

Notes and Documents

CONTEMPORARY POEMS ON CÆSAR BORGIA

THE tragic career of Cæsar Borgia has a humorous side also if regarded as an instance of the supreme wisdom with which Providence enlists bad men to execute its purposes, while persuaded that they are accomplishing their own. Among the minor strokes of this divine irony, none is more effective than the singular perversion of a poem originally composed to celebrate the escape of Borgia from his Spanish prison into a ditty upon his death. The poem and the travesty seem worthy of notice, both because they have apparently been overlooked by the biographers of Cæsar Borgia, and because the former at all events attests the interest which continued to be taken in him after his fall, and the satisfaction with which some at least regarded the prospect of his restoration, an indirect testimony to the merits of his administration of the Romagna.

The exceedingly rare poem to which reference has been made consists of seventy-four octaves, with an introductory sonnet, occupying four leaves, and is entitled, 'Francisci Sachini Fragmentum super illustrem et excelsum Dominum D. Cæsarem Borgiam. Historia de Francesco di Sachini da Mudiana sopra la fuggita de lo illustre ed excelso Duca Valentino novamente composta.' The piece is undated, but must obviously have been composed between the escape of Cæsar from his captivity at Medina del Campo, 25 Oct. 1506, and his death in the following March. There is no place of imprint, but it must in all probability have been printed in the territory of Ferrara. In his introductory sonnet the rhymester—for Sachini scarcely merits the title of poet—congratulates Romagna on the deliverance of her

Gentil signore,
Cesare Borgia figlio del Pastore.

The soldiers are especially invited to rejoice, for Cæsar is 'the father of warfare,' and 'wears the crown of Mars.' If he had perished, opines Sachini, justice must have forsaken the earth for heaven. He then commences his poem in the orthodox style by invoking Apollo,

Che per amore
Di *Damma* custodisti il grande armento,

to lend him a little light. He should rather have solicited the loan of an

appropriate epithet, for the licence *quidlibet audendi* is strained to its utmost limits by his character of his hero as

Un' uom *divino*,
Cesare Borgia Duca Valentino.

The invocation duly despatched, Sachini relates Cæsar's fall and imprisonment much as they are represented by historians, except that he attributes his release from the castle of St. Angelo to the intercession of the numerous cardinals created by Alexander VI, and his arrest at Naples to the discovery of a conspiracy for the introduction of the French into that kingdom. Arrived in Spain, Borgia is consigned to a dismal dungeon. He bewails his fate, wishes for a dagger to emulate the example of Cato, but eventually prevails upon his gaoler to supply him with pen and ink, and indites a pathetic epistle to Queen Isabella. He reminds her of his Spanish extraction and relationship to the late Head of Christendom, and implores release or speedy execution. The queen, moved to compassion, orders him to be removed to the royal palace, where he is still detained in custody, but becomes an object of great attention to the nobility and the general public. Among his visitors are two friars, who favour him with much religious exhortation. Borgia, however, has little relish for conversation of this kind, and, taking one of the friars aside, proposes to escape in his ecclesiastical vestments, promising an ample recompense. The friar wishes to consult his superior. Cæsar suspects treachery, and being, as the poet remarks, *uom di ogni cosa molto esperto*, has recourse to a very practical measure:—

No word he said ;
But took him, and straightway cut off his head,

which Sachini evidently considers a very laudable proceeding. He then disguises himself in the dead friar's garments, and makes all speed out of the palace. The other ecclesiastic raises an alarm. The duke is pursued and captured. The queen has serious thoughts of ordering his instant execution, but determines to confine him in a castle founded on a rock in the midst of the sea. A dungeon is constructed expressly for his reception, but in the mean time he has contrived to possess himself of a trowel, which, as soon as he finds himself alone, he proceeds to employ with a vigour sufficient, according to the poet, to have breached the flanks of Etna. At last he encounters a stone more impenetrable than Etna, which compels him to attempt the less adamantine fidelity of his attendant. With the speech, as the bard has it, of Ulysses, he compliments the youth on his personal advantages, and offers him sun, earth, and sea in exchange for a little gunpowder, 'Alas, my lord,' returns the willing esquire, 'how can I, seeing that the gaoler always searches me before I come in?' 'Take,' replies the inventive Borgia, 'a loaf, scoop out the inside, and conceal the powder therein.' The stratagem succeeds, and the duke's next request is for fire, which he instructs the attendant to bring him in a reed. We are expected to believe that with this gunpowder, Cæsar, without alarming his gaolers, effects a breach in the wall, through which he joyfully discerns 'a lock of Apollo,' or, in plain prose, a sunbeam. An obstacle still presents itself in the insulation of the castle in the sea. Borgia bethinks himself of his wife, perhaps the

person, among all connected with him, who makes least figure in his history. The squire is accordingly despatched on a mission to Valencia, which Sachini confounds with Cæsar's French duchy of Valence, and supposes to be possessed by him independently of the king of Spain. The duchess receives the messenger with great joy, expressing particular satisfaction at his account of the removal of the friar. In due time a troop of horse appears on the shore opposite the castle. Cæsar, having widened the breach, effects his escape by swimming, and is soon able to make his triumphant entry into Valencia, which is described with considerable spirit. He immediately receives advantageous proposals from the courts of Spain and France, and the poet, with an obvious bias towards the latter, leaves him deliberating between them; winding up his poem with a cordial recommendation of his hero to Providence, and a promise to put anything that may turn up subsequently into the best verse he is able.

