A manual for the collector and amateur of old English plays

Hazlitt William Carew
A MANUAL

FOR

COLLECTOR AND AMATEUR

OF

OLD ENGLISH PLAYS.
A Manual

for the

Collector and Amateur

of

Old English Plays.

Edited

From the material formed by Kirkman, Langbaine, Downes, Oldys, and Halliwell-Phillipps, with extensive additions and corrections

By

W. Carew Hazlitt.

London

Pickering & Chatto

66, Haymarket, S.W.

1892
When I proposed to myself the superintendence of a new edition of Langbaine,* with the additional matter published by Mr. Halliwell-Phillipps, F.R.S., F.S.A., etc., in 1860, incorporated, I had no conception that beyond the entries and notes which I had gradually drawn together between 1860 and 1890, much would remain to be done. But during the process of amalgamating these insertions, I discovered on every page of the work a proof that my predecessor had discharged his task in a manner infinitely more negligent and perfunctory than I had supposed, and it became indispensable either to relinquish the undertaking, or to submit to the onerous duty of revising the volume from beginning to end. I was too warmly interested in my self-imposed labour to throw it up, and I had to face the sole honourable alternative. No one can even cursorily examine the two impressions side by side without perceiving how entirely the text has been castigated and improved; but, of course, it will be easy for many to point out where I have failed, or might have accomplished more.

The Dictionary of Old English Plays of 1860 marked, of course, a great advance on Langbaine, but nothing in comparison with what it might have done in more careful and conscientious hands. There is, as the case stands, scarcely any form of error and misstatement from which the publication is free. The defects of every kind are rather those of the earlier book improperly retained than any for which Mr. Halliwell-Phillipps is directly answerable. But that gentleman seldom put his whole strength into work not immediately associated with Shakespear, and we have here, no doubt, the result of casual and desultory jottings in an interleaved copy of Langbaine. The mischief is that a project of this sort, where the public demand is specific and limited, however imperfect it may be, fills the room of a worthier book, and deprives those whose studies or researches are in a dramatic direction of the advantage of possessing a really useful Manual on the subject.

The weakest portion of the original work, as it has so far appeared from time to time in print, is that which deals with the earlier dramatic literature. The group of productions nearest in point of date to Lang-

* Langbaine originally printed his book in 1687, under the title of Monus Triumphant; then a second time, in 1688, as A New Catalogue of English Plays, etc.; and thirdly, in 1691, in the form in which it was adopted as the basis and groundwork of Mr. Halliwell-Phillipps's Dictionary.
baine and his immediate followers is described with a fair degree of accuracy and completeness. But the remarkable feature in the edition of 1860 is that Mr. Halliwell-Phillipps should have not even attempted to improve a section of the undertaking which more directly lay within his favourite researches and sympathy, and should have permitted the grossest absurdities, corruptions, and fabrications to remain.

While the 1860 volume fails to record a very considerable number of dramatic items of signal importance, and also omits essential particulars respecting many others which are given, a large amount of space is uselessly occupied by repetitions with slight differences of the same article under two or more heads, where a cross-reference at most would be sufficient; and I may perhaps add that there is a great deal of inaccurate bibliographical detail, which is out of place in a descriptive catalogue of a literary cast, and can be obtained in a far more satisfactory shape in the present writer’s Handbook and Collections and Notes, to which a General Index is nearly ready.

It is as true of our dramatic literature, as it is of the general body of early English printed books, that the actual volume or output was not only far larger than our antiquaries in former days imagined, but that we shall probably never succeed in replenishing with all the treasures which it once possessed the old theatre and theatrical library, although it has fallen to our lot in the course of the last fifty years or so to regain much, which was either unknown or believed to be lost, both in type and in MS.

The iniquitous holocaust of an extensive and valuable series of unique early dramatic MSS. by the cook of John Warburton, Somerset Herald, should have been ere this reduced to its probable dimensions. It was undoubtedly a grave, yet so far a happy, exaggeration on the part of the original narrator of the story; the plays, supposed to have been thus irretrievably lost, have been already in several cases recovered, and there is no question that others will occur from time to time in Collections.

Still, notwithstanding the periodical jetsam and salvage, which have restored to us so many relics of the past illustrative of the progress and development of the English drama, a vast store of material remains within the category of being, at all events, hitherto unrecovered; and the titles of some of these productions seem to have been preserved to us in many cases to tantalize our imagination by a vision, which they afford, of literary dainties never to be enjoyed. Our only solace is that, when some missing play is accidentally brought to light, the estimate which we had formed of it from the description in a record or an old catalogue is seldom realized.

One noticeable feature in the book as now reproduced is the removal in as many instances as possible of the loose practice by which (as I have observed) the former editors admitted notices of the same play under two or three different heads. This, no doubt, arose from many of our old dramas possessing more than one title, or being known at different periods under various names; but a cross reference seems to meet the difficulty, and to facilitate the study or command of all the existing facts respecting a piece in one place.

