

*The English Poets*,\* edited by T. H. Ward. London and New York : Macmillan & Co.; Toronto : Willing & Williamson. 1880. [Second notice.] Vol. I. Early Poetry, Chaucer to Donne.

'We should conceive of poetry worthily,' writes Mr. Matthew Arnold in his introduction, 'and we must also set our standard for poetry high.' What that standard should be appears in a few typical passages which he quotes from Homer, Dante, Shakspeare and Milton. He would have us compare with these gems such pretty bright coloured stones as we may meet with in our rambles by the side of the minor brooks that run, pearly, down the slopes of Parnassus and thus save ourselves from forming 'fallacious estimates.' After submitting some of our best-known poets to this strict test, it can hardly be wondered at that Mr. Arnold finds even Chaucer and Burns falling short of the full measure of poetic manhood. Their views of life are deficient in 'high seriousness,' and, lacking that, Chaucer's 'divine liquidness of diction, his divine fluidity of movement, . . . his largeness, freedom, shrewdness and benignity,' fail to entitle him to rank among the great classics.

Now, we do not wish to dispute Mr. Arnold's verdict or to claim that any other English poet can aspire to be admitted to an equal rank with the four great names he mentions. But, with every deference to the undoubtedly high position which he takes as a critic, we think Mr. Arnold is mistaken in advising us to apply these test verses, forged by the Titans of poetry, as our measure and criterion of minor poets. One does not use the diameter of Saturn's orbit as the mete-yard of comparison for the height of even Mount Chimborazo. With the verse of Dante or Shakspeare at their best ringing in our ears, what pleasure could we derive from half the poets who fill up the period from Chaucer to Donne.

The galaxies of little stars shrink into nothing in the overpowering presence of the greater lights of the firmament, yet we do not wish it to be always high noon-tide or full moonlight, but can afford at times to content ourselves with the 'spangly gloom' of a deep-breasted-summer night. If one of the fixed stars of poetry should find admirers rash enough

to challenge for him a place equal in honour to that of the morning sun, then it would be well to bring forward one of the great master's verses, the very sound of whose approach 'insupportably advancing' would dispose of the rash aspirant's pretensions to equality.

We are certainly apt, as Mr. Arnold says, to allow our estimate of poetry to be biassed, in the case of early poets, by historical considerations, and in the case of the moderns by our personal feelings. We read the crude works of some *jongleur* or rhyming chronicler—we know nothing of the aid he may have derived from traditional sources or how far his work is original—we somewhat rashly conclude that his attempt was a veritable *coup d'essai*, a light struck alone and unassisted amid the palpable darkness of the age he lived in, and forthwith we are moved as by enchantment. What power! we exclaim. How wonderful that his faults are not more obtrusive than they are! This little touch of nature, how moving it is; and that conceit, what freshness it has, now we find it here before a hundred poets have stated it with their repetitions! These historical considerations are most misleading when our studies have led us to devote our attention chiefly to some particular period of literature. If we have gone so far as to edit a minor mediæval poet, our sense of proprietorship is so strong as to make us the most unsafe guides in deciding upon his intrinsic merits; and the curious result follows that the more we know about such a writer the less able are we to rank him properly among his fellows. As the plan of Mr. Ward's volumes necessitates the treating of each poet by a writer who has made the period during which he flourished the subject of special study, Mr. Arnold's general remarks may be regarded as a not uncalled for warning against the natural partiality with which each sub-editor may be expected to regard his own particular poet.

The growing luxury and increased leisure of the richer classes determined the style in which Chaucer and his contemporaries were to write. It was an essential requirement that the poem should tell a tale. Nothing else could attract the attention of the only audience that could be hoped for, and nothing could be so well retained in the memory as a series of vividly told events, no slight