The best Elizabethan plays

Thayer William Roscoe
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Author: Thayer William Roscoe

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THE BEST

ELIZABETHAN PLAYS:

THE JEW OF MALTA, by Marlowe;
THE ALCHEMIST, by Jonson;
PHILASTER, by Beaumont and Fletcher;
THE TWO NOBLE KINSMEN,
   by Fletcher and Shakespeare;
THE DUCHESS OF MALFI, by Webster.

EDITED BY

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An American Drama," Etc.

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MY object in this volume is to present specimens of the best work of the five Elizabethan dramatists who stand highest among Shakespeare's contemporaries. Collections of separate scenes and special editions of single plays have frequently been made, and they have their value; but it seemed to me that in binding together the masterpieces which follow, I should enable not only the general reader but also the college student to taste the quality of Shakespeare's rivals, and thereby to esteem the more adequately Shakespeare himself. Few persons possess the fifteen or twenty large volumes in which the Elizabethan drama is published, and fewer still have the time or the patience to plod through many tedious or dirty pages in order to come upon the treasures they contain. For, just as a traveller in an Oriental city is often obliged to turn his eyes from some mosque or graceful minaret to the ground beneath his feet so as to avoid ordure and garbage, so the reader of the Elizabethan plays has his attention often distracted, and his sense of decency shocked by the vulgarity of many passages in them. This coarseness was due in part to the habit of the time, when men spoke openly to each other and even to women on subjects about which we are, if not ignorant, at least reticent, and in part to the deliberate effort of the playwright to please the vulgarest persons in the audience. But as filth is always filth, though it be
thrust upon us in a work of art, or come to us along with much that is noble under the sanction of a great name, and as each age has more than enough of its own obscenity to flounder free from, without falling back into the sty of a former generation, I have selected plays as little as possible tainted. Moreover, I have not scrupled to strike out phrases or lines where it seemed proper, being guided by decency and not by prudery; yet it will not be found that this purging interferes in the least in the understanding of the following dramas,—a sufficient evidence, if evidence be needed, of theunnecessaryness of obscenity from the artistic as from the ethical standpoint.

In making my selection I had less difficulty than might have been expected. Of Marlowe's four chief works, Tamberlaine is too crude and tedious, in spite of several fine passages; Doctor Faustus, though admirable in outline, lacks interest in detail, and is, besides, permanently superseded by the mighty work of Goethe; finally, Edward II, though its scenes are knitted together more closely than those of its predecessors, and though its murder-scene is indeed masterly, yet as a whole lacks vivid characters. So I have chosen The Jew of Malta, which exhibits Marlowe's great qualities and their defects, and which will always be interesting from the comparisons to be made between Barabas and Shylock.

Among Ben Jonson's plays two have ranked, and deservedly ranked, foremost,—Volpone and The Alchemist. The former seems to me to be the superior, but its ineradicable coarseness precluded its publication in this volume; whereas The Alchemist is both an admirable example of Jonson's skill in applying the rules of classic composition to an English subject, and a fair representative of his satire and erudition. It is, furthermore, a mirror in which are reflected
with wonderful accuracy, the social, scientific, religious, and philosophical quacks of the time of James the First.

Fifty-two plays are printed in the complete edition of the works of Beaumont and Fletcher,—many of them being wholly Fletcher's; but only three of those which I have read come within my scope. These are The Maid's Tragedy, Valentinian, and Philaster: the first two contain passages equal to the best their authors ever wrote, but they are besmirched with so much coarseness, and brutality is so hopelessly interwoven in their plots, that I was forced to reject them; Philaster shows Beaumont and Fletcher at their best, and is thoroughly characteristic of their genius.

The Two Noble Kinsmen, commonly attributed to Fletcher and Shakespeare, is surely one of the most beautiful plays of that period, and deserves from the public such admiration and popularity as it has long enjoyed from scholars. Its right to be published among Shakespeare's works is certainly equal to that of Henry VIII, and superior to that of some of the poorer plays which have few marks of his collaboration.

Webster left two masterpieces,—The White Devil and The Duchess of Malfi; both are great, but the latter excels, and is not only the most original and imaginative drama in this volume, but superior to every other Elizabethan tragedy except Shakespeare's best.

