

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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PREFACE.

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 the unnecessariness 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, *Tam-burlaine* 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 mediæval 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-

geance. Even Edward II, who seems an exception, illustrates the power of weakness, — if I may use an apparent paradox. For the most part, therefore, the personages of Marlowe's dramas are types of amazing passions, rather than sharply defined individuals: he did not attain the supreme excellence of dramatic characterization in which the type lives in the individual, as, for example, in Shylock. Vigor and exuberance, — those are the qualities which distinguish Marlowe's thought; and in his rhythm we meet lines and passages, now informed by an imperial stateliness, now by a subtle unforgettable melody, to find parallels for which we must turn to Shakespeare himself.

Of very different mettle was Ben Jonson, the posthumous son of a clergyman, born at Westminster in 1574, and educated there at the famous school, then under Camden's direction. But the widow Jonson married a bricklayer, and young Ben was forced for a time to work at his step-father's trade. When he could endure this no longer, he ran away, joined a regiment in the Low Countries, and after a brief military service, turned up in London, where his first comedy, *Every Man in his Humour*, was produced in 1596. Then followed, in 1599, 1600, and 1601, *Every Man out of his Humour*, *Cynthia's Revels*, and *The Poetaster*, comedies in which he satirized the foibles of the day, — and as, among other affectations, he laughed at the new romantic fashion of writing plays, he was in turn ridiculed by Dekker and Marston in *Satiromastix*. Yet, while they laughed at him, no man was so great a favorite as he among that illustrious group of playwrights and poets which used to meet and carouse at the Mermaid; and although, in spite of his protests, the Elizabethan drama steadily progressed along romantic lines, no plays were more popular than his. In

1603 he wrote *Sejanus*, a tragedy; in 1605, *Volpone*; in 1609, *The Silent Woman*; in 1610, *The Alchemist*; in 1611, another tragedy, *Catiline*. *Eastward Ho*, in which he had Chapman and Marston for collaborators, proved too strong a satire on the Scottish people for the taste of the Scotch-born James I, and its authors were imprisoned, only to be restored to liberty and favor a little while afterward. In 1619 Jonson was appointed Poet Laureate, with the usual perquisite of £100, and a butt of canary from the royal cellars, every year. In his old age he published *The Sad Shepherd*, and, having outlived all his great companions, he died Aug. 16, 1637. In erudition, he was reputed the most learned poet of his time, and it is even asserted that no other English poet except Milton has had a wider and more various knowledge than he. His models in the drama were the classic playwrights of Rome and Athens. Condemning the romantic principles of his contemporaries, which led to excess and a luxuriant confusion, he insisted on a rigid observance of the three unities, of time, place, and subject. His own plays, constructed in obedience to the Aristotelian methods, are marvels of ingenuity. No other English plots are more homogeneous and skilful; in none is there so little superfluity, so few digressions. In scene after scene you behold the author compressing a spring, till its tension is ready for the final, sudden discharge; yet he does this so adroitly, that your interest is excited from moment to moment, lest that discharge burst upon you unawares. In this respect he is the true descendant of the classic dramatists, and the kinsman of the Frenchmen who, in the seventeenth century, created the French drama on classic models. Unlike Marlowe, who sketches his plot but vaguely, and wanders whithersoever his love of splendor points, Jonson

has drawn every detail before sitting down to write. His material is the humors—or, as we should now say, the moods—of mankind, rather than their elemental passions; he produces his effects by cumulation and repetition, rather than by the swift, single, perfect strokes of a Shakespeare or a Webster. In *The Alchemist* this is well illustrated: he proposes to expose a popular imposture; to do this he introduces two varieties of the same species of quacks, and their female accomplice; and then he marshals before us, not one or two gulls, but a whole flock of them,—an epicure, a bragging young gentleman from the country, a sanctimonious Puritan, a simpleton of a clerk, a conceited tobacconist,—and we see how the same greed for unearned wealth affects each differently, yet drives all into a communion of dupery. So clever a weaving of various threads in one compact web has rarely been achieved; Jonson leaves no seams and no thrums in his work. He had not the highest imagination; but he had its best substitutes,—judgment, taste, sense of form, and culture.

