

**THE AGE OF  
TRANSITION,  
1400-1580, VOL. II**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649136551

The age of transition, 1400-1580, Vol. II by F. J. Snell

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**F. J. SNELL**

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HANDBOOKS  
OF  
ENGLISH LITERATURE  
EDITED BY PROFESSOR HALES  
THE AGE OF TRANSITION  
VOL. II

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LONDON: G. BELL AND SONS, LTD.

PORTUGAL STREET, KINGSWAY, W.C.2.

CAMBRIDGE: DEIGHTON, BELL AND CO.

NEW YORK: THE MACMILLAN CO.

BOMBAY: A. H. WHEELER AND CO.

THE  
AGE OF TRANSITION

1400—1580

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VOL. II

THE DRAMATISTS AND PROSE WRITERS

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LONDON

G. BELL AND SONS, LTD.

1920

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## INTRODUCTION.

CHAUCER'S *Canterbury Tales* assumed its present shape in or about the year 1390; and the first three Books of Spenser's *Faerie Queene* were published in 1590, so that almost exactly two centuries separate these two great works. But Chaucer lived on to 1400, and Spenser had made himself a name some dozen years before the first part of his *magnum opus* was published; so that between the Epochs or Ages of these poets a period of less than two centuries—only 179 or, in round numbers, 180 years—intervenes. Yet when Spenser looked back across the space of five generations that lay between him and Chaucer, the figure of his famous predecessor stood out high and clear, unobstructed by any forms of like or comparable dimensions. Many forms were to be seen; but they were those of lesser though not insignificant men. The dominating presence of our literary past was undoubtedly Chaucer, and he had no rival, however considerable the merits of many who had flourished since his day and enjoyed a limited lordship, which is still conceded them. Thus for Spenser as he grew up there was no one whom he could call Master, no one to whom he could do obeisance as to his king and sovereign, except Chaucer; and at Chaucer's feet he was proud to sit and his songs to 'lere.' In Spenser, his contemporaries thought, and in spite of some carpings and some quite defensible criticisms, his countrymen have ever since his

time thought, that poetry had revived again—that a true prophet had once more been raised up. He was welcomed with acclamations, and at once placed on the throne that had been so long empty. Whatever his defects and failures, the Elizabethans and posterity recognized in him a supreme imaginative power, and that in him the highest poetic spirit that seemed to have passed away with Chaucer was re-incarnated and re-instated.

Chaucer closes a great period; Spenser begins one; and, as he begins it, confesses his reverence for the last great monarch of English song, and how it is from him that he has himself learnt to sing. Thus in the *Shepherd's Calendar* he tells 'a tale of truth'

Which I conned of Tityrus in my youth,  
Keeping his sheep on the hills of Kent,

and his friend 'E. K.'—Edward Kirke—notes that by 'Tityrus I suppose he means Chaucer, whose praise for pleasant tales cannot die, so long as the memory of his name shall live and the name of Poetry shall endure.' Again, in the same poem, Spenser writes:

The God of Shepherds, Tityrus, is dead,  
Who taught me homely, as I can, to make.  
He, whilst he livèd, was the sovereign head  
Of shepherds all that been with love ytake.

Now dead he is, and lieth wrapt in lead,  
(O! why should Death on him such outrage show?)  
And all his passing skill with him is fled,  
The fame whereof doth daily greater grow.  
But, if on me some little drops would flow  
Of that the Spring was in his learned head,  
I soon would learn these woods to wail my woe,  
And teach the trees their tricking tears to shed.

And again: