

(editor's note: This paper was transcribed from a handwritten cursive copy with various difficulties. For a perfect rendition, the reader might wish to consult the original, itself a copy, in the volume entitled *Literary Club Papers*, May 30, 1891 to February 6, 1892)

The Rowley Poems and Their Author

We are still under the influence of the so called Romantic movement in literature. Begun a century and a half ago in the very midst of the great era of rationalism and common sense, and reaching its height in the early years of our own century, this revolutionary movement has acquired momentum enough to carry it down even to us. But interest in medieval life and manners, at first an absorbing, unquestioning passion, has now reached the stage of common investigation and criticism which accompanies the decline of the literary epoch, as such, and announces its end.

The fussy, old-fashioned grandmother of an antiquarian, with his ponderous display of ignorance has given place to the scientific student of language, literature and manners. Yet the beginning and end of this long period have something in common. The antiquated language, belonging to no age or period, that serves to disguise the beauties of the famous Rowley poems, reappears again in a milder form of harmless inaccuracy in the prose romances of Mr. William Morris. And Bishop Percy's hesitating contribution to literature, for which apology must needs be made to a polished age has expanded in the hands of Prof. Child of Harvard into a goodly row of splendid quartos, the delight of all lovers of poetry. While the wild rhetorical bursts of Ossian that so captivated our grandfathers, and perhaps even our fathers, have for us nothing more than an historical interest.

For some of the problems of life and government, that agitated Europe at the beginning of this Romantic period and accompanied its progress, solutions more or less satisfying, have been found. Others are transmitted to us together with the old pictures, the old furniture, and the old books.

Undoubtedly the new lines along which literature is to move in the future been to some extent already marked out. It is not my purpose however to call attention to them, or endeavor to determine their probable direction. But rather to recur to the beginning of the epoch just closing, which has in itself so much attraction and instruction for the present generation.

A powerful literary movement extending over so long a period of time, having for its central figures Wordsworth, Coleridge and Scott, and including such names as Byron, Shelley, Keats and Lander, cannot but possess a profound interest for every thoughtful man. We are probably not far enough removed from its influence to understand the full significance of this epoch for literature, as those who come after us will understand it; but we are separated by a sufficient distance from the beginning of the movement to estimate with some accuracy the forces at work, and to observe the manner of their application.

I can here consider but one of these powerful auxiliary forces, itself the resultant of many others, exerted over a wide area. Perhaps no literary period, scarcely even the Elizabethan

age itself, ever ushered in with such an exhibition of titanic energy and with such a prodigality of genius. It is a common observation that the eighteenth century had no poet of the first class, such as the seventeenth had in Milton and the nineteenth in Wordsworth and Shelley. Now if this be true (and there may be those who would question it) 'twas certainly not the fault of the Mighty Mother of poets.

For in the very midst of that century she bestowed upon favored England one of her most promising sons, endowed with the rarest gifts of genius; and when an obstinate and conceited generation would not listen to him, and let him die in youth unheard, she must needs send at once three sons more to take his place against the ranks of philistinism. They gradually gained allies and conquered at last, but the contest was hard and long and they often lamented bitterly the loss of their brother who fell in the very beginning of the struggle. Toward the close of the year 1752 in a poor tenement in the city of Bristol, not far from the church of St. Mary Radcliff where his ancestors in the male line had been sextons for generations, was born Thomas Chatterton the author of the Rowley poems. He was the son of a drunken schoolmaster, who had already been dead three months at the child's birth, and the widowed mother was in destitute circumstances.

What a contrast this to the surroundings and prospects of the little Goethe; now just beginning to acquaint himself with some of the queer rooms of the old house at Frankfort on the Main! How little likelihood that the Bristol boy will ever be able to break through the cramping restraints of poverty that must "repress his noble rage and freeze the general current of his soul" keeping him forever "mutant and inglorious"!

The pathetic story of the boy's short life and mortal struggle with adversity is commonly known and familiar even to many persons who have never acquainted themselves with the poems on which his reputation rests. In particular David Massin's "story of the year 1770", a sympathetic and imaginative account of Chesterton's career, not unmixed with a certain thread of sentimentality has naturally found many readers. But let me recall to your minds the main facts in the short history.

