

**THE MERRY DEVIL
OF EDMONTON: A
COMEDY**

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The merry devil of Edmonton: A comedy by Hugh Walker

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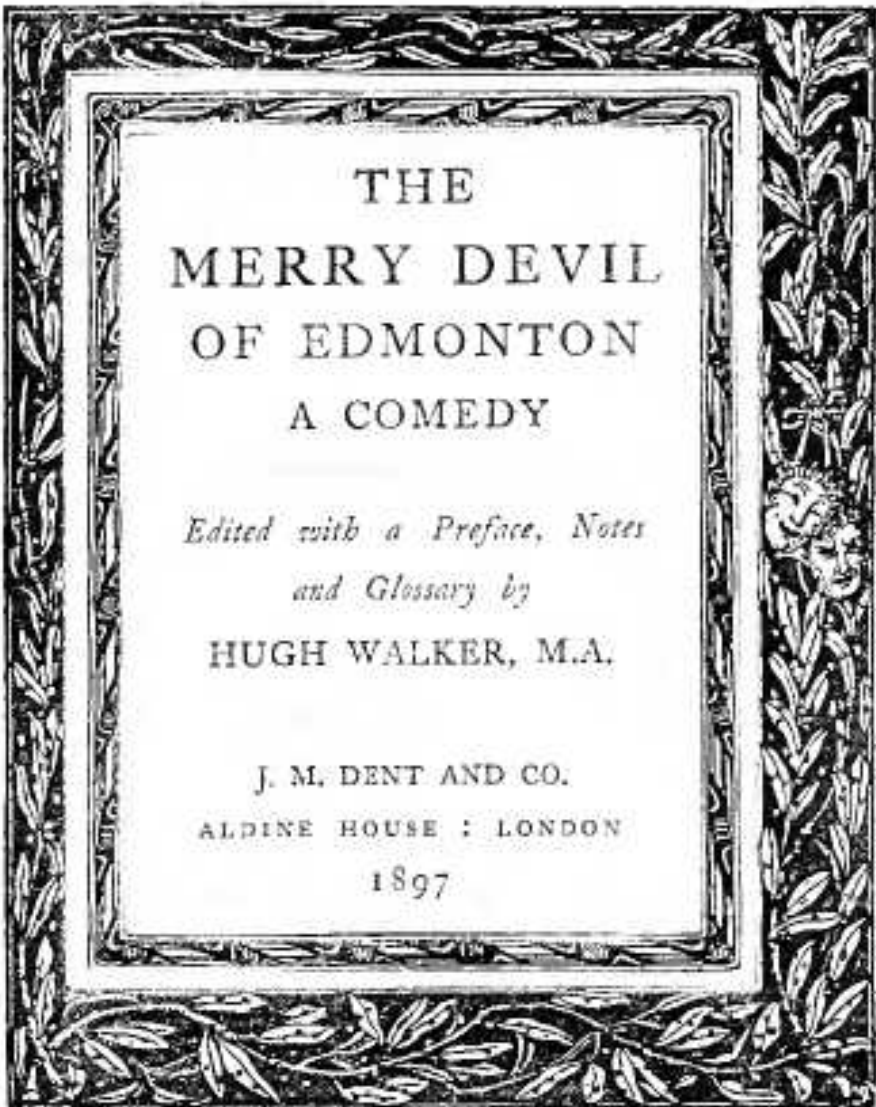
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HUGH WALKER

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MERRY DEVIL
OF EDMONTON
A COMEDY

*Edited with a Preface, Notes
and Glossary by*

HUGH WALKER, M.A.

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PREFACE

Editions of the Play. The first edition now known of *The Merry Devil of Edmonton* was published in 1608; and as the play was only entered at Stationers' Hall in October of the previous year, we may reasonably infer that it had not before been printed. Other editions followed in 1612, 1617, 1626, 1631, and 1655. It was included in Dodsley's *Old Plays*, and has been reprinted in the subsequent editions of that collection. It also appeared in Miller's *Ancient British Drama* (1810). But by far the most scholarly and complete of modern editions is that of Warnke and Proescholdt (Halle, 1884), to whom I am largely indebted. Their edition is exhaustive as to the variations of the text and almost equally good on the bibliographical side of the introduction. The notes are less full.

Date of Composition. The first known reference to the play is contained in the *Blacke Book* by T. M., 1604. This T. M., who is supposed to have been Thomas Middleton, quotes the title, and alludes to the comedy as an amusing one: 'Give him leave to see *The Merry Devil of Edmonton*, or *A Woman Kill'd with Kindness*.' There is no specific internal evidence, for the storming of St Quentin's, alluded to in i. ii. 24, is too early to be the basis of an argument. Tieck assigned it to the year 1600 because he believed it to be by Shakespeare, and thought that among Shakespeare's plays the one which had most in common with it was *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

The conjecture falls with the reason upon which it is founded, and few would now maintain the Shakespearian authorship of *The Merry Devil of Edmonton*. All that it seems possible to say is that it must have been written, at latest, soon after the year 1600, and that from style and tone and structure it may with greater probability be referred to an unknown date before, but not very long before, that year.

