ORIGINAL BALLADS BY LIVING AUTHORS, 1850

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HENRY THOMPSON

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Trieste

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By Living Authors,

MDCCCL.

EDITED BY THE

REV. HENRY THOMPSON, M.A.,

CANTAB.

Nicht länger wollen dieſe Lieder leben,
Als bis ihr Klang ein fühlend Herz erfreut,
Mit ſchönern Phantaſieen es umgeben,
Zu höheren Gefühlen es geweiht.

SCHILLER.

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PREFACE.

The great critic-poet, in one of those admirable dicta in which he exemplifies how possible is the combination of clear sense, lively fancy, deep thought, and exact taste, has observed that Poetry bears an analogy to Art; some poems, like some pictures, requiring the close and critical eye to discern minuteness of detail, and perfection of finish: others presenting to the scrutinizing examiner a mere chaos of shapeless masses; but, viewed at due distance, producing beautiful and harmonious effects.* In Art, the merits of these two classes of composition are equally recognized. The delicate elaboration of Correggio's Magdalene is not more attractive than the vigour of his broad and expressive frescoes: the landscape effects of Turner are

* Ut pictura, poesis; erit, quæ, si propiùs stes,
Te capiet magis; et quædam, si longiùs abstes:
Hæc amat obscurum; volet hæc sub luce videri,
Judicis argutum quæ non formidat acumen.
Hor. de Arte Poet.

equally admired with his most finished pictures; and the living multitudes represented by spots from the pencils of Martin and Danby are pleasing in eyes which can appreciate the severity and sublimity of Raphael and Michael Angelo. In poetry, the public estimate has been different. The ballad is in Poetry what the broad and effective style is in Art; not intended for close and exact criticism – presenting, perhaps, occasionally, to the critical eye, confusion, or even deformity:—though, viewed as a whole, and in its general effect, of strong and decided significance; the very blots, as the critic would designate them, being results of art, and bearing their share in the harmonious aggregate. Hence, in an age of great literary refinement, it will happen, that, while the painter may win fame and wealth from studies and sketches, the balladist must not be heard. Nature indeed will not yield her rights without a struggle; and accordingly it will be impossible, in any age, to deprive ballad poetry of a certain popularity. The lay that stirred the chivalrous heart of Sir Philip Sidney more than a trumpet, will, even in its tamer tones,* ever command its readers and admirers; and the early fountains of tenderness opened by the tale of the wandering children will flow on through life in affection and admiration. But an artificial age will regard those ballads rather with toleration and indulgence than with approval; as attempts to be endured, not as models to be

* It is almost unnecessary to observe that the "Chevy Chace" with which ordinary readers are familiar, is a modernization, though gradually brought to its present form.

imitated. There is, however, a concurrent cause for the depreciation of ballad poetry. Being the earliest form in which Poetry had appeared, its phraseology was not merely broad and simple, but rude and uncouth. This characteristic of a *period* was assumed to be inherent in a *style;* an assumption as rational as that which would conclude against the possibility of attaining freedom in art from its absence in a work of Cimabue or Giotto. Early ballads, moreover, having been seldom reduced to writing by their authors, were corrupted and vulgarized in transmission; and this accident became associated in the popular mind with the essence itself of ballad poetry.

In proportion, however, as the ballad is popularly depreciated, Poetry, abstractedly, must suffer. We may well conceive what would be the enervation of Art, were nothing to be tolerated that could not satisfy the close inspection of the eye-glass. Such a prostration did Poetry endure during the last century; it had degenerated into little more than elaborate versification. The high authority of Addison, who had ventured to vindicate the claims of "Chevy Chace," and "The Babes in the Wood," to the admiration of Milton's admirers;—the timid advances which Tickell and Mallet had made to engraft the ballad on the literature of the day, impregnated as even those were with the popular taste,—had little popular influence: "Colin and Lucy," "William and Margaret," "Edwin and Emma," produced few imitators, and inspired none. Meanwhile the exquisite ballad of "The Nut-brown Maid" had

been considered too rude and harsh for the "ears polite" of an "Augustan age," and was accordingly stilted into an eclogue in decasyllabic couplets. The age acknowledged no excellence in what was not imitated from classical models, as it designated distorted French casts of them. For the bag-wigs, buckles, and liveries of the Westminster dormitory differed not more from the pallia and tunics of the Ludi Megalenses, than Racine and Corneille from Sophocles and Euripides. Yet did English Poets receive law from Versailles while they imagined they were inspired from Parnassus, and allowed no existence to any other inspiration. Among the few poets of the last age, it would not perhaps be possible to name one beside Thomson, Collins, and Gray, whose inspiration was quaffed from the pure founts of antiquity: and the rest are neither numerous nor conspicuous enough to warrant the conclusion that contempt of ballad literature results from the ascendency of a purer and loftier poetry.

Bishop Percy did good service, not only to poetical archæology, but to Poetry itself, by the publication of his "Relics" and imitations. The fresh and simple beauty of many of these pieces was irresistible. The ear had been long palled with artificial and instrumental music; and the pure woodland minstrelsy of Nature was hailed again with honest delight. The pathetic ballads of "Jemmy Dawson,"* "Edwin and

* Shenstone was Percy's coadjutor, and therefore, though he did not live to see the "Relics" published, was well acquainted with the collection. "Jemmy Dawson" was afterwards published by Percy.

Angelina," "Hengist and Mey," "Sir Charles Baudwin," and many others, which will readily occur to the reader, resulted from the study of the early balladists. The beacon kindled Germany as well as England; Bürger, Uhland, Goethe, Schiller, gave back the light to Scott, Coleridge, Southey, Wordsworth,* Campbell, Hogg, Leyden, Cunningham, Tennyson, Macaulay; Britain and Germany illumed Longfellow and his countrymen; and now, with all our literary refinement, existent and probable, the ballad stands a fair chance of keeping its position beside the epopœia, the drama, and the ode; nay, (such is the natural effect of reaction,) of encroaching on their legitimate territory of popularity.

Still, the general idea of a ballad, as entertained at the present day, seems to exclude recent subjects; at least, to a great extent. As ballad poetry is the natural product of early times, it seems to have been allowed some natural, if not necessary, connection with them. Yet surely such a view is altogether erroneous. The very essence of the Ballad is broad effective painting of scene, sentiment, or narrative; and these are of no time or region. It is a species of poetry which originates direct from Nature, and therefore is not more appropriate in the days of palfreys and pages, than in those of locomotives and conductors. Wherever Nature is, there the Ballad may be. The present volume is given to the public in illustration

* The "Lyrical *Ballads*," however, are not here adverted to, as nothing can be further than the greater part of them from what is ordinarily understood by the term Ballad.