A moody sullen child, often bursting into tears without cause, imperious with his playmates and a dunce at his books, – such is the record up to the middle of the poet's seventh year. Then all of a sudden "falling in love" with an illuminated letter, which adorned an old musical folio of his father's, and with a quaint black leather Bible for a primer, the stupid boy rapidly learns to read at his mother's knee. Very soon he is absorbing greedily whatever falls in his way. At eight, if left to himself, he will read from morning till night.

Everything is grist that comes to him, history, theology, poetry, what chance offers. Before the age of twelve he prepares a list of seventy books he has read, chiefly in history and divinity. A black letter copy of Chaucer is an early favorite, and he has long been puzzling over certain scraps of old parchment about the house, brought there by his father from the muniment room of Radcliffe church. These and other childish belongings are gathered together in a small garret room where the young genius is closeted at every possible opportunity. In his eighth year the poor widow manages to gain admission for

him at Colston's school, a bluecoat, charity foundation where English is the only language taught. Seven years here of meager instruction, relieved only by contact with Phillips, one of the Masters, who is possessed of some literary taste and is besides something of a dabster at poetry, completes the boy's preliminary education.

But he has already become irrevocably a poet. Even before his eleventh birthday, some verses on the last Judgment suggested by his recent confirmation are dropped by his childish hand into the box of the Bristol Journal and in due time appear in its columns, to be followed by other contributions on several occasions.

The Rowley poems are already conceived and in full progress, and the boy has tried his skill and gained five shillings by imposing upon an unsuspecting pewterer a spuriously pedigree and a pretended antique poem. Translated from school in his fifteenth year, to the office of an attorney and articled, for seven years to the unsympathetic Lambert, set to copy volumes of tiresome legal papers and condemned to eat in the kitchen and sleep with the foot-boy, Pegasus feels himself indeed hitched to the plow. Yet eager youth manages to find time to dip into "heraldry, metaphysics, astronomy, medicine, music, antiquities and mathematics," and now and then he composes some new verses, or copies them, as he gives it out, from the ancient manuscripts of Thomas Rowley. But this must be done surreptitiously for everything not strictly in the nature of business-paper is contraband at the office.

But now the time is at hand to gull the public most gloriously. A new bridge is just opened and a letter appears in the Bristol Journal containing a description of the scenes at the first passage of the mayor over the old bridge five centuries before. The account is full of strange words and odd spelling, and the contributor, Donhelmus Bristolensis, represents it as taken from an old manuscript. But our attorney; clerk confesses to a friend a few days afterward that he is the author of it.

Within a month Chesterton calls on a Mr. Catcott, the partner of the above mentioned, deluded, pedigreed pewterer, and shows him copies of some of the Rowley poems, declaring them to be the productions of a Bristol monk of the 15th century. The amiable Catcott, pretending to know antiquarian lore, is easily taken in and is particularly delighted with a small scrap offered by the boy as a part of the original manuscript. This the worthy pewterer hastens to lay before the great antiquarian of the place, a Mr. Barrett, who is preparing a history of the city. That important personage gladly makes the acquaintance of the learned youth, receives copies of the ancient manuscripts and lends him books.

But Chatterton demands a wider field for the display of his marvelous powers. The Bristol stage is far too contracted for him. Little fame and scarcely any money is to be got from the credulous Bonnet and Catcott. Life with the harsh attorney is becoming intolerable. A new expedient must be resorted to. Mr. Dodsley, the London publisher, is informed by letter of "several ancient poems" discovered at Bristol, which D. B. Will be glad to send him copies of if he should so desire. But, though the letter contains some short passages from the poems and samples of their quality, not one poor guinea not even a reply can be extended from Dodsley.

There remains good natured Mr. Horace Walpole, known to everybody as a man of elegant leisure and cultured tastes, something of an antiquarian withal and a dabbler in literature. To him, then, the young adventurer, burning to escape from servitude and conscious of his powers successfully applies. Sends samples of Rowley, extracts a most friendly letter, and then throws himself utterly on Walpole's kindness, stating his indigent circumstances and his longing for a manner of life more suited to his tastes and abilities. But, oh, the heavy changes no avenue of escape here! Only a perpetual fountain of bitterness welling up ever after in the boy's heart against all the devotees of "Interest" who "live for pleasure and themselves."

