

Great Epochs in English Literature and their Causes.

A Sketch—Introduction.

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THE literary history of our own and of other languages shows that there are certain more or less clearly defined periods, in the records of each, distinguished, beyond others, by the number and genius of its writers. It has always seemed to me, when considering those periods, that they could be accounted for, and that in each country the causes or influences, which produced, or led to, these periods in any one or more countries were, in the main, similar to the causes or influences to which they, elsewhere, owed their origin. Turn to the annals of Ancient Greece and Rome and one finds epochs of literary greatness distinguished beyond others. If the enquirer's researches be brought down to more recent times, he will be met by like phenomena. Modern Italy has had her literary period: Portugal, small and insignificant though that little Kingdom may be considered, has yet had a literary era to which her children point with pride. Spain, also, has had a noble, intellectual period in letters. France, in days not long subsequent to those sometimes regarded as her palmiest, has had her literary era of great richness, and the same may be said of other lands.

If careful enquiry is made into the history of those countries, it will be found, I think, that these phenomenal periods of literary wealth have been preceded by other periods, which, though differing in many respects, have much similarity of character.

In English Literature there have been four epochs whose