

EPIC AND HISTORY

Rereading Plutarch, as I have been lately, is a most pleasant occupation, and one which provides an excellent mental stimulant. From the contemplation of the great biographer's living characters, one's mind wanders back to the classic historians, to Thucydides, to Herodotus and to Homer; to the dim ages when the epic and history were identified. Such a train of thought suggested this hasty attempt to sketch the relation of epic poetry and history.

Epic, it has been said, is "a compromise between poetry and history." That statement leads of course to the question: In what sense is it a compromise? Are the graces of poetry less—is part of historical fact sacrificed? Which gives way to the other? And when history has become the science we now know it—is epic no longer possible? "The poet and historian differ" says Aristotle in the 'Poetics,' "not by writing in verse or prose. The work of Herodotus might be put into verse, and it would still be a species of history, with metre, no less than without it. The true difference is that one relates what has happened—the other, what may happen. Poetry is therefore more philosophical, and a higher thing than history, for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular." There is nothing to exclude from the epic category, true history, for what has happened may readily conform to the probable, and so prove suitable material for the epic theme. The poetry that takes an authentic hero, and describes events that are historical facts, may be legitimate epic—epic of the secondary nature like that of Tasso. But yet, not by reason that it is set down in metre, but because of its treatment, of its method, it will differ from history. For though the poet has in one way more freedom than the historian, and is not circumscribed by facts, he is, on the other hand more strictly bound by certain rigid laws. He must conform to a principle, by which the historian is not, and can not be bound—the principle of unity. "Historical compositions," as Aristotle carefully tells us, "show a wide region of necessity, presents not a single action, but a single period, and all that happened within that period to one person or to many, little connected together as the events may be."

The poet may be an historian, but he must be a selective historian. All events must march together to the same end. All extraneous matter must be excluded; everything told must be closely knit to the main action. The whole must be homogeneous in itself, complete, intelligible and significant.

The true poet in a cultivated age never encroaches on the domain of the historian. Their paths lie far apart—the historian will sacrifice the dearest wishes of his readers to truth; the other as minister of their pleasure will be tempted, as it was said of Plutarch, “for the sake of the turn of phrase to make Pompey win the battle of Pharsalia.” But this separation came late in the development of the nations. Through the infancy of society, the dual function of poet and chronicler were united in the single person of the minstrel. The poet is the historian of the heroic age. The words credible and incredible belong to an advanced and skeptical age. The poet, when he clothed tradition in new and striking phrases, decorated and amplified it, was himself doubtless convinced of the truth of his own tale. Commonly he sang of his own kin or that of hearers, and what hindered him—because the world is full of wonders and the past may well have been more wonderful than the present—from making their achievements greater, more magnificent even beyond the prowess and glory of his own day. Poetry served its purpose when it enkindled high and noble thoughts and beautiful enthusiasms in the mind of the hearers, when it enkindled the desire to emulate these ancient heroes, both in their prowess and their magnanimity.

Then comes the dampening spirit of investigation, akin to distrust: the cold spirit like Froissart who made journeys hither and thither to obtain exact information. Then the historian presents himself as the poet's rival at the Court of Letters. This evolution we may trace in classic times. “Herodotus” says Gibbon the fully emancipated of the half-emancipated historian, “sometimes writes for children—sometimes for philosophers.” “Herodotus is as much a poet in relation to Thucydides,” wrote Peacock, “as Homer in relation to Herodotus. His history is half a poem—it was written when the whole field of literature yet belonged to the Muses, and the nine

books of which it was composed were therefore of right as well as courtesy, superinscribed with their nine names."

Dionysius tells us that, though Herodotus wrote his history in prose, he published his work as a minstrel might have done by reading aloud to an audience. He adopted, too, the devices of the epic. "Herodotus knew that every narrative of great length wearies the ear of the hearers if it dwelt without a break on the subject, but if pauses are introduced at intervals it affects the mind agreeably. And so he desired to lend variety to his work and imitated Homer."

Our own early chroniclers employed verse, and they, too, chanted their story when occasion offered, most often at the king's court or in the baronial hall. Printing was the downfall of the minstrel's vocation, but yet the poetic form continued over the transition period, so reluctant were poets to withdraw from the province in which they were so long supreme.

The last great monument of such writings that remains in English, coming as it did soon after that barren period of almost two hundred years, which followed the Norman conquest, when Latin overshadowed the native tongue, is Layamon's "Brut." It is one of the earliest, and by far the most noble of English poems after the conquest. It was the work of a priest of Arley on the Severn, near the Welsh border. It is a poem of colossal length—thirty thousand lines; it is wholly lacking in unity, ranging over too vast a field and too great a time. As a poem it is alive only in its parts, and as a chronicle is full of anachronisms, and is wholly untrustworthy; yet Layamon's "Brut" is not merely impressive for its length; it is not puerile nor garrulous, but sincere and full of rich imaginative vigour, and has indeed a paramount and indisputable claim to represent best of all this type.

Layamon had epic intentions; he took up the work the scop could no longer accomplish—the work of preserving the memory of memorable things, and of great deeds and of the men who did them. "It came to his mind" he wrote, "that he would tell the noble deeds of England, what the men were named and whence they came." He, like the minstrel, does not attempt to distinguish between authentic and mythic events and persons, but only is aroused by the glorious doings and lofty

heroes of this country's past. This enthusiasm makes Layamon a poet, and it makes the temper and scope of his work epic and national. There are passages of battle poetry comparable to the old epic fragments of Maldon and Waldhere. The alliterative measure recalls the iron ring of Beowulf; we see the ocean with labouring ships and waves which ran as if towns there were on fire. This gentle Worcestershire priest recalls the heroic age in language and style, in poetic animation, in love of great deeds, better than any other of the later days, and links the England of Beowulf with that of Chaucer.

This monument of patriotic zeal we leave to the curious reader to investigate for himself, as it is not within the scope of our essay. We cannot close, however, without drawing the attention of the reader to another great poem of the same nature—a poem for which stout champions have claimed epic honours, and that is Barbour's "Bruce," the greatest national poem that Scotland boasts of. The theme is indisputably of epic order—we have great figures like the good James of Douglass, hardly less heroic than Bruce himself—we have the armour and weapons of the heroic period and a magnificent variety of combats, sieges and skirmishes; we have splendid episodes like the last ride of Sir Aymer de Valence, or the Bruce's encounter with de Bohun, and the great final battle which makes him an independent sovereign, glorious and undisputed. Great was Barbour's opportunity, and great was the success he made of it, and had he been a poet of great powers, the poem would doubtless stand with Virgil's as one of the greatest secondary epics in the world. Although lacking in the subtle qualities of poetry, it still commands respect and provides pleasure. Barbour had the honour of inspiring Walter Scott, the greatest man of letters his country ever produced, and no poem has since been written which has so profoundly influenced Scottish ideals and Scottish character, as this, the work of the learned John Barbour, scholar and priest of Aberdeen.

—J. R. H. F.

Natural abilities are like natural plants, that need pruning by study; the studies themselves do give forth directions too much at large, except they be bounded in by experience.