

ments, little more than a cattle-lifting raid, the antiquity of the tale gives it a certain elevation, and the poet has so transfused it by his genius that he leaves it a magnificent narrative poem that has such a strong infusion of the heroic in all its parts, stern consideration for strict technical rule alone should hinder it from being placed among the Great Epics. Waving all minor canonical differences, however, it is as near an approach to the Grand Epic as are "The Idylls of the King," or probably as can be made by a poet living in the matter-of-fact Victorian age, when the schoolmaster and the man of science have between them almost destroyed inspiring myth and tradition, and the critical spirit has scouted romance from history leaving to the poet the sorry resort of the exact selection, interpretation, and appreciation of historical incident and national legend.

The poet displays such evenness of merit in his work that it requires an effort to discover a marked superiority in any of the parts, yet the five books into which this poem of over three thousand lines is divided, are not, I venture to think, of anything like equal literary worth. Were they so they would be most remarkable in the annals of literature as they would be almost unique. Homer alone among great poets maintains his strain at a very high altitude for a long spell, a distinction easily explained if it be true that the "Iliad" was at first a series of lyrics. Milton compares with him unfavorably, as when the epic of the latter reaches a high point it visibly and continually declines. The six books of Spenser's "Faerie Queen" form a declining scale of merit. In Dante there are many sleepy pages. Virgil's "Æneid" is a poem which is now read by preference in parts; it is incomplete in many details, and in the latter books the petty battle-scenes grow wearisome. To adduce many other instances would not be a difficult task, but they would only serve to accentuate a truism. While the human mind is rightly compared by Ruskin to the vault of heaven, encompassing the earth, which lives and flourishes beneath it, human performance, even when it is guided by the best intellect, is faulty and imperfect. No matter how unexceptionable the feeling that eventuates in a form of action, the latter will have only comparatively little wherewith to prove its exalted origin. Shakespeare puts into the mouth of the Duke, in