

Literature Primers

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ENGLISH
LITERATURE

FROM

A.D. 670 TO A.D. 1832

BY

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PRIMER OF ENGLISH LITERATURE

CHAPTER I

WRITERS BEFORE THE NORMAN CONQUEST, 670—1066

1. **The History of English Literature** is the story of what great English men and women thought and felt, and then wrote down in good prose and beautiful poetry in the English language. The story is a long one. It begins in England about the year 670; it had its unwritten beginnings still earlier on the Continent, in the old Angle-Land; it was still going on in the year which closes this book, 1832; nor has our literature lost any of its creative force in the years which have followed 1832. Into this little book then is to be briefly put the story of nearly 1,200 years of the thoughts, feelings, and imagination of a great people. Every English man and woman has good reason to be proud of the work done by their forefathers in prose and poetry. Every one who can write a good book or a good song may say to himself, "I belong to a noble company, which has been teaching and delighting the world for more than 1,000 years." And that is a fact in which those who write and those who read English literature ought to feel a noble pride.

2. **The English and the Welsh.**—This literature is written in English, the tongue of our fathers. They lived, while this island of ours was still called Britain, in North and South Denmark, in Hanover and Friesland—

Jutes, Angles, and Saxons. Their common tongue and name were *English*; but, either because they were pressed from the inland, perhaps by Attila, or for pure love of adventure, they took to the sea, and, landing at various parts of Britain at various times, drove back, after 150 years of hard fighting, the Britons, whom they called Welsh, to the land now called Wales, to Strathclyde, and to Cornwall. It is well for those who study English literature to remember that in these places the Britons remained as a distinct race with a distinct literature of their own, because the stories and the poetry of the Britons crept afterwards into English literature and had a great influence upon it. Moreover, in the later days of the Conquest, a great number of the Welsh were amalgamated with the English. The whole tale of King Arthur, of which English poetry and even English prose is so full, was a British tale. Some then of the imaginative work of the conquered afterwards took captive their fierce conquerors.

3. **The English Tongue.**—The earliest form of our English tongue is very different from modern English in form, pronunciation, and appearance; but still the language written in the year 700 is the same as that in which the prose of the Bible is written, just as much as the tree planted a hundred years ago is the same tree to-day. It is this sameness of language, as well as the sameness of national spirit, which makes our literature one literature for 1,200 years.

4. **Of English Literature written in this tongue** we have no extant prose until the time of King Ælfred. Men like Bæda and Ealdhelm, wrote their prose in Latin. But we have, in a few manuscripts, a great deal of poetry written in English, chiefly before the days of Ælfred. There is (1) the MS. under the name of *Cædmon's Paraphrase*, a collection of religious poems by various writers, now in the Bodleian. There is (2) the MS. of *Beowulf* and of the last three books of *Judith*. There is (3) the *Exeter Book*, a miscellaneous collection of poems, left by Leofric, Bishop of Exeter, to his cathedral church in the year 1071. There is (4) the *Vercelli Book*, discovered at Vercelli in the year 1822, in which, along with homilies, there is a collection of six poems. A few leaflets complete the list of the MSS. containing poems earlier than

Ælfred. All together they constitute a vernacular poetry which consists of more than twenty thousand lines.

5. **The metre of the poems** is essentially the same, unlike any modern metre, without rhyme, and without any fixed number of syllables. Its essential elements were accent and alliteration. Every verse is divided into two half-verses by a pause, and has four accented syllables, while the number of unaccented syllables is indifferent. These half-verses are linked together by alliteration. The two accented syllables of the first half, and one of the accented syllables in the second half, begin with the same consonant, or with vowels which were generally different one from another. This is the formal rule. But to give a greater freedom there is often only one alliterative letter in the first half-verse. Here is an example of the usual form :—

And *deáw-drias* : on *ðege* weorðeð
Winde geondsáwen.

And the *dew-downfall* : at the *day-break* is
Winnowed by the wind.

This metre was continually varied, and was capable, chiefly by the addition of unaccented syllables, of many harmonious changes. The length of the lines depended on the nature of the things described, or on the rise and fall of the singer's emotion ; the emphatic words in which the chief thought lay were accented and alliterated, and probably received an additional force by the beat of the hand upon the harp. All the poetry was sung, and the poet could alter, as he sang, the movement of the verse. But, however the metre was varied, it was not varied arbitrarily. It followed clear rules, and all its developments were built on the simple original type of four accents and three alliterated syllables. This was the vehicle, interspersed with some rare instances in which rhymes were employed, in which all English poetry was sung and written till the French system of rhymes, metres, and accents was transferred to the English tongue ; and it continued, alongside of the French system, to be used, sometimes much and sometimes little, until the 16th century. Nor, though its use was finished then, was its influence lost. Its habits, especially alliteration, have entered into all English poetry.