

**THE BEGINNINGS OF THE ENGLISH
SECULAR AND ROMANTIC
DRAMA: A PAPER READ BEFORE
THE SHAKESPEARE ASSOCIATION
ON FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 29, 1920**

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The beginnings of the English secular and romantic drama: a paper read before the Shakespeare Association on Friday, February 29, 1920 by Arthur W. Reed

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ARTHUR W. REED

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BY ^{William}
ARTHUR W. REED, M.A.

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THE BEGINNINGS OF THE ENGLISH SECULAR AND ROMANTIC DRAMA.

IN an article in 'THE LIBRARY' of January, 1919, on *John Rastell's Plays*, I expressed the opinion that the break with the tradition of the allegorical morality and the rise of the freer kind of imaginative drama were connected in a remarkable way with a group of men of whom Sir Thomas More is perhaps the best known to you. I added that this movement towards dramatic freedom began in the household in which More spent part of his boyhood, the household of Cardinal Morton. I hope to follow up and justify this suggestion to-night.

Students of the early Tudor Drama are familiar with the fact that the most interesting and original plays printed during the reign of Henry VIII came from the presses of a father and son, John and William Rastell. This bibliographical fact has much significance in the story of the origins of the Tudor Drama, and the investigation of the circumstances that lie behind it opens the way to conclusions of some importance for the historians of literature. John Rastell was More's brother-in-law, and William Rastell is well known as the editor of More's English works.

An attempt has been made in recent years entirely to restate the problem of the early Tudor Drama by Dr. C. W. Wallace, whose *Evolution of the English Drama* postulates, curiously, not evolution, but a 'square break.' Dr. Wallace finds in the literary musician, William Cornyshe, the great originator. He claims that Cornyshe is the author of *The Four P P*, *The Pardonere and Frere* and *Johan Johan*, a trilogy of plays

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traditionally assigned to John Heywood. He claims further that Cornyshe was the only dramatist living who had 'opportunity, impetus or skill' to write in the new manner three other plays, *Gentleness and Nobility*, *The Four Elements* and *Calisto and Melibœa*. If we add to this list of plays, assigned by Dr. Wallace to Cornyshe, the newly-discovered *Fulgens and Lucrez*, we have all of the plays of which I shall have to speak; and it should be remarked that six of the seven were printed by the Rastells, whilst it has been suggested by Mr. A. W. Pollard as probable that there was a Rastell edition, now lost, of the seventh, *The Four P P*.

Cornyshe, who is called by his protestant, the octavian Shakespeare, was master of the boys of the Chapel Royal during the earlier years of the reign of Henry VIII. He is prominent in the Revels Accounts of the earlier years of the sixteenth century, but his place in history lies in the story, not of the popular drama, but of that extravagant medley of music, pageantry and dance, the Court masque. The attribution of six plays to a definite dramatist on the sole ground that he alone of all Englishmen then living was capable of writing them is not likely, I think, to secure a good foundation for a study of the evolution of the drama. 'No other dramatist,' Dr. Wallace says, 'but the impossible Medwall was then writing.'¹

It is 'the impossible Medwall,' however, who has now to be put in the place of honour at the head of the line of Tudor dramatists. In dismissing Medwall to make room for Cornyshe, Dr. Wallace was apparently misled by Payne Collier whose very circumstantial and graphic illustration of Medwall's dullness he accepted without, it seems, examining the document at the Record Office in which it was said to be found. The anecdote which

¹ This question is discussed more fully in my studies on 'John Heywood and His Friends' and 'The Canon of John Heywood's Plays' (Alexander Moring).

occurs in Collier's 'History of Dramatic Poetry' (p. 69) gives an account, now widely circulated, of the failure of a lost play by Medwall, called, not without irony, *The Fyndyng of Troth*.

Quoting from a Chapter House Roll of Revels Accounts, Collier shows items for costumes for Venus, Beauty, a Fool, and ladies and gentlemen who took part in the entertainments at Richmond in 1513. These entries, correctly transcribed by Collier, are to be found at the Record Office in a large bound volume, which bears on each leaf the punctures of roll stitching (Misc. Books, Exch. T.R. 217). But according to Collier, there was 'a singular paper folded up in the roll' giving an account of two interludes performed on this occasion, one by William Cornyshe entitled, *The Tryumpe of Love and Beauty*, in which Venus and Beauty took part; the other, Medwall's *Fyndyng of Troth*. After an eulogistic description of Cornyshe's allegorical device, Collier quotes from the 'singular paper' the following note on Medwall's play, concluding with a facsimile of Cornyshe's signature:

Inglyshe and the oothers of the Kynges pleyers after pleyed an Interluyt whiche was wryten by Mayster Medwell but yt was so long yt was not lyked: yt was of the fyndyng of Troth who was caryed away by ygnoraunce and yprocesy. The foolys part was the best, but the kyng departed befor the end to hys chambre.

