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**Title:** "The Literature of the Age of Elizabeth," by Samuel A. Harrison

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Harrison

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— Literature of the age of Elizabeth —

July 5<sup>th</sup> 1840.

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— Situation of the age of Elizabeth —  
— 11 —

The progress of Literature like that of society has always been an interesting subject of contemplation; and the periods of its improvement have been designated with as much precision as the different epochs in a nations advancement. As at one time the state of society may be at the lowest ebb, the fabric of government shaking, anarchy and tyrannical <sup>misgovernment</sup> ruling, so darkness may sometimes rob the mind, the temple of sciences crumble to decay and learning be imprisoned in the gloomy unmar-  
tial cell. There is no period in a nations history, which interests us more than the first ages of its existence; 'tis then we see the rude materials of its future greatness; 'tis then we behold the strong timbers of the political ship, waving in solemn grandeur in the wild gloomy forest. So in a nations Literature the first periods attract our atten-

view most strongly; 'tis then we behold the sun of letters as he ascends with increasing brilliancy above the horizon of the mind, and we gaze with anticipating raptures on the orb which shall quickly illumine the world of intellect. Such was the age of Elizabeth; the bright dawn of a glorious day of learning.

It has long been remarked, that the just ages of a nation's literature present the greatest efforts of genius; this great Homer and moving Ophelus sang when Grecian art and Greece herself <sup>was</sup> young. And why? 'tis genius only then can soar above the vulgar herd, and stand forth prominently; then she only can

— "see the distant tops of thoughts

(which men of common stature never saw"

When she is unrestrained; no rules of art confine her powers, but the burning thoughts flout forth with freedom from the glowing laboratory of the mind. Nature long unpraised seems anxious to have her beauties sung; she inspires her priests, and frantic they rush from her temple singing their maddened songs. When young genius like our first parents, despises foreign dress or ornament, which serves but to conceal her form, but robed in the simple fig-leaf covering of our first mother Eve, we meet her well-beauteous proportions, her well-tuned limbs, and

strong muscles as he pierces through the wild wilderness of  
thought, a tripe in careless playfulness through the thorn-  
ing meadows of the paradise of the mind. In the early  
ages of literature, Genius treads new paths, untrod by  
man, hears new sounds uncaught by other ears, sees  
new sights unseen by other eyes and tastes new sweets  
unreached by other lips. "Nature plays around her in her  
Original's wild, and spreads for her a repast, when  
no Cæsar's spirit reigns." Such was the age of Elizabeth,  
a queen whose reign was no less distinguished for its  
literature, than for its policy and splendor.

Her reign, the brightest in the page of British  
History was adorned by the most brilliant array of ge-  
niums that ever confounded the tongue of man or penned  
a burning line of song; genius that shook the venerable  
philosophy of ages and raised a second Parnassus on  
British soil. Bacon rent away the age's ground ivy  
from the mystic philosophy of Aristotle, exposed its rot-  
tenness, and hewed it crashing to the dust. Whole men  
stood gazing in wild astonishment upon its ruins. The  
stately dame of Experimental Philosophy rose upon their won-  
dering vision reared by the great architect the English  
Bacon, in the reign of England's favorite queen.

And now Poetry

"The Soul of Science and the Queen of Souls"

commenced her mild reign. Chaucer had sung, but the last vibrations of his harp, had died away, and the winds of ages had played their rotian measures upon its strings; and now the words and Verbaders were the sole retainers of song. The language was young, but the poets of Elizabeth taught that poetry was breathed from heart to heart; like the language of nature spoken without words, spoken in language felt not heard, in language soft as the silent whispers of an enraptured soul. The language was in its youth when the "Fairy Queen" came tripping forth, tripping in broken speech her elfin numbers. "Spenser" says and "is of all poets the most portical; the two worlds of reality and fiction are poised upon his wings; his verse is a labyrinth of sweet sounds, that lay by their very sweetness" With him we dwell in fairy-land, recline on roses, feast on nectar from the fair-bell and drink the pure light of the stars; he realizes our early dreams, and builds the airy castles of our youth. "It was in this age that "Rosa Bon Jonson" the morning lark of English literature woke his early strains of wit and love to which succeeding ages shall continue to pay their tribute of praise

