

## Elizabethan Lyric

### Introduction:

Next to drama, lyrical poetry was the most popular, significant, and representative literary genre of the Elizabethan age. In the sixteenth century, particularly in the last two decades, there was a tremendous outburst of lyrical expression and the whole air was thick with ear-filling melodies of the songsters of the age. "England, Merry England", in Legouis' words, "was a nest of singing birds."

The generation of the lyrical spirit in the Elizabethan England may be explained by reference to the break which, consequent upon the Renaissance, England registered with the murky Middle Ages, a period too steeped in religious spirit to hold a brief for that passionate abandon which is the soul of lyricism. The Elizabethans felt themselves to be free, and this sense of freedom found a suitable medium in the writing of songs and lyrics which did not require much of discipline, either emotional or artistic. The Elizabethans thought intensely, lived intensely, and wrote intensely. Intensity was the thing. And this intensity has, naturally enough, a recourse to lyricism. Moreover, there were Italian and French precedents not to be discredited in an age which gloated in copying the foreign modes in writing as well as behaving. Some Italian and French strains are easily discernible in the rich orchestration of Elizabethan lyrical poetry. Lyrics and songs became the order of the day. Legouis observes: "And the song was everywhere, sung in halls and parlours and trolled along the roads. It was in towns and in the country, on the stage and in romances. It filled whole collections; some poets specialized in it...England, destitute of the plastic arts, became the impassioned lover of song."

### Variety of Theme and Treatment:

The lyrical impulse of the Elizabethans found expression in a great variety of poetic forms. Some of these forms are the pastoral lyric, sonnet and sonnet sequence, the formal ode, epithalamion, madrigal, canzone, roundelay, catch, and lyrical elegy or the dirge. Thus Elizabethan lyricists arrogated to themselves a great deal of freedom both in the matter of theme and treatment. On the one hand some lyrics and songs, such as those of Robert Southwell, are steeped in deep religious sentiments, and on the other hand, there are some others which are frankly sensuous and even heavy with erotic Italianism which was in the Elizabethan air and a sight of which is provided by such poems as Shakespeare's Venus and Adonis and Marlowe's Hero and Leander, and even more by Marston's Pigmalion and Drayton's The Barons War. The lyricists dealt with such themes as love, war, patriotism, and so on, but most of all, love. In spite of all this thematic variety, one thing was common in all the songs and lyrics; and that was the lightness of touch giving them freshness and charming simplicity. They are never, to quote a critic, "overweighted with meaning, nor at their best are they overcharged with convention or with ornament."

### Collections of Lyrical Verse—"Song Books":

In the sixteenth century there was a raging vogue for the collections of lyrical verse which were commonly known as "song books". These collections were publications of men of unrefined and indiscriminating taste. The exquisite flowers of great lyrical genius were strung in these collections along with the indifferent productions of very inferior minds. Nevertheless, these collections were much more popular than the works of

individual authors separately published. The vogue of the song book started in 1557 with the appearance of Tottel's Miscellany which comprised chiefly the songs and sonnets of Wyatt and Surrey. The last of the famous collections was Davidson's .Poetical Rhapsody which appeared in 1602. In between 1557 and 1602 there flowed an uninterrupted torrent of such song books. There was not a single year which did not see the publication of one or other of such collections of lyrical verse. Even to name these collections would be a lengthy task. Many of them appeared under the titles instinct with a kind of poetry of their own. Let us just name a few of the most important collections.

They are

- (i) The Paradise of Dainty Devices, 1576.
- (ii) A Gorgeous Gallery of Gallant Inventions, 1578.
- (iii) A Handful of Pleasant Delights, 1584:
- (iv) The Phoenix Nest, 1593.
- (v) The Passionate Pilgrim. 1599.
- (vi) England's Helicon 1600.
- (vii) England's Parnassus 1600.
- (viii) Belvedere 1600.

As we have already said, the contents of these collections are a curiously mixed stuff. As Legouis says, "exquisite poems are elbowed by others which are mediocre or even deplorable; the worst rhymsters are associated with the true poets". The Dainty Devices, which included contributions from some thirty writers, proved very popular and ran into no fewer than ten editions. Far from what the title may lead one to expect, the poems included in it are marked by perfect sobriety. The songs are relatively few, and all of them perfectly serious. The Phoenix Nest, according to the title, contains, "the most rare and refined works of noblemen, worthy knights, gallant gentlemen, masters of art, and brave scholars." These authors do not lend themselves to identification, but it is certain that almost all of them were men of Oxford. England's Helicon contained one hundred and fifty poems, some out of which are, according to Tucker Brooke, "the finest lyrics that had appeared from Tottel's Miscellany to Shakespeare." As regards England's Parnassus the same critic avers that "its selections are neither made with taste nor classified with care. The lover of poetry cannot read it and the scholar cannot rely upon it, but neither can safely disregard it. " A Poetical Rhapsody contained forty poems by Francis Davidson, eighteen by his brother Walter and sixty-five by "Anomos" who has not yet been identified, and some lyrics by Sidney, Campion, Constable, and others. The importance of The Passionate Pilgrim is that in it were for the first time published some of the sonnets of Shakespeare which were then in private circulation and were to be printed in a body only in 1609.

Some Lyricists Considered:

To enter into a more than thumb-nail treatment of the work of even the more important of Elizabethan lyricists is a task quite prohibitive in magnitude. No Elizabethan with even the slightest claim to poetic inspiration, or courtly refinement, or even plain cleverness, could do without producing at least a few songs and lyrics. Let us cast a hurried glance at the most prominent of Elizabethan lyricists.