Authorship. *The Merry Devil of Edmonton* is an anonymous play, and there is no evidence of weight sufficient to enable us to decide between the various assertions and suggestions which have been made as to the authorship. Kirkman, the bookseller, ascribed it to no less a person than William Shakespeare, but Kirkman's sole authority was a volume, originally in the library of King Charles II., and afterwards in the Garrick Collection, containing *Mucedorus*, *The Merry Devil of Edmonton*, and *Fair Em*, and lettered with the name of Shakespeare. *Mucedorus* and *Fair Em* have nevertheless been refused by the critics a place among the works of Shakespeare, and strong internal evidence would be needed to obtain another verdict in the case of *The Merry Devil of Edmonton*. Such evidence cannot be found. There are indeed traces of the influence of Shakespeare; but pleasant as *The Merry Devil of Edmonton* is, it does not seem probable that Smug and the Host and Sir John are the work of the hand that fashioned Falstaff and his group. There are comic possibilities in these characters that Shakespeare would almost certainly have made more of; and, as Charles Knight has suggested, it is not probable that he would have gone so near to duplicating his own characters as he would have done on the supposition that he created both the Host

The Merry Devil of Edmonton

PREFACE

in the present play and the Host in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Moreover, we may apply to the present case Lamb's remarks on the difference between Heywood and Shakespeare: 'We miss *the poet*, that which in Shakespeare always appears out and above the surface of *the nature*.' The characters 'are exactly what we see, but of the best kind of what we see in life. Shakespeare makes us believe, while we are among his lovely creations, that they are nothing but what we are familiar with, as in dreams new things seem old; but we awake, and sigh for the difference.'

Michael Drayton has also been named as the author of *The Merry Devil of Edmonton*, but there is no evidence beyond the statements of Thomas Coxeter, an untrustworthy authority, who says that he had seen an old MS. inscribed, 'by Michael Drayton'; and William Oldys, who merely remarks that 'it has been said' that Drayton wrote it.

After Drayton we have nothing but bare conjecture. Hazlitt thought it was more likely to be by Thomas Heywood than by any other writer; but though it bears a general resemblance to the spirit and tone of Heywood, it would be rash in the extreme to ascribe the play to him without more definite reasons than have ever yet been adduced.

Source of the Play. 'This drama,' says Hazlitt in his Introduction in Dodsley's *Old English Plays*, 'was suggested by, rather than founded on, the traditional account handed down in print of Peter Fabel, popularly known as the "Merry Devil of Edmonton."' This is strictly accurate. Fabel in his character of magician has really no vital connection with the development of the play, and the *dénouement* could easily have

been brought about without his agency. Indeed, though he promises to raise spirits and to produce illusion, it would appear that the mistakes all take place through ordinary causes. The object of introducing him was doubtless to win the advantage of the popularity attaching to his name; and we may thus explain the curious want of cohesion between what is in the text (following Warnke and Proescholdt) called the Induction, and the body of the play. The Induction portrays Fabell cheating the devil and winning by a trick another seven years of immunity. We naturally expect, therefore, either a comic or a serious variation of the theme of *Faust*; but instead the subject is simply dropped.

Little is known about Fabell beyond what we learn in the play. A prose tract by Thomas Brewer on the life and death of the Merry Devil of Edmonton, with the pranks of Smug the Smith, Sir John and Mine Host of the George, was published in 1631. It had, however, been entered at Stationers' Hall in 1608. Only a small portion of this tract is devoted to Fabell, the greater part detailing the adventures of Smug. Brewer tells us that 'in Edmonton he [Fabell] was born, lived and died in the reign of King Henry VII.'

We may safely conclude that the low comedy of the piece, as well as the character of Fabell, was the bequest of tradition. The love story, and the characters of the knights, etc., are otherwise unknown, and were probably the invention of the dramatist.

Contemporary and other References to the Play. We may reasonably infer that *The Merry Devil of Edmonton* was one of the most popular of Elizabethan comedies, for few of

The Merry Devil of Edmonton

PREFACE

them passed through so many editions. Moreover, the terms in which it is alluded to in the *Blacke Book* imply that it was looked upon as an effective and amusing comedy. But the most decisive reference is in the prologue to Ben Jonson's play, *The Devil is an Ass*, where he speaks of it as the 'dear delight' of the people:—

' If you'll come
To see new plays, pray you afford us room,
And show this but the same face you have done
Your dear delight, the Devil of Edmonton.'

In later days *The Merry Devil of Edmonton*, standing among the miscellaneous group of anonymous plays, has been less widely known. It has, however, always remained a favourite with professed students of the Elizabethan drama. Hazlitt declared it to be 'assuredly not unworthy of' Shakespeare, while Lamb says that it 'seems written to make the reader happy.' In this remark Lamb draws attention to its characteristic excellence. *The Merry Devil of Edmonton* is a happy, lively romance, full of honest fun, and free from nearly everything that can be stigmatised as addressed to coarser tastes and passions. Perhaps its most serious defect is a certain want of cohesion between the parts, especially between the supernatural element of the Induction and the subsequent action.