In some measure, therefore, the reader can form from these five plays—supplemented, of course, by acquaintance with Shakespeare—some idea of the methods and range of the amazing dramatic inspiration in the reign of Elizabeth and the first James,—unsurpassed in the history of literature, and equalled only once, in Greece. The dominant influence was that of the Renaissance, transmitted to
England by way of France, and modified by an intensely English patriotism, — the Renaissance, when classical learning revived, when great discoveries in geography opened new lands and peoples to the view of Europe; when a bolder commerce brought not only richer merchandise, but strange and fascinating lore, from the races of the Orient; when the sway of a single religion was broken, and throughout Christendom men ordered their lives by new beliefs; when science, assisted by experiment and criticism, began its conquest of nature; when the legends of chivalry, and the traditions of the crusades, and mediaeval myths and superstitions, were still so fresh as to appeal to the imaginations while they no longer distorted the convictions of poets. It was the age when romance seemed real, and when the revelations of science seemed romantic. Curiosity, insatiable and enthusiastic, scrutinized all things. The divorce between passion and action, between the scholar and the man of affairs, had not yet been proclaimed: many-sided men were common, — philosophers were courtiers and diplomats; soldiers were poets. Intense individualism produced extreme types of character, prodigies of virtue or monsters of wickedness. Political conditions, the strife of noble with noble and of king with king, the dangers and excitements of foreign voyages, awakened qualities and passions which in quieter times lie dormant. It was as if mankind conspired to place the whole circle of its capacities on exhibition. To the great stimulus of the recovered appreciation of classical antiquity was added the impulsion of that modern spirit, which mysteriously and almost imperceptibly was remoulding society. And just as Bacon took all knowledge for his province, so the great poets of the age of Elizabeth took all human nature for theirs. Literary precedents and
the conventional rules prescribed by writers of rhetorics and grammars did not hamper them. They were too busy endeavoring to portray the mighty pageant sweeping before them, to rummage old attics for the musty colors and warped palettes of by-gone painters.

Taking the implements at hand,—the tedious moralities and the loosely spun miracle plays,—they soon improved upon them, soon invented a drama-form not so rigid as to be cramped, nor so loose as to be redundant, but articulate like a highly developed organism, and as elastic as the various material furnished by nature required. And for their metre they adopted and perfected a line susceptible of almost infinite modulations, suited alike to the simplest narration, and to the highest outbursts of passion, and to the most delicate whisperings of fancy. In their hands, blank verse became the peer of the Homeric hexameter, and of Dante’s terza rima,—a metre superior to that which any other modern language offers to its dramatic writers.

To Christopher Marlowe is due the honor of having first shown the capacity of this “mighty line.” We know but little about his life. He was born at Canterbury, and christened there on Feb. 26, 1564, almost exactly two months before the date of Shakespeare’s birth. He attended the King’s School in his native place, and, in March, 1581, matriculated at Benet (now Corpus Christi) College, Cambridge, where he took a bachelor’s degree two years later. In 1588 Tamburlaine was acted, and The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus appeared a little later. Then followed The Jew of Malta and Edward II. These, and The Masacre of Paris, Dido (in which he was assisted by Nash), some journeyman work on the three parts of Henry VI, and a fragmentary poem entitled Hero and Leander,—
comparable with Shakespeare’s *Venus and Adonis*, — were all that he had time to do before he was killed in a quarrel over a courtesan, at Deptford, June 1, 1593. It is common, while deploring his early death, to speculate whether he might not, had he lived to maturity, have equalled Shakespeare himself; but such speculation seems to me to betray the uncritical temperament of those who indulge in it. We cannot reasonably doubt but that Marlowe, at forty, would have produced works far superior to any he has left: he had great powers, and they were surely ripening, but there is no indication that he could ever have excelled in two very important fields, where Shakespeare is supreme, — in humor and in fancy. Humor is inborn, and shows itself early, — yet there are not among Marlowe’s creations any germs of such characters as Falstaff or Mercutio; fancy, again, is preeminently a young poet’s gift, yet Marlowe’s lack of it is almost as surprising as are the ease and confidence with which he steps upon the stage for the first time. There is no bashfulness, no imitation, but the air of one who feels sure of his powers. He was full of vitality, intoxicated at beholding the mighty forces which uphold and perpetuate the universe; and he seems to have believed that man, let him but cultivate his titanic possibilities, may master those forces, and cease to be their puppet. So his heroes are marvels of energy, devoting themselves to the acquisition of power which shall place them above the limitations of human nature: with Tamburlaine, it is desire of empire, — the whole world shall be his slave; with Faustus, it is desire of knowledge and pleasure, — the mysteries of fate shall be revealed to him, and all delights shall be concentrated in a cup for him to quaff; with Barabas, it is desire of gold, — he will have the means of exterminating all Malta to satisfy his ven-