Meanwhile Mr. Walpole has shown the manuscripts of the poems lately received from Bristol to those learned friends of his, Gray and Mason, and their antiquarian value has been explored. Not blinded altogether to the merits of these singular compositions by this discovery, Walpole writes nevertheless, nothing more than a letter full of good advice in a patronizing tone, urging his aspiring correspondent to continue his legal studies and wait till he has acquired an independence before thinking of indulging his elegant tastes.

At the same time the manuscripts in question are retained by the great man without a word. Chatterton at once demands in a manly letter the return of his manuscripts, but is obliged to write three times, for Mr. Walpole is a very busy man and off now to Paris for a pastime. At last a curt note brings them, but without note or comment of any kind, and so ends the intercourse between the patron of polite letters and the struggling young genius. But Mr. Walpole will hear of the lad again in the course of a few months and under very different circumstances. No more trials of this kind are to be made. Plainly emancipation does not lie in that direction. But there is London, the great mart of literature, where genius must be recognized if it can but make itself heard. Then

"Farewell Bristolia's
Lovers of Mammon, worshipers of trick,"

There is fame and fortune in London. One April night, therefore, in the third year of his bondage, "between the hours of eleven and two, in great distress of mind" the student of law composed his first legal paper for the eyes of the astonished attorney, that tremendous document, his last will and testament, at once a satire on his enemies and a charter of liberty. No reputable attorney could think of retaining in his service such a crack-brained lunatic with suicidal tendencies as that document disclosed young Chatterton to be.

Behold him, then, forthwith released, already aboard the stagecoach and off for London, having just bid mother and sister a courageous goodbye, that wonderful gray eye of his burning with resolution and his head full of plans for astonishing the town. But not as a poet alone does he make this venture in literature, there are other powers in him more likely, perhaps, to win fame and favor in a prosaic generation devoted to such practical questions as the freedom of the press and parliamentary reform; when "Wilkes and Liberty" is the cry, and when the ministry is writhing under the cutting lash of "Junius."

Not long since the Bristol apprentice has seen with delight in a London Journal a letter from his own hand signed “Decimus” and skillfully imitating the manner of the now famous satirist of the “Public Advertiser.” And for more than a year “The Town and Country” magazine published in the metropolis, has contained frequent contributions from him both in prose and verse, signed D. B. and in part purporting to be transcripts from the manuscripts of one Thomas Rowley a monk of the 15th century.

So much has been accomplished by the attorney’s clerk’s while still in bondage, and this very modicum of success has made continuance in that condition seem impossible. Only five months ago this youth of the stagecoach passed his seventeenth birthday, but he has the self-reliance, energy and manly bearing of twice that age. Unhappily there is a fatal admixture of pride. Though never beyond the neighborhood of his native town before, the boy has no provincialism to be overcome in the great city. With the wonderful adaptability of genius he will grasp the situation, catch at once the taste of the town and enter into the spirit of London life without any period of tutelage whatever. Perhaps no one of all the thousands that have gone down to London on a similar errand ever set out with greater courage, with greater confidence in his own resources, or with less of those worldly aids that smooth the path of prudent mediocrity.

With no letters of introduction and with a light purse in his pocket, known only as a country correspondent to a couple of editors, themselves on the verge of ruin, Chatterton steps down from his seat on “the machine” and goes to take up his quarters at the house of a poor plasterer in Shoreditch, sharing his chamber with a young fellow in the plasterer’s employ.

The first letters home are full of high spirits, the journey, the city, the future, his great success.

He has seen some humble aunts and cousins and been welcomed by them, but, what is far more important, has called on certain booksellers and publishers and received “great encouragement” “all approved of his design.” In a few days he expects to be introduced to Mr. Wilkes who already knows him by his writings. The rest of the short career is soon told. Letters from “Decimus” appear in quick succession in the Middlesex Journal. Contributions chiefly prose, sketches and light articles, from the boy’s industrious pen are accepted by half a dozen magazines and periodicals. Within two months he has attracted the attention of the famous Lord Mayor Beckford, has addressed a letter to him, called at his house and been most kindly received. But a series of unavoidable misfortunes destroys all his fine beginning. Two of the publishers best known to him are thrown in jail, one for debt, the other for attacks on government.

