

**COMPANION POETS,
V; RODERICK, THE
LAST OF THE GOTHs**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649007554

Companion poets, V; Roderick, the last of the Goths by Robert Southey & Henry Morley

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Cover @ 2017

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ROBERT SOUTHEY & HENRY MORLEY

**COMPANION POETS,
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COMPANION POETS.

V.

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- V. RODERICK, THE LAST OF THE GOTHs, BY ROBERT SOUTHEY.

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Companion Poets

R O D E R I C K

THE LAST OF THE GOTHs

BY

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277/88
31. 8. 32

LONDON

GEORGE ROUTLEDGE & SONS, LIMITED

BROADWAY, LUDGATE HILL.

GLASGOW, MANCHESTER, AND NEW YORK.

1891

INTRODUCTION.

—1880—

SINCE Chaucer's day until the year 1814 no poet had produced a tale in English verse of nobler strain than Southey's *Roderick*, first published in that year. It is its writer's masterpiece in verse, and the *Life of Nelson*, published but a few months earlier, is commonly accepted as his masterpiece in prose. He wrote these books when in the fulness of his power, in his fortieth year, and he was busy upon these books when he was made Poet Laureate, in 1813. The writing of *Roderick* was begun at Keswick in December 1809, and finished there in July 1814. The French had entered Spain in 1807. In March 1808 they took Madrid, where, on the second of the following May a revolution broke out, and the French were massacred. On the next day the whole province of Asturias rose against the invaders. The French were defeated at Vimiera on the 21st of August. On the 21st of February 1809 the heroic defence of Saragossa by Palafox ended with its capture by the French; Cordova and Seville were taken in the following November. In that year, and after it, deep interest in the patriotic struggle drew all eyes to Spain. It put new life and new significance into the old Spanish romances of the struggle to free Spain from the grip of the Moor, and caused three poets to fasten upon the story of Count Julian's calling in the invader, the overthrow of Roderick, the last Gothic king, and the beginning of the struggle for the freeing of the land from

foreign conquerors, and the establishment of Spanish nationality. Walter Savage Landor's play of *Count Julian*—which I have reprinted, together with his *Gebir*, in one of the threepenny volumes of the "National Library"—was begun in 1810 and published in 1812. Walter Scott's *Vision of Don Roderick*, reprinted at the close of the last volume of these "Companion Poets," associated Roderick directly with a vision of the future, closing with the Peninsular War and the success of the long struggle to free Spain from the grasp of Bonaparte.

Southey in earlier life had visited Spain. He had learnt its language, studied its history, and delighted in its old romantic lore. Three centuries of Gothic rule in Spain ended in the year 711 with the death of Roderick in battle. A main cause of the ruin of the power of the Goths was rivalry between the royal families of Chindaswintho, who died in 652, after ten years of rule, and Wamba, who was dethroned twenty years later, and died in a monastery. Witiza, who was sole king in the year 701, was of the family of Wamba. He put out the eyes of Theodofred, a younger son of Chindaswintho, and murdered Favila, another son, at the instigation of Favila's wife, with whom he then lived in adultery. Favila's son, Pelayo, he drove into exile. Theodofred's son was Roderick, who recovered the throne, so re-establishing the family of Chindaswintho. He put out Witiza's eyes, but spared Witiza's brother Orpas because he was a priest; also Ebba and Sisibert, who were sons of Witiza by the mother of Pelayo. The supporters of the rival family of Wamba sought aid from the Moors against Roderick, and the immediate occasion of the call was said to be the violation of Count Julian's daughter. These are events before the action of Southey's poem. Roderick's father, Theodofred, whom Witiza had blinded; King Witiza, whom Roderick had dethroned and blinded; Favila, the father of Pelayo, and his adulterous wife, the mother of Pelayo, are all

dead. The persons of the tale are Pelayo, who checks the Moors at the battle of Covadonga, and becomes the founder of a monarchy in Spain, Christian and national, as king of Asturias; and Leon, with his unfaithful sister Guisla, his wife Gaudiosa, his son and daughter, Favila—named after his grandfather—and Hermesind. There are the great lords, Count Eudon and Count Pedro; and Count Pedro's son, Alphonso, a heroic youth, to become twenty years afterwards king of the free and Christian part of Spain, as Alphonso the Catholic. Witiza's brother, Orpas, and Witiza's sons, Sisibart and Ebba, come also into the story; Count Julian, of course, and Florinda; Roderick's mother Rusilla, and Abdalaziz, Moorish governor of Spain, to whom Roderick's wife Egilona has attached herself. Urban, Archbishop of Toledo, and the monk Romano are to be found in the old records, but Adosinda and Siverian are characters invented by the poet. Of Southey's invention also is the whole plot of his beautiful tale of a manly penitence in Roderick's victory "over the world, his sins, and his despair." That victory is at the heart of the heroic tale which ends with the battle that freed part of Spain from Moorish domination and made Pelayo the first Spanish king. The English poet's tale of manly penitence, tried to the quick and with a saving force for more than Roderick himself, replaces the old monkish legend of deep penitence after escape from the battle in which Roderick was thought to have lost both life and kingdom. The monk Romano took with him the lost Roderick to help in saving two very sacred images—one of the Virgin, one of St. Bartholomew—with which, Roderick carrying the image of the Virgin in his arms, they journeyed together across mountains and rivers, for twenty-six days, till they found, by the shore of Portugal, in the bay of Pederneira, a solitary rock miraculously rising from the waste sand, and on the top of it "a little hermitage with a holy crucifix, and no other signs of man save only a plain tomb, without writing or epitaph to declare whose

it might be." In that hermitage Roderick resolved to end his life. Romano settled in a cave by the beach more than a mile away, within sight of the king, and set up in his cave the image of the Virgin; but Roderick had in his hermitage the image of Saint Bartholomew. Roderick and Romano visited each other, and were both much tempted by the devil. After a year Romano died, and Roderick buried him. When more time had passed Roderick was led by a white cloud to Viseo, where, in the hermitage of St. Michael, he "ended his days in great penance, no man knowing the manner thereof, neither was there any other memorial clearer than that, in process of time, a writing was found upon a certain tomb in this church with these words: **Hic requiescit Rodericus ultimus Rex Gothorum.**" There was also a legend that King Roderick went down into that tomb alive, together with a two-headed serpent, and so was closed in it. The tomb was flat, and of a single stone, with barely room for a man's body. But there was a round hole in the tomb, and through this, it was said, the snake had entered.