Alas! the fates ordained otherwise. Cæsar Borgia was killed in a skirmish near Viana, 12 March 1507, and Sachini's poem fell into the hands of a scribbler seven times worse than himself. Something was wanted in a hurry to be hawked about the streets in celebration of the event, and some person whose dialect shows him to have been a Venetian, and who would be extravagantly complimented by the appellation of vile poetaster, laid hold of Sachini's triumphal poem, still damp from the press, on Cæsar's escape, and converted it into an elegy on his death by the simple process of omitting the last four stanzas and substituting four of his own, giving an entirely inaccurate and barely intelligible account of the catastrophe. If he had but stopped there! but he has in addition mutilated almost every verse of his original, until few are left even capable of being scanned. One example may suffice. The anonymous 'Historia de la Morte del Duca Valentino' being no doubt intended to be sung by the Venetian gondoliers, for whom Tasso had not yet arisen, and Cæsar Borgia being no favourite at Venice, Sachini's *uom divino* has become *uno homo de honore e de ardimento*, the fact that *ardimento* will not rhyme with *divino* being above the botcher's perception, or beneath his notice. The last stanza, where he had no help from his predecessor, will serve as a specimen of his own delectable metre and style:—

Così forni la sua vita el Valentino
 Ognun di fora andava
 Facendo ognuno bon botino
 Altramente vini saquistava
 Sperasse el grande e picolino
 E tuti li soi per filo di spada andava
 Li suoi nemici torno dentro con victoria
 Al vostro honore fornita questa istoria.

It may be conjectured that this worst outrage on the fame of Cæsar Borgia was perpetrated by the very ballad-monger whose vocation it was to chant it; and it is not devoid of literary interest if regarded as a specimen of the manipulation requisite to convert an heroic poem, even of a low class, into a Venetian street ditty. In any case both pieces are interesting, one as a testimony to the fidelity of Cæsar's partisans, the

other as a proof of the sensation excited among his adversaries by his death. They are also significant as indications of the state of moral feeling of Italy at the time, and of the really national character of the romantic epic just perfected by Boiardo. The exploits attributed to the hero of the day are precisely in the style of the achievements of the Orlandos, Rinaldos, and Mandricardos of Carlovingian romance.

The actual particulars of Cæsar's captivity and escape, it is hardly necessary to say, were widely different from those feigned by the imagination of his panegyrist. They have recently been related by M. Charles Yriarte in an article on 'L'Épée de César Borgia,' in the *Revue des Deux-Mondes* for 15 Sept. last, an essay containing very little on its professed subject, but much that is highly interesting upon matters of greater moment. According to M. Yriarte, ample materials exist in the Spanish archives for a work on 'Cæsar Borgia in Spain,' which it is to be hoped will be undertaken. Approaching his subject mainly from its picturesque side, M. Yriarte naturally deploras the absence of any authentic portrait of Cæsar. It may be worth pointing out that a professedly authentic portrait does exist, although upon a very small scale, and of dubious credit. Among the medals of Pius III engraved in Bonanni's 'Numismata Pontificum Romanorum' (tom. i. p. 187), is one ostensibly struck to commemorate the protection accorded by the pope to Cæsar Borgia. A young man, unarmed and bareheaded, his left hand pressed to his heart, kneels on one knee before the pontiff, who is enthroned between two cardinals. The legend is SUB UMBRA ALARUM TUARUM, MDIII. The features, though diminutive, are distinct, and, although the brow is much less lofty than in the posthumous portrait or pseudo-portrait attributed to Raphael, might very well be Cæsar's; but we know of no undoubted contemporary representation by which their identification could be established, and, considering the extreme shortness of Pius's reign, the genuineness of the medal itself may appear questionable.

R. GARNETT.

CUTHBERT MAYNE AND THE BULL OF PIUS V

THE question as to the proportion in which the penal measures of Elizabeth against Roman Catholics were dictated by political and theological motives is a large one and can only be determined by a survey of the whole conflict between her government and the papal party. An error of fact here or there in the details of some plot or of some act of judicial cruelty may be comparatively unimportant. Yet it may be well to call attention to an erroneous statement which has been recently propagated by several eminent historians and which lends itself too easily to the making of a telling point against what is historically the weaker side. Mr. Froude is perhaps the original offender. Quoting a letter from Mendoza to Philip (28 Dec. 1578) in which the ambassador refers to the constancy with which some missionaries from the seminary, founded by his majesty at Douay, had already suffered martyrdom, Mr. Froude adds in a note (*Hist.*, vol. xi. chap. 68): 'Mendoza perhaps alludes to Cuthbert Mayne, who was discovered in Cornwall in November