

Elizabethan Prose

Introduction:

The Elizabethan age has well been called a "young" age. It was full of boundless vigour, re-awakened intellectual earnestness, and unfettered, soaring imagination. The best fruits of the age are enshrined in poetry in which all these elements can be befittingly contained. In poetry there are restrictions of versification which exerted some check on the youthful imagination and vigour of the Elizabethans. Consequently, Elizabethan poetry is very great. But prose does not admit of any restrictions, and the result is that Elizabethan prose is as one run amuck. Too much of liberty has taken away much of its merit.

During the fifteenth century, Latin was the medium of expression, and almost all the important prose works were written in that language. It was in the sixteenth century, particularly in its later half, that the English language came to its own. With the arrival of cheap mass printing English prose became the popular medium for works aiming both at amusement and instruction. The books which date from this period cover many departments of learning. We have the Chronicles of such writers as Stowe and Holinshed recapturing the history of England, though mixed with legends and myths. Writers like Harrison and Stubbs took upon themselves the task of describing the England not of the past but of their own age. Many writers, most of them anonymous, wrote accounts of their voyages which had carried them to many hitherto unknown lands in and across the Western Seas. Then, there are so many "novelists" who translated Italian stories and wrote stories of their own after the Italian models. There are also quite a few writers who wrote on religion. And last of all there is a host of pamphleteers who dealt with issues of temporary interest.

Though the prose used by these numerous writers is not exactly similar, yet we come across a basic characteristic common to the works of all: that is, the nearness of their prose to poetry. "The age," says G. H. Mair, "was intoxicated with language. It went mad of a mere delight in words. Its writers were using a new tongue, for English was enriched beyond all recognition with borrowings from the ancient authors, and like all artists who become possessed of a new medium, they used it to excess. The early Elizabethans' use of the new prose was very like the use some educated Indians make of English. It was rich, gaudy and overflowing, though, in the main, correct." A. C. Ward observes in *Illustrated History of English Literature*, Vol. I: "Our modern view of prose is strictly and perhaps-too narrowly practical and utilitarian or functional. Prose, we hold, has a job to do and should do it without fuss, nonsense, or aesthetic capers. It should say what it has to say in the shortest and most time-saving manner, and there finish." But we find Elizabethan prose far from this commonly accepted principle. It is colourful, blazing, rhythmic, indirect, prolix, and convoluted. Rarely does an Elizabethan prose writer call a spade a spade.

The-prose works of the Elizabethan age fall into two categories:

- (i) Fiction
- (ii) Non-Fiction.

Let us consider them one by one.

FICTION

The fiction of the age of Elizabeth is generally "romantic" in nature in the sense that it is of the kind of romance. Many forms of fiction were practised in the age. Some important forms and their practitioners are as follows :

- (i) The romances of Lyly-, Greene, and Lodge
- (ii) The pastoral romance of Sir Philip Sidney
- (iii) The picaresque novel of Nashe
- (iv) The realistic novel of Delony.

John Lyly (1554-1606):

Lyly in his romance displays all the peculiarities of Elizabethan prose which we have mentioned above. At the age of twenty-four he came out with his *Euphues or the Anatomy of Wit* (1578) which took England by storm. This work which may only very roughly be termed the "first English prose novel" was an agglomeration of a thousand elements many of them alien to the nature of the novel proper. The "plot" of the work is the simplest imaginable. *Euphues* is a man of learning and culture belonging to Athens (which evidently stands for Oxford). He goes to Naples (which stands for London) to lead a life of pleasure. There he becomes intimate friends with a young man *Philautus* who introduces him to his fiancée, *Lucilla*. *Euphues* attracts *Lucilla's* love, and the two friends exchange taunting letters. But *Lucilla* plays him false and elopes with a stranger. *Euphues*, heart-broken, returns to Athens, and he and *Philautus* become friends again. The plot is simple but very long essays on such topics as love and the education of children, with many rhetorical letters and lengthy dialogues, are grafted on to the thin stem of the story. In 1580 Lyly came out with, a sequel. *Euphues and His England*, in which is narrated the arrival of *Philautus* and *Euphues* in England, and *Philautus'* unsuccessful courtship of *Camilla*, a maid of honour to Queen Elizabeth. This volume pays a glowing tribute to the English nobility, particularly the courtiers. "Lyly was," to quote Tucker Brooke, "most careful to depict them, not as they were, but as they would have liked to have themselves regarded." To quote the same critic, "in the last fifteen pages a portrait of Queen Elizabeth [is] probably the most elaborately flattering that much flattered sovereign ever received."