The ministry is waking up and means to cow the public prints into silence. Articles in the “Junius” vein are in less demand. And, most fatal of all, the friendly Lord Mayor suddenly dies. At this catastrophe Chatterton declares himself ruined, but recovers and writes an elegy, on the back of which a neat balance is struck showing the advantage to him of the Lord Mayor’s death in pounds shillings and pence.

Even before this event he has confessed in a letter to his sister that “there’s no money to be got on this side of the question. Interest is of the other side. But he is a poor author,” the boy adds, “who cannot write on both sides”..... Nevertheless he still has some conscience and will rather call back the discarded hand-maid Poetry, than forsake the cause of Wilkes and Liberty. Changing his lodgings for a poor garret in Brook Street, the young poet pours forth hundreds of verses and floods the magazines; he catches with ease the trick of all the popular poets, writes inflated eclogues in the style of Collins, fierce satires in the vein of Churchill with a smack of Dryden and Pope in them, depressing elegies in the fashion of Gray, fables, epistles, odes, songs, hymns, and finally [] for the public gardens the last suggested by a chance acquaintance connected with a musical house, and full of promise of speedy remuneration.

With characteristic enthusiasm, Chatterton, writing to his mother of this turn in his fortunes, exclaims “Bravo, hey boys, up we go!” But all these things after all brought in very little money. Articles were not paid for till they appeared in print and the comfortable editors made judicious selection of their materials. Masson has calculated that the poor youth could scarcely have received more than £10 or £12 during his first two months in the city, and after that very little indeed. Much of this amount went in dress, for a neat appearance was indispensable, and boyish generosity mingled with pride spent considerable sums in presents for mother and sister, to prove at once his love and his prosperity. As the summer advances starvation is close at hand. Always singularly abstemious, a diet of bread and water is no great hardship for him, but they must be had. There remains, however, one more avenue of escape to be tried. Among other things a poet has dabbled in medicine. He will try for a place as surgeon on board an African ship, for his pride will stoop to no menial place among shop-keepers, nor permit him to reveal his condition to a single acquaintance or relative.

In a letter to Catcott, the pewterer, full of bitter satirical hits at the avarice and meanness of his native town, the starving poet incidentally requests that Mr. Barrett will send him a character as a surgeon. When this is naturally refused (though qualifications were such a place aboard ship were then very slight) despair and hatred of his fellows seize the unhappy youth and hurry him away to a speedy death.

On the morning of August 25th just four months after his arrival in the city, Chatterton is found dead in his garret, surrounded by a quantity of manuscript torn into little bits, and with a few drops of arsenic and water in a glass on the table. A hasty inquest, a pine shell in a pauper’s grave complete the scene. The papers contained no notice of the death of their young contributor.---Reporters were not so important then as now. Month after month editors, still possessed of Chatterton’s manuscripts continued to publish them in their magazines without any comment or in any way concerning themselves about the fate of the author. At length when some three months had passed an elegy on the dead poet, composed by his Bristol friend, Leary, appeared in one of these periodicals. As time went on a little gossip began to circulate in clubs and coffeehouses about an unfortunate young fellow of promise whose life had been suddenly snuffed out by his own hand.

But most notable were certain vague rumors that came floating down from distant Bristol, industriously propagated no doubt by Mr. Catcott and the learned Barrett, of some remarkable poems there discovered, the work of a heretofore unknown poet of the fifteenth century, one Rowley a priest, but transcribed and made known by the very youth who had so miserably perished in London. Such was the talk one day at the first annual dinner of the Royal Academy, introduced we are told by the kindhearted, credulous Dr. Goldsmith and listened to, among others, by Mr. Horace Walpole “with,” as he hastens to add, “surprise and concern.”