Spenser inserted some lovely songs in his Shepherd's Calender. However, he is too sophisticated and elaborate, so that some of these songs have almost the appearance of odes. Sidney's songs and lyrics are much more airy. The eleven songs which Xe

inserted among the one hundred and eight sonnets of Astrophel and Stella are. the best of their kind. and are vastly superior to the songs he introduced in Arcadia, most probably because they have the genuineness and intensity of his personal feeling at their core. Some of Sidney's most famous and most delightful songs are those with the following refrains:

To you, to you, all sons, of praise is due; Only Joy! Now here you are; and  
Who is that this dark night?

Marlowe, the wielder of "the mighty line", who in Tamburlaine "led" the audience "to the stately tent of war" to thrill them with "the high astounding terms" of Tamburlaine's speech, "laid", in the words of Legouis, "his sonorous trumpet aside one day to play a pastoral air on a reed pipe. He sang a reed pipe. He sang the shepherd's call to the shepherdess, 'Come, live with me and be my love "Raleigh came out with the song of the shepherdess:

If all the world and love were young.

Lyrics and Music:

All these songs and lyrics were full of harmony and had the capability of being set to music. We have already referred to some collections of lyrical verse which were very popular among Elizabethan readers. There were other collections, too, and equally popular, which included both verses and music. Tucker Brooke maintains: "Much of the finest Elizabethan lyric [is] found in the collections that the musicians made for household singing, for the English musicians in this period were, like the poets, the greatest in Europe." Among these musicians-cum-song-writers the most prominent were William Byrd, Nichols Yonge, John Dowland, and Thomas Campion. Byrd is rather heavy and didactic. Yonge's songs are too obviously imitations of Italian airs. Dowland was credited with a "heavenly touch upon the lute", and though he was decidedly a better lutanist than poet yet some of his songs are quite interesting.

Campion as a poet is much better than Dowland and though he was a doctor of medicine by profession who sought entertainment in music yet he was, as Legouis says, 'a true poet". He wrote a few masques which contained songs and lyrics. Campion as a lyricist is much airy and fresh. Compton-Rickett observes: "Campion's songs are light as thistledown, and float away in the air."

The Dramatists:

Some of the best of Elizabethan songs and lyrics are to be found in plays of the age. It was a practice with playwrights then, and it continued till the Restoration, to insert quite frequently songs and lyrics in their works. And though these songs and lyrics have a contextual significance and appropriateness yet many of them can be enjoyed and appreciated by themselves too. Lyly's famous songs are Cupid and my Campaspe played and O yes, O yes, if any maid. George Peele's Arraignment of Paris has some wonderfully lovely songs. So are the cradle-songs in Greene's Menaphon, Weep not, my wanton and the madrigal in Lodge's Rosaline:

Love in my bosome like a bee

Doth suck his sweet:

Now with his wings he plays with me,

Now with his feet.

Within my eyes he makes his nest.

His bed amidst my tender breast.

Shakespeare's songs are in a class apart. They are so different thematically from one another that they defy all classification. But all of them are exquisitely fresh and full of first-hand impressions of nature. Most of them fit in with the scenes in which they are recited and cannot be properly wrenched out of their context. Their tone and content are alike appropriate to the occasion. Consider, for instance, the jeeringly ironical lines of the fool in King Lear, the incantations of the witches in Macbeth, the carousing songs of Iago in Othello, and in the same play, Desdemona's pathetic willow song. The versification of Shakespeare's songs is as varied as their content, and in all cases is fitted to the mood of the intended speaker with a rare ingenuity and insight.

Shakespeare's contemporaries do not show the same skill and imagination in the writing of songs and lyrics for their plays. But some successful attempts may here be mentioned:

Dekker's *Co Id's the wind and Art thou poor;*

Beaumont and Fletcher's *Lay a garland on my hearse Hence all your vain delights and Drink today and drown all sorrow*

Webster's *Call for the robin redbreast;* and finally,

Ben Jonson's *Come, my Celia, let us prove and Drink to me only with thine eyes* (which does not, however, occur in a play, but his collection entitled *Underwoods*).

**Sonnets and Sonneteers:**

The sonnet is a very disciplined form of lyrical poetry, it has to have fourteen lines arranged in one of the various rhyme-patterns, and each line is to be, more or less, an iambic pentameter. The sonnet had its origin around the fourteenth century in Italy from where it was imported into England by Wyatt who modelled his own sonnets closely on the pattern used by the Italian poet, Petrarch. The amorous and idealistic, if not artificial, sentiments expressed by Petrarch in his sonnets were also aped by Wyatt. Surrey also wrote sonnets, but he employed another kind of rhyme-scheme which came later to be called the Shakespearean pattern, after the name of Shakespeare who also adhered to it in his sonnets. Whereas Petrarch and Wyatt divided the sonnet into two parts—an octave (eight lines) and a sestet (six lines) mutually separated by a pause—Surrey and Shakespeare divided the sonnet into four parts—three quatrains (four lines each) and the ending couplet. The Petrarchan octave had the rhyme-scheme *abba, abba*, and the sestet, one of the many. The Shakespearean sonnet has the rhyme-scheme *a b a b c dc d efefgg*. Spenser tried a somewhat different pattern—*ababbcbccd'cdee*. Sidney, Spenser, and Shakespeare were the most prominent among Elizabethan sonneteers. Their sonnet sequences are combinations of autobiographically genuine sentiment and convention. There were many other sonneteers, too. About two thousand of the sonnets written in the last two decades of the sixteenth century are extant even today.