What is remarkable about Lyly's work is not its matter but its terribly manneristic prose style which has come to be dubbed as "Euphuism." It came to be parodied and derided by a long chain of writers from Shakespeare to Scott, though it also excited imitation in a very large number of writers now justly forgotten. The cool Drayton declared that Lyly taught his countrymen to speak and write "all like mere lunatics." Nevertheless, if Lyly was a lunatic there was method in his madness. He did employ a well-thought-out plan which has the following characteristics:

- (i) The first is the principle of symmetry and equipoise obtained generally by the employment of alliteration, balance, and antithesis. See, for instance, such an expression as "hot liver of a heedless lover", or the description of *Euphues* as "a young gallant of more wit than wealth, yet of more wealth than wisdom."
- (ii) Secondly, there are the very numerous references to the classical authorities, even for very well-known facts.
- (iii) Thirdly, there is the mass of allusions to natural history, generally of the fabulous kind.

All these devices are used for the purpose of decoration. But our complaint is that the style is over-decorated, to the point of being monotonous and insipid, even though it

affects poetic beauties. To quote Compton-Rickett, Lyly's style "suffers from the serious defect of ignoring the distinction between prose and verse. It is the prose of an age that found its most effective medium in verse."

Robert Greene (1560-92):

Greene was a patent imitator of Lyly, and later that of Sidney, after he came to know of his *Arcadia*. Though in his actual life he was a debauchee of the worst kind yet in his works he was quite didactic. His several "novels" include *Pandosto* (1588) which very obviously furnished the plot for Shakespeare's *A Winter's Tale*. His other important works are *Menophon* (1519), *Mamilia* (1583), and *The Card of Fancy* which was published within a decade of *Euphues* and, as A. C. Ward says, "reproduces its mannerisms of style, its elaborately artificial and voluble conversations, its classical embellishments, its images and comparisons from natural history (for Greene, like Lyly, drew upon Pliny), its frequent and lengthy soliloquies." The frequency of letters may have furnished Richardson with a model of epistolary novel. In his *Life and Death of Ned Brown*, a notorious pick-pocket, Greene provides hints for the low-life scenes we meet with in the novels of Smollett and Defoe.

Thomas Lodge (1558-1625):

He was another writer of Euphuistic novels the best of which is *Roslynde*, *Euphues Golden Legacie* (1590). In his tricks of style Lodge imitates Lyly, but his matter is derived from Greek pastoral romance. The work is significant because it furnished Shakespeare with the plot of *As You Like It*. Further, it includes, like Greene's *Menophon*, some very charming lyrics.

Sir Philip Sidney (1554-86):

Like Lyly, Sidney also prompted a number of imitators. His *Arcadia* (1590) is the first pastoral romance in English prose, just as Spenser's *The Shepherd's Calendar* is the first verse pastoral romance. All the happenings of the story are envisaged in an imaginary land of idyllic beauty with shepherds, shepherdesses, running brooks, and lush scenery. It tells the story of Basilius, king of Arcadia, who settles in a village with his wife and two daughters named Pamela and Philoclea. Two princes from abroad come to Arcadia and start courting the two girls. One disguises himself as a shepherd and the other as an Amazon. Complications start when both Basilius and his wife fall in love with the "Amazon", the former taking him to be a real Amazon and the latter, after discovering his real identity. Everything is finally unravelled by Euarchus, king of Macedonia and father of one of the princes. Everything ends happily. This was the first version of the *Arcadia*, known as the Old *Arcadia*. In the revised version Sidney included many complications and also added much symbolism and didacticism which rendered it almost of the nature of *The Faerie Queene*. In the *Arcadia*, observes Daiches, "Ideal love, ideal friendship, and the ideal ruler are, directly and indirectly, discussed, suggested, and embodied."

The style of the *Arcadia* is as artificial and attitudinised as that of *Euphues*. It is, to quote Daiches again, "highly 'conceited', full of elaborate analogies, balanced parenthetical asides, pathetic fallacies, symmetrically answering clauses and other devices of an immature prose entering suddenly into the world of conscious literary artifice. "One of Sidney's constant devices is to take a word and, somewhat like Shakespeare, toss it about till its meaning is sucked dry. AS an example of pathetic fallacy consider his reference to the cool wine which seems "to laugh for joy" as it nears a lady's lips.