That serene gentleman at once recalls his correspondent of the previous year and proceeds to relate the story to Sir Joshua, Dr. Johnson, and the rest of that celebrated company. And so began on the spot the long controversy as to the genuineness of the Rowley poems that soon placed them side by side with Ossian in public interest. Visitors to Bristol usually hunted up Barrett and the rest, to have a look at the poems and hear the story.

This on one occasion Dr. Johnson did, and even went good-naturedly puffing up a long flight of stairs to the manuscript room of Redcliff church that good Mr. Catcott might demonstrate to him than the antiquity of the poems by the sight of the ancient chest from which they were said to be taken. Of course the learned doctor was not to be deceived in the matter of criticism and, to the amazement of the pewterer, pronounced Chatterton on the spot “the most extraordinary young man that had encountered his knowledge.”

Interest in the matter and pity for the young poet was still farther increased when it became known that, at the very time of his greatest need in the course of that fateful summer, Dr. Fry head of St. John’s College, Oxford was just preparing to journey down to Bristol to investigate the Rowley poems and their authorship. But the Reverend doctor delayed until it was too late, and it is by no means certain that his tact and learning could have extracted the truth so jealously guarded by their author, or have penetrated the disguise so steadily observed to the end. It is known that Chatterton took the roll of these precious manuscripts with him to London, and on several occasions alluded to them darkly, hinting at their great value and threatening that the world should never see them if it did not behave well.

Yet he seems to have cared little to publish them, estimating doubtless the taste of the town only too well. One alone called “an excellent Balade of Charitie,” was written and offered and rejected in the midst of his distress. At the time of their author’s death these manuscripts, together with everything else of the kind, were probably torn in pieces and destroyed, for they were never seen again.

When, seven years afterwards, Tyrwhitt, the well-known editor of Chaucer, published the first collected edition of these poems, he could only bring together such fragments as Catcott and Barrett had transcribed from “copies” furnished by Chatterton in his Bristol days. A portion of them, therefore perished irrevocably with their author.

Scarcely had this first edition appeared when the Dean of Exeter published a sumptuous quarto containing “Poems supposed to have been written at Bristol in the fifteenth

century,” together with a long commentary to prove their authenticity. This was not the first attempt of the kind, but it was the most considerable, perhaps, and authoritative.

The eighteenth century knew, and cared to know, but little about the earlier forms of the modern languages, yet there were some scholars in England even then who could tell a veritable antique when they saw it, and indeed little real knowledge was needed to penetrate the thin mask that Chatterton’s own ignorance had drawn over these compositions. But pretentious ignorance is of immortal race and, though it has many a snug corner to repose in, it has never found a more secure retreat than is afforded by ecclesiastical preferment.

Since this brave beginning, Rowley and Chatterton have been published and republished, discussed and modernized down to our own day, but throughout all the vicissitudes of taste and the heat and bumptiousness of argument there has been no question of the excellence of the verse itself and the true genius of the poet. Let us inquire then briefly what is the character of these poems that have placed their younger author so unquestionably among the best poets of his country. For it is on these “antique lays,” as he called them, that his fame rests solidly, and not on those hasty scribblings of that frantic London life, showing strength and fire, of course, and some fine passages, but incomplete, abortive, unlicked, fragmentary. With one exception already noted, the Rowley poems, so far as preserved, were probably composed in Bristol where the idea first occurred to the strange boy pouring over his parchments under the shadow of St. Mary Redcliff.

They have received the name of the priest to whom most of them are attributed, and who figures as the author of many a bit of antiquarian lore besides, that found its way from time to time into the journals to which Chatterton had access. But this wholly mythical character, the creation of the child’s imagination, is only the bright star in a constellation of genius.

In the composition of one of his dramatic pieces the good priest is assisted by a certain John Iscam, Canon of the monastery of St. Augustine. Several short poems bear the name of William Canynge, a real merchant of Bristol in the fifteenth century represented as the warm friend and benefactor of the poet priest and the builder of the church of St. Mary.

Some verses written in a tone of handsome compliment of Rowley are ascribed even to John Ludgate, the disciple of Chaucer. Besides these personages, Sir Thybbot Gorges, Sir Allen de Veres, quarrelsome John a Dalbenie and several others, are grouped about the principal character their state and condition being indicated in notes by the pretended editor, and the family of [Canynge] coming in for special description by means of prose narrative from the hand of Rowley himself.

