are bold, passionate songs, some times characterized by exquisite beauty and charm and sometimes by the note of fancifulness.

Spenser ingested elaborate songs in his Shepherd's Calender. His natural richness and loftiness led him to make of the song a little ode if not such a magnificent ode as the Epithalamion.

Marlowe laid his sonorous trumpet aside and sang songs in the pastoral strain.

Shakespeare's songs are the most original and spontaneous of all and the richest in impressions of nature. A fresh and rustic realism runs through more than one of them. Armein's, Under the Green Wood Tree is quite realistic and rustic and the song of Autolycus in the Winter's Tale is equally true in its rustic vein.

Shakespeare's songs were born of a particular occasion and are implanted in a scene from where they can not be taken out without injury. Many are frail as butterfly's wings and at a touch the gold dust which is their sparkle falls away from them. Their rhythm is as various as their meanings. They vanish at the attempt to wring sense from them. Music is their note. The characteristics of the Elizabethan lyric are as follows -

- (i) The Elizabethan Age was the most propitious time for the flowering of the English lyrical genius. Every poet had a natural turn for expressing himself in a lyrical mode.

ii) The Elizabethan lyric is not heavy. It is an expression of the holiday mood of its author. It is light and airy and refreshes even when it says nothing in particular.

iii) For rhythmic grace and music it is difficult to find a parallel to the Elizabethan lyric; assonance, alliteration and other verbal effects are seldom so happily blended as in the Elizabethan verse.

(iv) A common feature of all Elizabethan writing - songs, sonnets and lyrics - is the lack of real passion. It is not the direct cry of the heart that can be heard in these literary exercises. Each poet speaks because everyone does so.

(v) The Elizabethan lyricist does not necessarily reflect his own feelings and sentiments. It is vain to search in Lodge or Greene a note of personal passion or distinct individual experience.

(vi) Elizabethan lyric like the song and the sonnet was considerably influenced by the example of the Greek, French and Italian lyricists. From Greek, Latin, Italian, French sources, English poetry was drawing rich sustenance and assimilating the Southern to the Northern mode.

The prominent lyricists of the Elizabethan Age were Robert Greene, Lodge, Breton, Campion, Shakespeare and Ben Jonson. They enriched the English lyric literature by their numerous lyrics of rare beauty and excellence.