There are certain other entries as to which I entertained some doubt.
I refer to those plays which do not appear to have been even composed or translated with a view to the stage, including the Elizabethan academical versions of the tragedies of Seneca. But we frequently remark, in turning over the pages of dramatic records, that such works, if not immediately transferred to the boards, were valuable to practical playwrights as the basis or plot of pieces better adapted for public representation.

The exceedingly dull and narrow Academic dramas were scarcely, perhaps, worth registration, unless it had been my object to render the Catalogue as perfect as possible. They certainly form a curious and not a very proud contrast to the productions which do not belong to that series.

An interesting and important branch of an inquiry into the genealogy of early dramatic work is the passage in many cases of the same play under different names through successive stages of development before it reached a printed shape. A commencement was made in the former editions of the present undertaking of an attempt to trace and note the progress of certain plays, as they received the alterations and additions of successive authors in the employment of the theatres during the reigns of Elizabeth and her immediate successors; and I have aimed at carrying what appeared to be so material a feature in the Manual as much farther as I could with the assistance of later information and discovery.

The principles of revision and adaptation of existing plays appear to have been carried out to a much greater extent than was at first supposed; and this circumstance makes a difficulty in connection with the formation of collected editions of dramatic writers, where, by the light of fresh revelation, the responsibility for the authorship is seen to be so divided and so difficult in apportionment.

The enrolment of players and other caterers for the public amusement under the name and protection of a nobleman is partly explained by the state of the law in regard to vagrants within the verge of the metropolis, which once embraced nearly all the theatres of London. All such persons, on being apprehended and convicted, were adjudged to be "grievously whipped and burnt through the gristle of the right ear with a red-hot iron an inch in compass; and this regulation and liability extended to those using subtle craft and unlawful games or plays, some of them feigning to have knowledge in physiognomy, palmistry, etc., and all fencers, bearwards, common players in interludes, and minstrels not belonging to any Baron of this realm, etc."

It will be perceived that there are several entries of Antic-masques performed before royalty and at the Inns of Court. These exhibitions were for a time very popular; and the idea is adopted by the compiler of the History of Friar Bacon, first published about 1620, where Bacon performs successively a masque of the Five Senses and an antic-masque of Apes.

It would be ungrateful and improper to overlook the obligations under which every worker in this field must be to Mr. Fleay for his laborious work on the LONDON STAGE, 1890. I have been personally indebted to it for several useful elucidations, more especially in regard to
the currency of the same drama under different names, and the survivor-
ship, with a varied forefront, of pieces supposed to have perished. So
far as it is becoming in me to do so, I cordially endorse all that
Mr. Fleay says in condemnation of the negligence or dishonesty of
many who have preceded us both in the present direction; and after the
exhaustion of all probable sources of intelligence, as well as of all
means of scrutiny, one is apt to be far from sanguine that one has
cleared the ground from the ramified mischief perpetrated by the
bungler and the forger from the Elizabethan era downward.

I could have wished, however, that Mr. Fleay had rendered his book
less complex and obscure in its arrangement. He has fallen into the
same error for which he blames Malone, though in a somewhat different
way.

The appropriation by Mr. Fleay and Mr. A. H. Bullen of anonymous
productions to known authors is, I apprehend, to be received with
cautions and allowance, inasmuch as the acknowledged works of those
writers almost invariably bear their names either on the title page, or at
the foot of the dedication, or in the Diaries of Henslowe, Herbert, and
others.

In looking at a volume, such as that offered to the public in the
present case, we have to recollect, and we must acknowledge, that,
indeed, independently of its mere technical and literary interest, it recommends
itself to our notice and regard as a rich source of political and social
illustration, and during the whole period of time which it embraces,
affords valuable side-lights upon the events and characters recorded in
our annals.

There is, in truth, scarcely any phase or turn of our early history
which is not touched by this Dramatic Chronicle.

A tolerably exhaustive body of information on the reduction of
history, legend, and fancy to a dramatic form from the earliest infancy
of our drama to the close of the seventeenth century ought to prove an
acceptable companion to all lovers of such literature; and the present
may be regarded as the first attempt to carry out the design with even
approximate completeness. The successive labourers in the field have,
by course, contributed to the result now before the public, and without
their cumulative work it might have been almost impossible to achieve
so much, or to approach so many degrees nearer to finality.

It may be desirable to consult for this matter, inter alia: Sir James
Whitelocke's Liber Fameliens. ed. Bruce, p. 12; Arber's Introduction
to Fish's Suppllication for the Beggars (1529); and Manning's Memoirs of
Sir Benjamin Rudyard, 1841, especially the Noctes Templarie there
inserted. In the Antiquarian Repertory, ed. 1807, i. 171, will be
found an account of masques performed before Robert Dudley, Earl
of Leicester, in the Low Countries, in 1585. In MS. Ashmole 1729,
art. 82, is a letter from the Lady Arabella Stuart to Mr. Edward Talbot,
stating that she had been unjustly accused of contriving a comedy and
he a tragedy.—16 Feb. [no year].

A New Index of Names, Theatres, Theatrical Companies, City
Gilds, and other leading matters, has been added, and will probably be
found useful.