On a superficial view the language employed in the Rowley poems bears the marks of antiquity. The spelling of familiar words resembles that found in manuscripts of the 14th century and there is an infusion of obsolete terms, but here the likeness ends. Chatterton

had no knowledge of any pronunciation but that of his own day, none of any differences of dialect characteristic of an earlier time. Consequently his rhymes are eighteenth century rhymes, his spellings are consistent with no age or dialect, and his language is that of contemporary literature with an inter-mixture of a medley of old words caught up from dictionaries and glossaries and introduced with a profusion that makes some of these poems much more difficult to read than genuine works of the age to which they are said to belong. What his manner of composition was we do not certainly know, for the boy permitted no confidant in this supreme matter, but certain manuscripts preserved among his papers, and wholly modern in style, though dealing with themes similar to those treated by the old priest, seem to indicate that was his custom to compose first and give his language the appearance of age afterwards, much as he had learned to do with [] of parchment by means of some ochre and candle.

It is known too that for this very purpose Chatterton had prepared a glossary compiled from some old dictionaries, with the modern words in alphabetical order and their ancient equivalents opposite. And his writings show they followed unhesitatingly even the worst typographical errors of his inaccurate authorities. At this point the question naturally arises how could works of real value be produced by the aid of such clumsy machinery? Or rather perhaps, why were they not however good in the beginning, irretrievably spoiled? That might indeed have been the fatal result had the pretended old poems approached a complete imitation of 15th century language and thought. But the whole tone and manner of them is thoroughly modern. They show the influence of the best poets from Spencer to Gray and of the recent translations of Homer. The hands are the hands of Esau but the voice is Jacob's voice.

Chiefly dramatic and epic, with a few eclogues, songs, epitaphs and miscellaneous fragments, the whole volume of this verse will scarcely exceed 6000 lines, not a great amount in itself, but indicating masterful productivity in a youth of seventeen. True to his instincts, Chatterton's subjects in the Rowley poems are taken almost exclusively from early English history and from the Chronicles of his native town. Everybody is familiar at least by name, with its principal dramatic piece, "Aella a tragical Interlude."

Fine as this place certainly is, it may well have been surpassed by its companion-peace "Godwin" of which only a fragment now remains. The hero, Aella, Lord of the Castle of Bristol at the time of the Danish invasions, is hurried away from the side of his young wife to repel a fresh attack. I need only outline the very simple plot. With only four characters in a limited time, after the revised classical style of the day, choosing a happy modification of the Spencerian stanza instead of blank verse, the poet has produced not a stage-play exactly, but a dramatic poem of rare power and charm. The action is quick and varied, the plot neatly developed and complete in itself, the mood of the speakers happily indicated and the right note struck at the opening of each scene; the villain meets a deserved fate and the hero dies as a result of the intrigue. Yet, so far as appears, it is the case of the good man's suffering through no fault of his own, common enough in real life, but in the opinion of the Stageright not a proper subject for tragedy. Considerations of this kind, of course cannot blind the reader to the wealth of poetic resource displayed, nor the strength and beauty of the work. Never perhaps, have the quiet delights of home and wife been more powerfully contrasted with the horrors of war and the grim joy of the

warrior. Running through the gamut of passion and striking every chord with an unfailing touch the poet produces a succession of wonderful lyric effects. Here he seems at his best and his reader cannot resist the seductive melody of the verse. It thus in the opening scene that the minstrel sings of love, a strain half new, half old. The prelude to the exquisite harmonies of a century to come:

First Minstrel

“The budding floweret blushes at the light
The meads are dappled with the yellow hue;
In daisied mantle is the mountain
The tender cow-slip bendeth with the dew;
The trees enleafed, unto heaven straight,
When gentle winds do blow, to whistling din are brought.

The evening comes and brings the dew along;
The ruddy welkin shineth to the eyne;
Around the ale-stake minstrels sing the song,
Yound ivy round the door-post doth entwine;
I lay me on the grass, yet my will.
Albeit all is fair, there lacketh something still.