Such was his song, that even Shakespeare gazed with curious  
eye as he roared roaring on high. And it was in this age,  
Shakespeare, "the great Chemist of nature": acted out again  
the drama of human life; 'Twas in this age Shakespeare  
England's favorite bard, wrote <sup>his</sup> cheerful strains. He was  
in truth the child of nature, and will he knew his pa-  
rent; his it was to praise her beauteous smile, or write  
with saddened brow her darkened frown. Will he knew the  
avenues of the human breast, its passions, its affections,  
its desires; and he so read the hearts of men, that they them-  
selves looked wild, as though by some dark art, he had  
opened the hidden secrets of their breasts. He brought the  
heart in all its lively real colors before the eyes again,  
and at his magic touch, those long dead stalked forth  
from their gloomy abodes.

The rapt magician of his own wild lay,  
Earth and her tribes his mystic wand obey  
Old ocean tremble, thunders crack the skies  
Air turns with shapes and tell-tale specters rise  
Nights pattering hags their fearful eyes keep  
And faithful guilt unseals the lips of sleep.  
Times yields her trophies up, and death restores  
The maddening victims of his voiceless shores.

The fieside legend and the fabled page  
The crime that could, the deed that bleps an age  
All, All come forth —

He was the word uter'd; now he is as the captured being  
speaking in left air to reigning courtiers; now he is as the  
crowned genius he treads the stage with stately steps, com-  
manding crowding flatterers. With the spirits and painters he  
gambols. Now in the sublime he mingles and our heads  
grow dizzy looking from such a height; now he in beauty  
revels and our eyes grow dim with his hopes. Such was Shak-  
speare, free as the air, sublime as the ocean, and beau-  
tiful as his own green isle. Language confin'd him not,  
but had no bonds for him, nature was his model and  
man his theme.

Such was the eye when the virgin genius Eliz-  
abeth reigh'd o'er Britains isle; an eye though not Au-  
gustine in its character, yet one which stands forth as  
the joyous prelude to the enchanting song of literature &  
Science which after ages sing.

Saml. A. Hanifan  
— — —

June 16<sup>th</sup> 1840.



Commencement Oration of S.A. Harrison, Class of 1840  
Transcribed by Chris Altieri, May 2008  
Edited by Don Sailer, September 2009

### The Literature of the age of Elizabeth

The progress of Literature like that of society has always been an interesting subject of contemplation, and the periods of its improvement have been designated with as much precision as the different epochs in a nation's advancement. As at one time the state of society may be at the lowest ebb, the fabric of government shaking, anarchy and tyranny ruling, so darkness may sometimes robe the mind, the temple of science crumble to decay and learning be imprisoned in the gloomy monastic cell. There is no period in a nation's history, which interests us more than the first ages of its existence; 'tis then we see the rude materials of its future greatness; 'tis then we behold the strong timbers of the political ship, waving in solemn grandeur in the wild gloomy forest. So in a nation's Literature the first periods attract our atten

tion most strongly; 'tis then we behold its sun of letters as it ascends with increasing brilliancy above the horizon of the mind, and we gaze with anticipating raptures on the orb which shall quickly illumine the world of intellect. Such was the age of Elizabeth: the bright dawn of a glorious day of learning.

It has long been remarked, that the first ages of a nation's literature present the greatest efforts of genius; this great Homer and moving Orpheus sang when Grecian art and Greece herself were young. And why? 'Tis Genius only [then?] can soar above the vulgar herd, and stand forth permanently, then she only [can?]

--"see the distant tops of thoughts which men of common stature never saw."

