

ENGLISH PROSE

1137-1890

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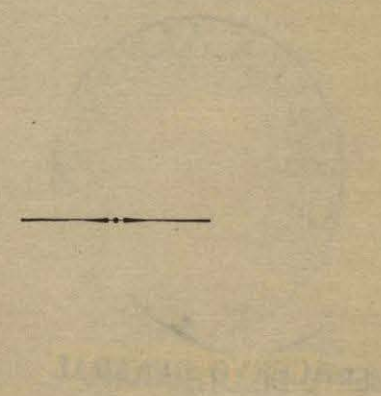
ENGLISH PROSE

(1137-1890)

SELECTED BY

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PREFACE

This volume and its companion, *ENGLISH POETRY, 1170-1892*, were suggested some twelve years ago by the experience of Professors Bronson, Dodge, and myself with an introductory course in English Literature in Brown University. Our plan was to have the students read English classics in the same manner and spirit in which they would read interesting contemporary poems, novels, speeches, essays, etc., and then to discuss with them what they had read. No attention was given to linguistic puzzles, unessential allusions, or any other minutiae. Such things are of course a legitimate and indispensable part of the study of literature, but it seemed well not to confuse and defeat our principal aim by dealing with them in this course. Literary history, however, was not neglected, and care was taken to supply such information in regard to the setting of each piece in life or literature as seemed necessary for the interpretation of its subject, purpose, and method.

The greatest difficulty we had to contend with was the lack of cheap texts. No single volume on the market contained what we needed, and separate texts, even when accessible at very low prices, cost in the aggregate more than students could afford to pay. I therefore attempted to bring together in the volume of English Poetry such a collection of poems, important either historically or for their intrinsic merits, as would permit every teacher to make his own selection in accordance with his tastes and the needs of his class. The present volume is, in like manner, intended to be used by teachers as a storehouse or treasury of prose.

In the Preface of the volume of poetry, I tried to make it clear that I did not suppose that any teacher would require his pupils to read all the poems contained in it. This would indeed be absurd. That volume contains between fifty-five and sixty thousand lines, and, as there are in the ordinary school year only about thirty weeks of three recitations each, the pupil would have to read more than six hundred lines — between fifteen and twenty pages of an ordinary book — for each recitation. Yet some teachers have attempted this and have been surprised to find the attempt unsuccessful. It will be well to bear in mind that this prose book, also, contains much more than at first sight it may seem to contain. Each page, it may be noted, contains about as much as three ordinary octavo pages of medium size.

As to the manner in which the choice shall be made for the use of a class, the teacher may of course confine the work to as few authors as he chooses, or may require only the most interesting parts of the long selections, or may in both ways reduce to reasonable limits the amount of reading required. Some teachers will wish a large number of short passages illustrating the characteristics of as many authors as possible; others will prefer to study a smaller number of authors in selections long enough to show, not merely what heights of excellence each writer could occasionally attain, but also what qualities and what degree of sustained power each possessed. This volume, it is believed, provides materials for both kinds of study.

It need hardly be said that, after leaving the earlier periods of English Literature, in which unknown words and forms confront the reader in every sentence, the main difficulties that a student meets in reading the English classics arise not so much from internal as from external causes. And these can easily be removed. Simple and clear presentation by the teacher of the theme of the writer, of his attitude toward his theme, of the relations of writer and theme to contemporaneous life and art, and of other matters necessary to intelligent reading, should precede the student's reading of each piece, whether of prose or verse. Great literature is usually great no less because of its content than because of its form, and it will generally be found that students are prepared to appreciate fine thoughts before they are able to understand grace or beauty of form in literature. And certainly, if, as Spenser tells us,

Soul is form and doth the body make,

we must understand the soul, the content, and aim, of a piece of literature before we can judge whether or not it has created for itself an appropriate and beautiful body or form. To expect a student who has not the knowledge implied or assumed in a bit of prose or verse to read it sympathetically is as grave an error as that ancient one — now happily abandoned — of causing students of English composition to spin out of their entrails vast webs of speculation upon subjects lying far beyond their knowledge or experience. If the teacher will attempt to make every selection as real and vital to his students as if it were concerned with some subject of the life of to-day, the study of English Literature will become a new and interesting thing for himself as well as for his pupils. And although this is theoretically a counsel of perfection not easily fulfilled, it will be found in practice not difficult to secure a large measure of success.

In this volume, as in its predecessor, the remarks in the Introduction are not intended to take the place of a history of English Literature. Here and there they furnish information not usually found in elementary text-books; here and there they have not even that excuse for existence, being often merely hints or suggestions or explanations which the editor wished to make; in a few instances it may be thought that their proper place is the Preface rather than the Introduction.

In printing the earlier texts — that is, all before Sidney's *Arcadia* — the old spelling is preserved, except that *f*, *þ*, *ȝ*, *i*, *j*, *u*, *v*, have been reduced to modern forms and usage. Such inconsistencies as appear are due to variations in the texts themselves or to variant editorial methods in the standard editions. The punctuation of the earlier texts has been modernized, sometimes by me, sometimes by the editor whom I follow.

In the later texts, the spelling and punctuation of standard editions has usually been retained, even where they differ from modern usage; but in a few instances, where the older punctuation was not only faulty but seriously misleading, I have not scrupled to change it. In no such instance, however, was there any doubt as to the author's meaning.

The division of the book into periods is of course not altogether satisfactory. Not to mention general difficulties, Ben Jonson's relations with Shakspere and Bacon induced me to put him in the same period with Bacon, though it would doubtless have been better to put both him and Dekker in the following period. Again, in the Nineteenth Century, it seems hardly justifiable to put Stevenson in the same period with Newman, Borrow, Thackeray, and Dickens; but I found that I had room for him and him only among the departed masters of his generation, and it seemed undesirable to put him alone in a separate division.

No attempt has been made to apportion the space given to a writer in close accordance with his importance. My plan originally was that every piece, whether essay, letter, speech, or chapter of a book, should be given as a whole composition, in its entirety. But lack of

space made it necessary to make many cuts, — though none, I hope, that affect the essential qualities of any selection or interfere with its intelligibility. The attempt to present whole selections rather than brilliant scraps of course made proportional representation impossible, and the cuts that were made did not better the adjustment, as they were made where they would cause the least loss of formal and material excellences.

In spite of careful calculations, far too large an amount of copy was sent to the printer. Nor did such cutting as is mentioned above suffice to reduce it to the necessary limits. It became necessary, while the book was going through the press, to omit several writers altogether, — some of them, no doubt, writers whom I shall be criticised for omitting. I can only say that my regret is perhaps greater than that which will be felt by any one else. I now feel that, as I was obliged to omit Henley and some other recent writers, it might have been well to omit Stevenson also and let the book end with Walter Pater.

The selection from the so-called Mabinogion in the Appendix was added at the suggestion of Professor Cunliffe of the University of Wisconsin. Many teachers will no doubt wish to use it in connection with the study of mediæval romances, and will join me in thanks to Professor Cunliffe.

For aid in collating the copy for the printer and in reading proofs I am indebted to my sister, Annie Manly.

J. M. M.

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