Second Minstrel

So Adam thought long since in Paradise,
When heaven and earth did homage to his mind;
In woman only man’s chief pleasure lies,
As instruments of joy are those of kind,
Go take a wife unto thyne arms, and see
Winter and dull-hued hills will have pleasure for thee.

Third Minstrel

When Autumn sad but sun lit doth appear,
With his cold hand gilding the falling leaf,
Bringing up Winter to fulfill the year
Bearing upon his back the ripened sheaf;
When all the hills with wobbly seed are white.
When lightning fires and gleams do meet from far the site;
When fair apple, flushed as the even sky
Doth bend the tree into the fertile ground;
When juicy pears, and berries of black dye,
do dance in air and call the eye around;
Then foul the eve may be, or be it fair
Methinks my heart’s content is dashed with some dark care.

Then in livelier responsive verse sung by a man and woman.

Man

See the moss grown daisied bank,

Peering in the stream below;
Here we'll set on dewey bank,
Turn thee Alice do not go.

Woman

I've heard of yore my granddame say,
Young damoiselles should never be
In the sylvan month of May
With young men in the greenwood tree.

Man

Sit thee Alice, sit and hark,
How the blackbird chants his note
The goldfinch and the grey moon lark,
Chanting from their little throat,

Finally after several stanzas, both:

We will in college live
Happy though of no estate;
Every day more love shall give
We in goodness will be great

Now follows the quickstep of a popular ballad measure in Eleanor's song.

My husband, Lord Thomas, a forrester bold
As ever clove him or the basket,
Does never a comfort from Eleanor hold,
I have it as soon as I ask it.

Lord Walter, my father, he loved me well,
And nothing unto me was needing;
But should I again go to merry Cloud-dell,
In truth it would be without redeyge.

When AElla is gone to meet the Danes and Bertha is full of foreboding; the minstrels strike a darker tone.

Oh sing unto my roundelay?
Oh drop the bring tear with me;
Dance no more on Holiday;
Like a running river be!
My love is dead
Gone to his death-bed,
All under the willow tree!

Hark the raven flaps his wing
In the briery dell below,
Hark: the death owl loud doth sing
To the night-mares as they go.
My love is dead
Gone to his death-bed
All under the willow tree!

The same perfect control of superstitious notions to heighten the imaginative effect appears again in the ballad on death by William Rufus in "The Tournament."

Through the mirkohade of twisted tress he rides,
The frightened owlet flaps his dew specked wing,
The lording toad in all his passes bides;
The poisoness adders at him dart the sting,
Still, still he passes on, his steed astrod,
Nor heeds the dangerous way, tough leading into blood.

Again the (invocation of the) High Priest in AElla (before the battle), deals with the supernatural powers in a similar way and awakens only in degree of the same sense of awe that the famous witch seen in McBeth stirs in the dormant Teutonic imagination:

Ye who high in murkey air,
Deal the seasons foul and fair,
Ye who when ye were in ire,
Wreathed the morn in robe of fire,
Moved the stars and did unbind
Every barrier to the wind;
When the foaming waves distressed,
Striving to be overest;
Sucking in the spire-girt town.
Swallowing wole nations down,
Sending death, or plagues astrod,
Moving, like the earth's God,
To me, send your heat divine,
Light enlighten all mine eyne,
That I may now undevice
All the actions of the emprise.
(Falleth down and afterwards riseth)
Thus say the gods: "Go issue to the plain,
For there shall mint of mighty men be slain."

As a taste of the general body of the poem, here are a few lines from the speech of AElla to his soldiers, certainly not wanting in sustained force and vigorous restraint:

There is no house all through this fate-girt isle,

That has not lost some kin in these fell fights
That blood had surfeited the hungry soul,
And towns aflame have lighted up the nights.
In robe of fire, our holy church they dights,
Our sons lie stiffened in their smoking gere;
Up from the root our tree of life thy fights,
Vexing our coast as billows do the shore –
Ye men, if ye are men, display your name,
Burn up their troops, like to the roaring tempest flame.

Glancing now from earth to heaven the poets “imagination bodies forth the forms of things unknown” in lines like these.

