

*THE TRANSITION PERIOD IN ENGLISH
LITERATURE.*



WHILST Englishmen have just cause to be proud of their intellectual growth as expressed in their literature, they have also reason to regret certain phases of that growth as tending rather to tarnish than to brighten their national fame. And of such a character is the literature of the transition period. True, it must be admitted that this period, extending as it did from the breaking out of the civil war to the advent of William, Prince of Orange, was not favorable to literature, owing to the unsettled state of political affairs in England. But we do not complain so much of the quantity as of the quality of the writings then produced. They are indelibly stamped with two characteristics that, fortunately, have long ceased to form the stock in trade of English authors; a servile imitation of French ideas and taste, and a moral turpitude the more blameworthy that it was universal. In the writings of Milton only are these features not found; in their place are characteristics that entitle him to be ranked as an author of the Shakesperian age. All the other authors, from the poet laureate to the merest scribbler, sought to fill their compositions with obscene allusions and to write them in the French style and as much as possible in the French language. In a poem by Dryden, for instance, on the coronation of Charles the Second the following lines are to be found:

"Hither in summer evenings you repair,
To taste the fraicheur of the cooler air."

The melodious Tuscan so much studied during the reign of Elizebeth was now neglected. To quote 'Greek or Latin was pedantic, but to garnish speech with scraps of French was the height of good breeding. The better to imitate their French Masters the English authors translated the tragedy in rhyme but it soon dropped and died. As imitation is not a characteristic of the English people one is naturally led to enquire how it came to be so extensively practiced at the time under discussion. The answer is soon

found. France had then attained the zenith of her glory. In arms she had no superior; in literature no equal. What other country could point to poets like Racine, prose writers like Fénelon orators like Bossuet? The literary glory of Spain had set; that of Germany had not yet dawned. In England the Shakesperian age of colossal intellectual power had passed away; the age of scrupulous correctness and classic purity had not yet been ushered in. Hence France was without a rival. She ruled the world with a power more absolute than that of the Roman empire; for when Rome was the military master of Greece she was her intellectual slave. Here then is the reason why French words, French ideas and French taste passed as native coin in England. It would have been well if English writers, whilst they so scrupulously modeled their ideas and language upon French patterns, had also imitated French morality. For whatever be the character of contemporaneous French literature that of the age under consideration was in general irreproachable from a moral standpoint. But they chose rather to take the dross and leave the gold. Their writings one and all are marked with a hard-hearted shameless licentiousness at once revolting and inhuman. But the evil to a certain degree brought its own remedy. The writers of that period did not realize that drapery is more attractive than exposure, and that the imagination is caught more by delicate hints which leave it ground to exert itself than by gross descriptions whereby all speculation is put to an end. The drugs they administered were so strong as to produce nausea; and this nausea at length brought about a reaction. But in the interim they wallowed in the mire to their hearts' content. Whilst this depraved spirit pervaded all literature it was in the drama especially that it thrust itself forward in all its hideousness. And to this do the plays of that age owe their banishment from the modern stage. Many of them are of undoubted excellence and were it not for their depraved character would beyond doubt be amongst the foremost plays of the day. To the student