

**AN ANTHOLOGY
OF ENGLISH PROSE
(1332 TO 1740)**

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An anthology of English prose (1332 to 1740) by Annie Barnett & Lucy Dale

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BY
ANNIE BARNETT
AND
LUCY DALE

LATE SCHOLAR OF SOMERVILLE COLLEGE, OXFORD

WITH A PREFACE BY ANDREW LANG

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TO VIND
AMPHONLAD

PREFACE

FROM the Greek Anthology, that great bouquet of imperishable flowers, to our own *Golden Treasury*, and *Oxford Book of Verse*, the making of such selections of poetry has been the work of excellent critics. These Anthologies, as the makers of this selection of prose passages quote Sir Philip Sidney, "As if your journey should lie through a fair vineyard, at the first give you a cluster of grapes; that, full of that taste, you may long to pass further". They who have tasted the honey of ancient rhyme in a good Anthology, may desire to walk for themselves in the gardens of the past, and to gather more of the unfading blossoms with their own hands, and at the bidding of their own taste. The selector and collector of fine passages of prose has a more difficult task. Our earliest English lyrics, even before Chaucer's time, have a charm of melody, an artless note as of the birds in spring, which survives in the best modern poetry, and at once seems familiar and alluring to the least experienced reader. But old prose is more strange, more difficult, and therefore, to most readers, is much less alluring.

Again, lyrics are things complete in themselves, whereas it is by no means easy to find brief and charming passages of early prose, perfect within themselves, apart from their contexts. Such a passage, in this volume, is Sidney's "Journey to Arcadia" (pp. 57, 58), where the unaccustomed reader is apt to be surprised by the inordinate length of the first sentence. As we read it, we observe that Elizabethan readers had leisure to concentrate their attention on their

book with a steadiness not now very usual. Bacon, in his "Essays" (pp. 61-69), on the other hand, scarcely gives, as far as his form is concerned, more trouble than Macaulay; yet his thought is so close packed that it demands resolute attention. The beginner in the study of our early prose must face the fact that it is not "easy reading"; is far indeed from being such easy reading as our early poetry.

But literature cannot be studied in Histories of Literature alone, and the Anthologies of Mrs. Barnett and Mrs. Dale are intended not merely to impart pleasure and tempt curiosity to venture on a wider range of study, but to be companions to histories of literature, such as that which the present writer is about to offer, and other such brief histories, in which space forbids the use of illustrative extracts.

The idea may be fantastic, but it occurs to one that a reader who wishes to take a rapid view of the development of our language and literature might begin at the end, with what is most familiar, with R. L. Stevenson in the "Anthology of Modern English Prose," and so work back through Newman and Carlyle to Scott and Miss Austen and Gibbon into Johnson and Fielding and Richardson, passing from the more to the less familiar.

As early as de Quincey, Scott, and Miss Austen the reader acquainted only with the books of the moment finds himself in an atmosphere to which he is unaccustomed, for very many are like that young lady who, when spoken to about Miss Austen, said "I cannot read early English". As it happens, an extract from Scott, in the Modern Anthology (p. 124), contains that very passage which provoked, by its laxity of style, the censure of Stevenson. When the student arrives at Fielding (pp. 11-15) and finds that novelist quoting Aristotle and Arrian and Herodotus and Clarendon and Suetonius, he discovers that he is indeed in a strange country very unlike modern fiction in climate; and almost as surprising as "The Vale Perilous" of Sir John Mandeville, of the fourteenth century, with which the present volume opens.

Yet in Mandeville the sentences are as brief, and, the

antiquity of spelling apart, all is as easy reading as man can desire. The earlier English prose, as in Malory, is indeed nearer to our own than the prose, Latinized in vocabulary and in structure of periods, which began with the Revival of Learning. The reader must apply his mind much more closely to Clarendon than to Malory and Mandeville. It is in the middle part of his course that he passes through the *Vale Perilous*, which is not "all fulle of develes," but of noble and illustrious writers whose thought, like that of Donne (p. 85), is obscured by its own intensity and luxuriance and a hurry of speed which outruns our slower apprehensions. Only by some attentive toil can we enter into the enjoyment of our English literature.