Hope, holy sister, sweeping through the sky,
Which for a brood in gentle air doth fly
Meeting from distance the enraptured site,
Albeit oft thou takest thy high flight,
Wrapped in a mist, and with thine eyes yblent,
Now comest thou to me with starry light;
Unto thy vest the red sun is adente; (fastened)
The summertide and month of May appear
Painted with cunning hand upon thy wide [] robe

The fragment of “Godwin” contains part of a rousing martial song of Freedom, very different from any of these selections. It begins with a sort of weird music.

When freedom, dressed in bloodstained fast
To every knight her war song sung,
Upon her head wild weeds were spread.
A gory weapon by her hung.
She danced on the heath;
She heard the voice of death.

I cannot draw farther from the storehouse of these poems, yet there remains the fine ballad of, in the style just made popular by Percy on the death of Sir Charles Badwin, which opens with the swinging lines

This feathered songster Chanticleer
Has wound his bugle horn,
And told the early villager
The coming of the morn.

In the principal epic piece on the battle of Hastings Chatterton has caught the martial note of Homer, The wounds of heroes on both sides given and received are described with a vividness and accuracy well imitates the account of the battles before Troy. But most characteristic of the poet and of the new epoch began with him, are the first similes,

drawn from a sympathetic acquaintance with Nature, that are scattered over every page. Such dainty touches as these:

“Like primrose drooping with the heavy rain,
Like kingcup thirsting with the morning dew,
The tender cowslip bending with the dew,
Swift as the rain upon an April day.”

In the very year of Chatterton's death, Wordsworth was born, the next year Coleridge and the next Walter Scott. They and all their compeers of a later day felt his influence and worked under the same spirit which animated him. Between them in the great masters of the 16th and 17th centuries to whom they looked back with reverence his solitary figure stands out conspicuously. The lost skill of the lyrist was revived in him.

He could make songs full of tenderness and melody before Burns. He loved nature and knew the power of simplicity and directness before Wordsworth and the lyrical ballads; he had caught the charm of Spencer's touch long before the Eve of St. Agnes appeared, and he understood the artful use of the supernatural before the ancient Mariner was conceived of; he anticipated the strange, new melodies of Clabibel and M. the powerful, licentious satire of Byron and the fervid imagination of Shelley. All the potency of the new era appeared in embryo and him. This and not his tragic fate alone brought very near to all his brother poets. Keats dedicated his Edymion to him; Shelley enshrined him in Adonais among “the [] of unfulfilled renown and Coleridge wrote one of the best of his early poems on the death of his young predecessor, every line throbbing with sympathy and affection. Here occur the familiar verses –

O Chatterton! That thou went yet alive!
Sure thou wouldst spread the canvas to the gale,
And live with us the twinkling team to drive
O'er peaceful Freedom's undivided dale;
And we, at sober eve, would round thee throng,
Would hang, enraptured, on thy stately song,
And greet with smiles the young-eyed Poesy
All deftly masked, as hoar antiquity.

Chesterton's place among English poets has already been to some extent indicated. Upon his young shoulders was imposed the hard duty of the pioneer. He sank down under the heavy burden. Fate did but show him to the world. Yet at an age when most of us are little more than children he was not merely to [] a place for himself in the memory of men as permanent as the great literature to which he contributed, but he was to aid largely in turning that literature into new channels and in infusing it with fresh life and vigor.

For more than a century poetry had been constrained to flow decorously within the narrow sluice of conventionalism, and clatter the monotonous milk-wheel of the rhymed couplet. Creative imagination and all the higher qualities of poetry had given place to an exhibition of mere brilliancy and wit. It was plain that the dam must be broken down and

the stream set free again to make its way as of old unimpeded through woods and fields. We shall scarcely be willing to go so far as Rossetti has done and say of Chatterton that "He was a great as any English poet whatever, and might absolutely, had he lived, have proved the only man in England's theater of imagination who could have bandied parts with Shakespeare."

But we may agree with him and with the more moderate critics that "Not to know Chatterton is to be ignorant of the true dayspring of modern Romantic poetry."

E. M. Brown
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