Unfortunately there was no trace of this paper in the bound volume, nor is anything known of it at the Record Office, where the documents for this period have recently been subjected to a close scrutiny for the revision of the first volume of the 'Letters and Papers of Henry VIII.' As it could not have any bearing on the business of receipts and payments of which the roll was a record, its insertion does not find a ready explanation. I would suggest, therefore, that

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it is wise to treat the story of the folded paper with suspicion.

It is, however, upon this story with its implied contrast between Cornyshe of the new school and Medwall of the old that Dr. Wallace has rested his thesis; and unhappily his only reference to the folded paper is under the phrase, 'a well known document.'

The wrong done to Medwall has been righted by time. Readers of the 'Times Literary Supplement' will remember the signed article by Dr. F. S. Boas on February 20th, 1919, on the Mostyn Plays then awaiting sale by auction at Sothebys. Henry Medwall's play of *Fulgens and Lucrez* had come to light. It was sold a month later to go to America for £3,400, a figure that does not exaggerate its importance.

Halliwell-Phillips was right after all when he added to the fifth edition of his 'Outlines' in 1885 the note:

The most ancient English drama which is known to exist was written about the year 1490 by the Rev. Henry Medwall, chaplain to Morton, Archbishop of Canterbury, and afterwards printed by Rastell.

As the note does not appear in the fourth edition (1884) it would be interesting, if it were possible, to know whether Halliwell-Phillips saw the Mostyn Plays in 1884, or whether we may yet recover another copy.¹

The play is one of remarkable interest historically, how interesting may appear from the following account which I am able to give of the source of its plot and the nature of its structure.

A fragment of the play, two leaves in the Bagford collection at the British Museum was facsimiled by the Malone Society, and in 1911 Professor Creizenach announced in the *Shakespeare Jahrbuch* that the source of the plot was apparently to be found in the *De Vera Nobilitate* of Bonaccorso of Pistoja, which he had come

¹ Mr. Seymour de Ricci has since shewn that Halliwell-Phillips knew of the Mostyn Plays. (*See Fulgens and Lucrez; Intro.*)

across in a summarised form. My independent investigation has confirmed Creizenach's note.

Bonaccorso was an Italian humanist, a learned lawyer, a Petrarchan enthusiast, and writer of Ciceronian Latin, as well as of vernacular poetry. He held magisterial office in Florence, enjoyed the patronage of Carlo Malatesta, Lord of Rimini, to whom he dedicated his *De Vera Nobilitate*, and died in 1429, in the same year as his patron.

The subject of Bonaccorso's *débat* will become clear as we proceed. But it may be explained that the story is a pseudo-realistic romance of Roman life written in the artificial style of a rhetorical exercise in Ciceronian Latin.

Medwall's immediate source was not, however, the Latin of the Italian humanist, but an English version printed by Caxton in 1481, translated by John Tiptoft, Earl of Worcester, from a French version, the work of Jean Mielot, secretary and translator to Philip of Burgundy, printed by Colard Mansion of Bruges, Caxton's collaborator. This Caxton version of Bonaccorso's story of *Fulgens and Lucrez* I accidentally discovered while examining a Caxton Cicero in 1917 at the Museum. The discovery gave an added interest to the announcement of the sale of the lost play, *Fulgens and Lucrez*, and I availed myself of the sale-room privilege of turning over the pages of the little quarto.

The Caxton version of *De Vera Nobilitate* occurs in a volume containing Cicero's *Friendship* and *Old Age*, and it is connected with these by its introduction, the three pieces making up Caxton's book. It opens with the words

Here followeth the Argument of the declamation which laboureth to shewe wherein honoure shoulde reste :

Whan thempyre of Rome moste floured . . .

From this argument we learn that Fulgens, a noble senator of Rome had a daughter, Lucesse, of