The Dramatic Works of John Lilly, (The Euphuist.)

Lyly John
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THE DRAMATIC WORKS
OF JOHN LILLY,
( THE EUPHUIST. )
WITH NOTES AND SOME ACCOUNT OF HIS
LIFE AND WRITINGS
BY F. W. FAIRHOLT, F.S.A.
HONORARY MEMBER OF THE SOCIETY OF ANTIQUARIES OF NORMANDY,
PICARDY, AND POITIERS, AND CORRESPONDING MEMBER
OF THE SOCIETY OF ANTIQUARIES
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JOHN LILLY AND HIS WORKS.

Whatever judgment modern critics may pass on the writings of Lilly, it is certain they produced a marked effect on the literature of his own era. His Euphues gave the tone to the conversation of the court of Queen Elizabeth; and the gallants and wits who frequented it formed their language upon the model of that once-famed book. "The chief characteristic of his style, besides its smoothness, is the employment of a species of fabulous or unnatural natural philosophy, in which the existence of certain animals, vegetables, and minerals with peculiar properties is presumed, in order to afford similes and illustrations."¹ It was scarcely to be expected that such laborious trifling, founded on the mistakes and inventions of the fabulous writers who flourished in the Middle Ages, would be revived among the learned men of the Elizabethan court, and almost enforced upon such as would wish to pass for polished scholars there. Blount, the editor of his six plays in 1632, says:—"That beautie in court which could not

parley *Euphuisme*, was as little regarded as shee which now there speakes not French." Anthony-à-Wood, in his *Athenae Oxonienses*, also notes:—"In these bookes of *Euphues* 'tis said that our nation is indebted for a new English in them, which the flower of the youth thereof learned."

Lilly's contemporaries were often loud in his praises. William Webbe, in his *Discourse of English Poetrie*, 1586, speaking of the great improvement the English language had "by the helpe of such rare and singuler wits as from time to time might styll adde some amendment to the same," particularly commends Lilly:—"I thinke there is none that will gainsay, but Master John Lilly hath deserved most high commendations, as he which hath stept one steppe further therein then any either before or since he first began the wyttie discourse of his *Euphues*. Whose workes, surely in respete of his singuler eloquence and brave composition of apt words and sentences, let the learned examine and make tryall thereof thorough all the partes of rhetorick, in fitte phrases, in pithy sentences, in gallant tropes, in flowing speeche, in plaine sence; and surely in my judgment, I thinke he wyll yeelde him that verdict which Quintilian giveth of bothe the best orators Demosthenes and Tully, that from one, nothing may be taken away, to the other, nothing may be added." In verses by Henry Upcheear, prefixed to *Menaphon or Arcadia*, 1587, occurs the following lines:—

"Of all the flowers a Lillie once I lov'd,
Whose labouring beautie brancht itself abroade."  

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1 This obvious pun on our author's name seems to have
In a sonnet by I. Eliot prefixed to Perimedes, 1588, he is mentioned in a similar strain:—

"Marot et de Mornay pour le langage Francois:
Pour L’Espaignol Guevare, Boccace pour le Toscan:
Et le gentil Sleidan refait l’Allemand:
Greene et Lyllé tous deux raffineurs de l’Anglois."

Lodge, in his Wit’s Miserie and the World’s Madness, 1596, speaking of the demon of envy, and "the divine wits for many things as sufficient as all antiquity," who have to suffer his reproof, gives the first place to Lilly in his enumeration of English authors:—"Lilly, the famous for facility in discourse; Spencer, best read in ancient poetry; Daniel, choise in word and invention; Draifton, diligent and formall; Th. Nash, true English Aretine."

In verses prefixed to Alcida, 1617, occur these Latin lines:—

"Multis post annis, conjugens carmina prosis,
Floruit Ascamus, Chekus, Gascoynus, et alter
Tullius Anglorum nunc vivens Lillius."

But these praises were not universal; and it is but fair to note that, despite court influence and fashionable sanction, there were some writers who spoke plainly against the affectation which disfigured Lilly’s works. Thus Drayton commends Sir Philip Sidney, as the author that

"did first reduce
Our tongue from Lilly’s writing then in use;
Talking of stones, stars, plants, of fishes, flies,

been a constant favourite. Harvey, in his Pierce’s Supereroga-
tion, has a whimsical joke upon it in a double sense, where,
alluding to the stationers, and the usual water-mark on their
paper, he slurs our author by saying they “find more gaine
in the lilly-pot blanke, than in the lilly-pot wastepaper Eu-
phued.”
JOHN LILLY

Playing with words, and idle similies,
As th’ English apes, and very zanies be
Of every thing that they do hear and see,
So imitating his ridiculous tricks,
They speak and write all like meer lunaticks.”

Marston, in his comedy entitled What you Will, Act 5, Sc. 1, makes the foolish Simplicius attempt Euphuisms in complimenting his mistress; Shakespeare is thought to have ridiculed the style in the character of Don Armado in Love’s Labour’s Lost; and it formed one of the chief objects of satire in Ben Jonson’s Cynthia’s Revels.¹

Materials for the biography of Lilly are scanty, but not more so than for other, and greater, authors of his era. The earliest consecutive notice of his career is thus given by Anthony-a-Wood:—“John Lylie, or Lylly, a Kentish man born, became a student in Magdalen College in the beginning of 1569, aged sixteen, or thereabouts, and was afterwards, as I conceive, either one of the deniers or clerks of that house; but always averse to the crabbed studies of logic and philosophy. For so it was that his sense being naturally bent to the pleasant paths of poetry (as if Apollo had given to him a wreath of his own bays, without snatching or struggling), did in a manner neglect academical studies, yet not so much but that he took the degrees in arts, that of master being compleated 1575.² At which time, as he was esteemed in the university a noted wit, so afterwards was he in the

¹ Sir Walter Scott, in his Kenilworth, makes his Sir Piercie Shafton “parley Euphuism.”
² In the Fasti Oxonienses we find, in the lists of Bachelors of Arts under April 27, 1573, “John Liley of Magd. Coll.,” and, under June 1, 1575, an entry, in the same words, as Master of Arts.