

SHELLY

The unfortunately early death of Shelley makes it almost inevitable that the critic in preparing to pass judgment upon his poetry, should find himself so hampered by notions preconceived, so dominated by the prospect of finding evidence of immaturity and crudeness as seriously to impair the validity of the conclusions at which he arrives. All that remains for the individual critic is to hope that he may by personal culture have acquired the ability to suspend judgment to such a degree as will warrant him in the expression of the hope that he may do no glaring injustice to the man before him.

Outside of his Juvenilia, the output of his boyish years, the first poem that arrests our attention is that remarkable production of "Queen Mab," composed by Shelley, when about twenty years of age, at Lynmouth, on the Devonshire coast. While I shall probably conclude that the impression of crudeness and immaturity is the final and predominant impression of the piece as a whole, I still do feel bound to say that there are some important respects in which the poem is an illustrious exception to the class of effusions usually produced by men of his age. By referring to these first, before I go on to the main impression, I shall be serving two purposes. I shall be giving you a feeling of the light and shade, the relative importance of the elements of the piece, while at the same time, by showing my appreciation of my subject, I shall perhaps ingratiate myself in your favor so far as somewhat to enhance the value of the judgments I may pass.

In the first place, the very simplicity of the conception and plan of "Queen Mab" goes far towards removing the poem in one swift stroke from the turgid complexity that might be expected to mark the work of one so young a man. Indeed, its plan is equally simple with that of Goldsmith's "Traveller," which is traditionally regarded as the most simple and comprehensive of modern philosophical poems. Before the rising of the curtain

Goldsmith has conducted his Traveller to a lofty summit of the alps, whence, with quite a show of plausibility and naturalness, he proceeds to make a survey of different peoples. In a way that is equally simple, Shelly, having caused the Queen of Spells to sweep down to earth in her faery chariot, makes her conduct the disembodied spirit of Ianthe to the battlements of Heaven. When the car of the Faery Queen touches the earth Ianthe lies asleep. It is in preparation for his description of her, as she lies thus, in the course of which I may say, in passing, that Shelley's powers of subdued passion show at their very best, that he writes that celebrated comparison between Death and Sleep:

How wonderful is Death,
Death and his brother sleep!
One, pale as yonder waning moon,
With lips of lurid blue!
The other, rosy as the morn,
When throned on ocean's wave
It blushes o'er the world.

Ianthe, having been conveyed to heaven's battlements, is permitted by the Queen, to whom "'tis given the wonders of the mortal world to keep," to cast a backward glance over the antecedent history of the world, and also to gaze forward into the future. While it is certain that Shelley's survey of history is superficial and inaccurate, at the same time you see the naturalness of the situation. Note, too, that the loftiness of the point of view communicates to the poem a considerable degree of that serenity and statesque calm that is bound to accompany any treatment that is at all adequate of the empyrean solitudes. Then, too, in the comparative externality of expression Shelly exhibits qualities that are quite exceptional for a man of his years. He realized, in a practical way, and to an almost unwonted degree, the important principle that there are some incidents and some scenes possessed of such intrinsic power to interest that they can afford to dispense with the vapidities of