Then she is unrestrained; no rules of art confine her powers, but the burning thoughts [blast?] forth with freedom from the glowing laboratory of the mind. Nature long unpraised seems anxious to have her beauties sung; she inspires her priests, and frantic they rush from her temple singing their maddened songs. Then young genius like our first parents, dispises foreign dress or ornament; which serves but to conceal her form, but robed in the simple fig-leaf covering of our first mother Eve, we mark her beauteous proportion, her well turned limbs and

strong muscles as she [illegible] through the wild wilderness of thought, a [trip?] in careless playfulness through the [blooming meadows?] of the paradise of the mind. In the early ages of Literature, Genius treads new paths, untrod by man, hears new sounds uncaught by other ears, sees new sights unseen by other eyes and tastes new sweets unsipped by other lips. "Nature plays around her in her [illegible] wild, and spreads for her a repast, where no crude surfeit reigns." Such was the age of Elizabeth, a queen whose reign was no less distinguished for its Literature, than for its policy and splendor.

Her reign, the brightest on the page of British History was adorned by the most brilliant array of genius that ever confounded the tongue of man or penned a burning line of song: genius that shook the venerable philosophy of ages and raised a second Parnassus on British soil. Bacon [rent?] away the age grown ivy from the mystic philosophy of Aristotle, exposed its [illegible], and hurled it crashing to the dust. While men stood gazing in wild astonishment upon

its ruins the stately dawn of Experimental Philosophy [rose?] upon their wondering vision [reared?] by the great architect the English Bacon, in the reign of England's favorite queen.

And now Poetry

“The soul of science and the queen of souls”

commenced her mild reign. Chaucer had sung, and the last vibrations of his harp, had died away, and the winds of ages had played their Eolian measures upon its strings, and now the bards and Troubadours were the sole votaries of song. The language was young, and the poets of Elizabeth taught that poetry was breathed from heart to heart, like the language of nature spoken without words, spoken in language felt not heard, in language soft as the silent whispers of an enraptured soul. The Language was in its youth when its “Fairy Queen” came tripping forth, lispings in broken speech her elfin numbers. “Spencer” says and “is of all poets the most poetical; the two world of reality and fiction are poised upon his wings; his verse is a labyrinth of sweet sounds, that cloy by their very sweetness” With him we dwell in fairy land, recline on [roses?], feast on nectar from the hari-bell and drink the pure light of the stars. He realizes our early dreams, and builds the airy castles of our youth. ‘Twas in this age that “[Rose?] Ben Jonson” the morning lark of English literature [woke?] his early strains of wit and love to which succeeding ages shall continue to pay their tribute of praise

Such was his song, that even Shakespeare gazed with envious eye as he soared [illegible] on high. And it was in this age, Shakespeare, “the great chemist of nature,” acted over again the drama of human life; ‘Twas in this age Shakespeare England's favorite bard, wrote his cheerful strains. He was in truth the child of nature, and well he knew his parent; his it was to praise her beauteous smile, or write with saddened brow her darkened frown. Well he knew the avenues of the human breast, its passions, its affections, its desires; and he so read the hearts of men, that they themselves looked wild, as though by some dark art, he had [conned?] the hidden secrets of their breasts. He brought the past in all its lively real colors before the ages again, and at his magic touch, those long dead stalked forth from their gloomy abodes.

The rapt magician of his own wild lay,  
Earth and her tribes his mystic wand obey  
Old ocean trembles, thunder cracks the skies  
Air teems with shapes and tell-tale specters rise  
Nights paltering hags their fearful orgies keep  
And faithless guilt unseals the lip of sleep.  
Time yields his trophies up, and death restores  
The mouldering victims of his voiceless shores.

The fireside legend and the faded page  
The crime that cursed, the deed that blessed an age  
All, All came forth----

He was the world at once, now he is as the sceptered king speaking in lofty air to the cringing courties; now he is as the crowned queen he treads the stage with stately steps, commanding [crowding?] flatterers. With the spirits and fairies he gambols. Now in the sublime he [illegible]

and our heads grow dizzy looking from such a height; now he in beauty revels and our eyes grow dim with highness. Such was Shakespeare, free as the air, sublime as the ocean, and beautiful as his own green isle. Language confined him not; art had no bonds for him, nature was his [model?] and man his theme.

Such was the age when the virgin queen Elizabeth reigned over Britains isle; an age through out Augustine in its character, yet one which stands forth as the joyous prelude to the enchanting song of literature & Science which after ages sung.

Samuel A. Harrison

June 16th 1840.