Similarly the water drops that slip down the bodies of dainty ladies seem to weep for sorrow. The name that a beautiful lady utters is perfumed by the scent of her breath. When the princesses put on their clothes, the clothes are described as "glad." And so forth.

Thomas Nashe (1567-1601):

Nashe had a taste for buffoonery, satire, reckless savagism, and effrontery. He is best known for his vigorous pamphlets. He also wrote the first English picaresque novel *The Unfortunate Traveller, or The Life of Jack Wilton* (1594) which is a tale of the adventures of a page named Wilton in the reign of Henry VIII. It was perhaps suggested by the Spanish *Lozarrillo de Thormes*. It has also been called the first English historical novel as it introduces as characters such known figures of yore as Erasmus, Sir Thomas More, and the Earl of Surrey. But Nashe jumbles up all the historical details with reckless abandon and irresponsibility without minding gross inaccuracies and anachronisms. The adventures of Jack Wilton take him through half of Europe which (particularly Italy) is described with all its sordidness, crime, culture, and beauty. The novel has no form. It is made up of, to quote Compton-Rickett, "a series of episodes lightly strung together." -It is hopelessly incoherent at times. In his prose style Nashe follows neither Lyly nor Greene nor Sidney. His sentences are short and striking, but sometimes he is carried away by a flood of words. "Nashe," says A. C. Ward, "was drunk with words, even besotted by them." Anyway, his strength was acknowledged by his contemporaries, and he had many imitators'.

Thomas Deloney (1543-1600):

Deloney, a silk-weaver by profession, exhibited even weaker sense of form and structure than Kashe. His three tales *Jack of Newbwy*, *The Gentle Craft*, and *Thomas of Reading* (all 1590) show him as a story teller of the bourgeois craftsmen. In the second named he glorifies the craft of Shoemakers. Deloney's style is quite homely, and he was read and appreciated by a vast number of people, particularly craftsmen, whom he had tried to flatter. In spite of his gifts of description he does not manage to give pattern, unity of action, or even unity of tone or mood to his stories.

NON-FICTION

Richard Hooker (15547-1600):

Hooker's masterly work *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Policy* is the greatest of the non-fictional prose works of the Elizabethan age. It began appearing volume by volume in 1594 and continued till the author's death. It was the first book in England which used English for a serious philosophic discussion. Hooker was a Protestant who combined the piety of a saint with the simplicity of a child. His purpose in writing the book was to defend the Church of England and to support certain principles of Church government. Hardin Craig in *A History of English Literature* edited by himself maintains :

"As originally written the eight books were already on a very high level of theological and legal argument. The first book is Hooker's famous general treatise on law. The second argues that divine law or scripture is not the only law that ought to serve for our direction in things ecclesiastical. The effect of the third is to make of the Church an independent and self-directing social institution within the State. The fourth claims for the Church the right to adjust its position, free, on the one side, of Rome and, on the other, of Geneva. The fifth book...deals with the established practices of the Church of England. The fragmentary sixth is largely on penitence...The seventh treats the power

and position of bishops, and the eighth is a most significant treatise on the relation of the Church to the secular government. Hooker admits the right of the secular government to establish and control the Church, but declares that the powers of the Crown are derived from the consent of the governed as expressed in a parliament of the people."

Hooker modelled his style on Cicero. Though his diction is simple yet the syntax is highly Latinized, but not without much harmony and studied flow. The style is as much removed from vulgarity as from pedantry. Ruskin was later to seize upon this style and use it in his earlier works, particularly *Modern Painters*.

Bacon (1561-1626):

Exactly opposite to Hooker's Ciceronian style was Bacon's English prose style which has been called style coupe or anti-Ciceronian style. Much of what Bacon wrote appeared in the age of James I. However, the first edition of his *Essays* appeared in 1597, that is, within the age of Elizabeth. Bacon borrowed the term and the conception of the essay from the French writer Montaigne whose *Essais* first appeared in 1580. In spite of the fact that Bacon took them lightly, his essays make pretty heavy reading. They are full of memorable aphorisms which have passed into everyday speech. The scope of his essays is vast, and they embrace all kinds of issues, but, mostly, those of practical life. By writing his essays Bacon became "the father of the English essay." Even though his essays differ from the kind which was later established in England, he is a worthy predecessor of the line of essayists ranging from his own times up to ours.