As he is pre-eminently classic, so Beaumont and Fletcher are pre-eminently romantic. Most of the Elizabethan dramatists sprang from lowly families: not so Francis Beaumont, who came of noble stock. His father, Sir John Beaumont, was a Justice of the Common Pleas in Leicestershire, where Francis was born in 1586. At the age of eleven he was admitted a gentleman commoner at Broadgate-hall (now Pembroke) College, Oxford. Going to London, he read law in the Inner Temple, but soon was drawn towards the stage. He formed a literary partnership with John Fletcher, and had already become renowned, when he was cut off by death in 1615. Fletcher, whose father was Dean of Peterborough, and then Bishop of Worcester, was born

at Rye, in Sussex, in December, 1579. We know little about him, except that he was educated at Benet College, Cambridge, went to London early, devoted himself to play-writing, died of the plague in 1625, and was buried at St. Saviour's, Southwark. An old tradition has it that Beaumont supplied judgment, and Fletcher fancy, to their joint productions. Owing to the early death of the former, it is easy to separate those plays which they wrote together from those which Fletcher wrote alone, and by this process the reader who is curious can determine more or less accurately which parts should be assigned to Beaumont, and which to Fletcher, in their united works. That eminent critics, despite this clue, should have hitherto failed to agree, seems to indicate that no ultimate certainty can be reached, and that therefore opinions which have only probability for their basis ought not to be too vehemently attacked or defended. Be the division what it may, the quality which prevails in their dramas is the quality of romance. Their best heroes are earlier Hernanis, bred in the ideals of Castilian honor; even their villains—and monstrous villains some of them are—utter very noble sentiments. You feel that such persons never existed, and yet you know the thoughts to be true, and you cannot resist the fascination, the glamour—if you will—of ideals borrowed from the age of chivalry. There is, in Beaumont and Fletcher, “a constant recognition of gentility,” as Emerson has remarked; this, and their picturesque descriptions, their genuine sentiment, and their occasional flashes of imagination revealing intense passion, constitute their chief merits, and interfuse through their dramas the spirit of romance I have noted. To be delightfully unnatural is their privilege at their best; they approach the actual human nature of their time only on its

most depraved side, and are abominably coarse at their worst.

The Two Noble Kinsmen has furnished critics with a multitude of pleasant difficulties. Even a novice, in reading the play for the first time, must detect the impression of two different minds upon it; and, since it was believed that those two were Shakespeare and Fletcher, every resource of criticism has been employed to determine the share of each. The tests applied have been intellectual and metrical: Has a given scene those imaginative qualities peculiar to Shakespeare? Has its versification his familiar style? The latter test is perhaps the more helpful; for Fletcher adopted, whether from preference or carelessness, a form of blank verse by which he can usually be recognized. More frequently than any of his contemporaries, he writes lines with a double ending. Again, Shakespeare employs "run-on lines"—those whose meaning does not stop at the end of a verse—much more freely than Fletcher. The construction of the play gives further hints. Besides the main story of the two Kinsmen, there is the subordinate story of the gaoler's daughter. Her mad-scenes, drawn without pathos or much skill, are evidently copied from Ophelia's. Indeed, the style of the prose passages, and the commonplaceness of the secondary characters, afford other clues as to their authorship. Nevertheless, it must not be inferred that all the inferior work is Fletcher's; one of the finest scenes in the play—the dialogue of Palamon and Arcite in prison—was almost certainly written by him. Concerning the date of its composition, we have only vague suggestions. It must have come between 1603 or 1604, — the latest date assigned to *Hamlet*, and 1613, when Shakespeare retired to Stratford. As Fletcher's talents began to be renowned only about 1607,

and as he worked with Shakespeare on *Henry VIII* after that time, we may probably assign *The Two Noble Kinsmen* to the period between 1608 and 1612. It may well be, as Mr. Skeat suggests, that the play in its present form was revised by Fletcher, and even that parts of Shakespeare's share were altered by him after Shakespeare's death. As I have given in the notes the opinions of the critics most competent to decide the question of authorship, I need not pursue the matter here, and will only add that *The Two Noble Kinsmen* deserves to be known and admired because it is, first of all, a fine drama; that it happens to be a first-rate puzzle in literary criticism, is a minor reason for its republication.

Of John Webster's personal history we can learn nothing. A few entries in Henslowe's *Diary*, of payments made to Webster for theatrical properties, a few dates of the performances of his plays — and "the rest is silence." The first mention of him is in 1601, as the author of *The Guise, or the Massacre of France*, which may have been, as Dyce suggests, only a *rifacimento* of Marlowe's piece; together with Dekker, he wrote *Westward Ho* and *Northward Ho*, published in 1607; *The White Devil* was printed in 1612; *The Duchess of Malfi* in 1623 (but performed earlier); long afterwards, in 1654, *Appius and Virginia* issued from the press. On one title-page Webster is styled "merchant-tailor," and there are commendatory epigraphs by Middleton, Rowley, and Ford. All that we know of his character we glean from two or three short addresses to the reader, and from two dedications: these show him to have been conscious of his own powers, yet modest; not without a dignified contempt of the opinions of the majority of playgoers, who, he says, "resemble those ignorant asses, who,