

**FRANCIS
BEAUMONT**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649587889

Francis Beaumont by G. C. Macaulay

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A CRITICAL STUDY

BY

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LONDON

KEGAN PAUL, TRENCH & CO., 1, PATERNOSTER SQUARE

1883

2493.2.1.

PREFACE.

THE following essay is, so far as I am aware, the first systematic attempt to separate Beaumont and Fletcher on broad grounds of criticism. This task has been pronounced impossible by some, while by others it has been approached from one side or another; and so far as metrical tests are concerned, it was to a certain extent accomplished by Mr. Fleay in the papers read before the New Shakspeare Society in 1876. With these I only became acquainted after my own work had made some progress, and I was glad to find that they afforded independent confirmation of many of my results. I have not been able however to accept all his conclusions; and while by no means inclined to neglect metrical evidence of authorship, which is often both the most valuable as well as the simplest test, I have avoided the statement of it in a statistical form, which may be seriously misleading. In that part of the essay—representing a greater amount of work than any other—which deals with the question of authorship, I have not attempted to set forth

in detail the evidence which leads me to assign each scene to its author; this would need a separate treatise for each play, and would stand seriously in the way of any broad view of the whole: I have desired only to state definitely the conclusions, and to suggest the nature of the evidence by which they were reached, in such a way that it can be easily tested by the critic. Questions of disputed authorship cannot but be wearisome to most readers; but upon the answer to them in this case depends our estimate of one of the most remarkable of Shakspeare's contemporaries, whose individuality has for various reasons been hitherto greatly obscured. And this should be a subject of interest to students of English literature. If the work consists more of disentangling criticism than of presentation, that fault is inherent in the subject.

In criticism I have endeavoured to be definite, and to avoid exaggeration. Of Shakspeare literature Carlyle said long ago, "Volumes we have seen that were simply one huge interjection, printed over three hundred pages." My aim is not to demand admiration for the subject of this essay, but to help in some small degree to define his position, to illustrate one obscure passage in the most interesting chapter of English literature.

Obligations must be acknowledged first and chiefly to Dyce, the value of whose work on the text of Beaumont and Fletcher can only be fully appreciated by those who, like myself, have had experience of other editions.

"Did the name of criticism ever descend so low as in the hands of those two fools and knaves, Seward and Simpson?" asks Coleridge: and most readers of Beaumont and Fletcher will be disposed to echo the complaint. I am also indebted to Charles Lamb's *Specimens of the Dramatists*,* to Spalding's *Essay on the Authorship of "The Two Noble Kinsmen,"* to Collier's *Annals of the Stage*, to Mr. Fleay's papers for the New Shakspeare Society and *Shakespeare Manual*, and to Professor Ward's *History of English Dramatic Literature*. Other obligations will be acknowledged as they occur.

In quotations the text of Dyce has been followed in all essential points, and in dates the modern system has been adopted, assuming the year to begin January 1st; thus March, 1615-16, is written simply March, 1616.

* It may interest some of the many lovers of Charles Lamb, to hear that the copy of Beaumont and Fletcher which belonged to him, and was used in making selections for his *Specimens*, is at present in the British Museum, having been picked up accidentally at a sale a few years ago. It is a copy of the folio of 1679, and contains MS. notes by S. T. Coleridge, chiefly on *The Frophetess*, and an apology for them, signed with his initials. "I cannot read Beaumont and Fletcher but in folio," says Elia; and this evidently must be the identical old folio which was dragged home late on a Saturday night from Barker's in Covent Garden, as related in his essay on *Old China*.

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I.

THE mysteriously double personality which passes in literature under the name of "Beaumont and Fletcher" has perhaps had its due share of popular reputation; but it has certainly hitherto had less than its due share of sound criticism. The first of English literary critics asserted, as is well known, that in their own age the popularity of these dramatists upon the stage exceeded Shakspeare's; and the latest historian of the English drama counts them as names to which posterity has been inclined to allow almost equal honour with his. "In the Argo of the Elisabethan drama—as it presents itself even now to popular imagination—Shakspeare is the commanding figure. Next to him sit the twin literary heroes, Beaumont and Fletcher, vaguely regarded as inseparable in their achievements. The Herculean form of Jonson has a more disputed place among the princes; and the rest are but dimly distinguished."*

* Ward, *History of the English Drama*, vol. ii. p. 155.

rather to over-estimation than to neglect, and but for the general absence of clear ideas upon the subject which is hinted at by the phrase "vaguely regarded as inseparable," one might almost suppose that it was a needless impertinence to call public attention to them any further. But in fact, whatever may be the popular estimate of these writers (if indeed anything exists which deserves to be called by that name), it seems to rest upon no sound basis of criticism. The duty of the critic in such a case as this is first to ascertain whether the work to which are attached the names of two writers is in fact a homogeneous product or no. If indeed it should appear that in this notable instance two men were found who had such a congenial spirit that they became in truth but a single writer, it would matter little to the critic what share each had in the writings which they jointly put forth; even the retirement of one would make no essential difference in the quality of the subsequent work. But if we have here a partnership like others in that age, or differing only in being more continuous, and formed rather from considerations of private friendship than from the necessity of rapidly supplying the theatre with a play; if, in fact, there was no such wondrous "consimilarity of fancy" so far as literary production was concerned, however much tastes may have agreed in domestic matters, and if the opinion to the contrary is merely the invention of an uncritical age perpetuated by the indolence of eighteenth-century editors,—then it becomes a question whether any true estimate of the work can be formed which does not distinguish the bent of each