

STEPPING STONES OF ENGLISH LITERATURE.

The development of English literature forms one of the most pleasing and instructive chapters in the intellectual history of the world. We trace its glimmering dawn in the ballads of the early minstrels, its brilliant morning in the Canterbury Tales, and its full glory in the literature of the age of Elizabeth.

The early steps of this progress tends to support the theory that the development of a nation's literature is really a part of its religious history. The religion of the pagan Saxons in England was but a rude worship of the forces of nature, and their literature consisted of a few war-songs and legends, but the advent of christianity caused intellectual, as well as spiritual awakening. The Saxon mind thrilled with the new hope of the life to come, and released from disquietude, was free to direct its energies toward such fields of learning as were opened to it by the new religious teachers, and the Saxon heart poured forth many a rude but vigorous song. From the introduction of Christianity, the predominant tone of Anglo-Saxon poetry is religious.

Missionaries from Rome brought with them the intellectual culture of the countries around the Mediterranean, in so far as it had survived the fall of Rome and the invasion of the barbarians. The Roman alphabet and parchment superseded the Northern runes and the wooden tablet. The necessity for the preservation and translation of at least a part of the scriptures, the demand for enough knowledge of astronomy to determine beforehand the date of Easter, all favored the promotion of learning.

When the Normans and Saxons were as two hostile armies encamped in England, Christianity did much to weld together these two discordant elements into the English nation, which made it possible for the immortal Chaucer to address a united people.

Scholasticism flourished in Europe during the twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and was of the greatest advantage to literature. The schoolmen, as the promoters of scholasticism were called, accepted the doctrines of the church as infallible. They thought that everything must have a reason, and it was their duty to find it out. This, of course, entailed endless discussion and argument; and produced a ferment of intellectual activity, such as

Europe had never seen. Through the darkest part of a dark age, which threatened to annihilate scholarship, it kept alive the spirit of culture. These controversies sharpened men's minds and created activity of thought and deftness in argument. The founding of the universities we owe to the schoolmen, whose reputation drew together such numbers, that it became necessary to establish these institutions.

When scholasticism had done its work in thoroughly arousing and sharpening the minds of Europe, England, as well as the continent, filled with schools and universities, in which were opened the scientific stores of the past, made accessible by the labors of Arabian scholars; a mighty impulse was given to the intellectual progress of Europe by the long-lost treasures of classical literature. The scholars of Europe thus had placed before them the most faultless models of taste and judgment. The influence of these in correcting extravagances of the mediæval imagination can be distinctly traced in English literature, and many of the most elegant of modern writers have acknowledged that their graces of style were caught from a close study of the classical masters.

There was one great hindrance to the classical revival in the difficulty of procuring copies of the different works. But in the latter part of the fifteenth century, this obstacle was removed, by what Hallam calls the most important discovery recorded in the annals of mankind, the invention of printing. Without it the revival of classical literature must have languished.

The invention of paper, about the same time, greatly enhanced the value of printing, as the parchment previously in use was very costly. Through the art of printing, the speculations of scholars and the theories of philosophers could be quickly brought before the whole body of learned men, and thus arose counter speculations and adverse theories. Historical studies received a sudden impulse from the increased facilities for collecting and preserving facts.

One of the greatest achievements of printing was that it made possible the distribution of the Bible, which hastened the Reformation, another great factor in the advancement of English literature. The main-spring of the Reformation was an awakened conscience, with an anxiety to seize upon truth and justice. Some writers have said that the Reformation was the chief cause of the brilliancy of the