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By AMOS R. WELLS, Litt.D., LL.D.

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# The Book Table

Edited by EDMUND PEARSON

## Books About the British Drama

Reviewed by BRANDER MATTHEWS

**H**ALF a dozen years ago Professor George C. D. Odell published his solidly documented, amusingly written, and superbly illustrated volumes, "Shakespeare from Betterton to Irving," in which he set before us the stage-histories of the tragedies and the comedies from the reopening of the London theaters after the Restoration to the end of the nineteenth century, supplying us with ample information about the many modifications of the text, the mangling of the story, the method of production, and the merit of the actors who successively impersonated the more important characters. In his stately tomes Professor Odell did what no one had attempted before him; and he did it so thoroughly that no one will need ever to do it again.

Shakespeare is the foremost of the Elizabethan dramatic poets, but he had not a few distinguished comrades; and it is to be hoped that scholars, British or American, will supply us sooner or later with adequate stage-histories of the plays of Marlowe, who was Shakespeare's predecessor; of Ben Jonson, who was Shakespeare's younger contemporary; and of Massinger, who was Shakespeare's follower (and imitator). Here in New York a century ago Edmund Kean acted Barrabas in Marlowe's "Jew of Malta;" in London three-quarters of a century ago Charles Dickens acted Bobadil in Jonson's "Every Man in His Humor;" and in New York again half a century ago both Edwin Booth and E. L. Davenport acted Sir Giles Overreach in Massinger's "New Way to Pay Old Debts"—which Mr. Walter Hampden has recently promised to revive for us.

But the stage-history of the plays traditionally credited to Beaumont and Fletcher would be at least as interesting as that of the plays of Marlowe or of Jonson or of Massinger; and it is the most interesting period in the stage-history of the Beaumont and Fletcher plays that Dr. Arthur Colton Sprague has chosen to consider in the beautifully printed volume recently published by the Harvard University Press.<sup>1</sup> Dr. Sprague has limited his researches to the

Restoration—that is to say, that he begins his story with the organization of Davenant's company in 1660, after the dark days of the drama under the Commonwealth, and he closes his narrative with the death of Betterton in 1710. It was in these decades that the Beaumont and Fletcher plays had their greatest popularity in the playhouse. For the playgoers of those decades they were more pleasing than were the tragedies and comedies of Shakespeare. In the first three years after the reopening of the theaters twenty-four of the Beaumont and Fletcher pieces were produced, apparently without alteration; and in these same years only eight of Shakespeare's comedies and tragedies were seen on the stage.

Throughout the period Dr. Sprague is dealing with there were many more performances of the Beaumont and Fletcher plays than of the Shakespeare plays, perhaps too high-minded, too austere, for the corrupted taste of the Court. It is significant that of the twenty identifiable plays performed at the Inner Temple from 1660 to 1688, there were seven by Beaumont and Fletcher and not a single one by Shakespeare. Dr. Sprague wisely abstains from going into the obscure problem of the authorship of each of the half hundred dramas, comedies, tragedies, and tragicomedies which are loosely lumped together as due to the collaboration of Beaumont and Fletcher; he has decided that ascriptions of authorship are beside his purpose; and he holds that the many characteristics these various pieces have in common are sufficient to justify him in continuing to treat them as a group.

Dr. Sprague has done well what he set out to do; and it was well worth doing. He is scholarly without being pedantic, full without being fatiguing, and cheerful without factitious liveliness. His bibliography is ample and his index is concise—and there are few things more annoying to a student than an unduly elaborated index. His illustrations are only a few, but they are well chosen. His book deserves a warm welcome from those of us who prefer to consider the dramatic poets as dramatists rather than as poets.

Professor Ernest Bradley Watson's

<sup>1</sup> Beaumont and Fletcher on the Restoration Stage. By Arthur Colton Sprague. The Harvard University Press, Cambridge. \$4.

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"Sheridan to Robertson"<sup>2</sup> is also a beautifully printed volume, and also from the Harvard University Press. It is the first serious and scholarly study of theatrical conditions in London during the major part of the nineteenth century—six or seven decades in which there were many richly gifted actors and actresses and not a single dramatist of genuine ability. To measure the penury of this period we have only to call the roll of its most popular playwrights—Reynolds, O'Keefe, Holcroft, Douglas Jerrold, Sheridan Knowles, Boucicault, Buckstone, Planché, Bulwer Lytton, Charles Reade, and Tom Taylor; the majority of these are forgotten to-day, and the minority, if remembered at all, are remembered chiefly for their non-dramatic work. The reasons for this appalling poverty are not easy to declare; and Professor Watson's explanation does not seem to me wholly satisfactory. It is set forth plausibly and persuasively; and it is good enough as far as it goes, but I doubt if it goes deep enough.

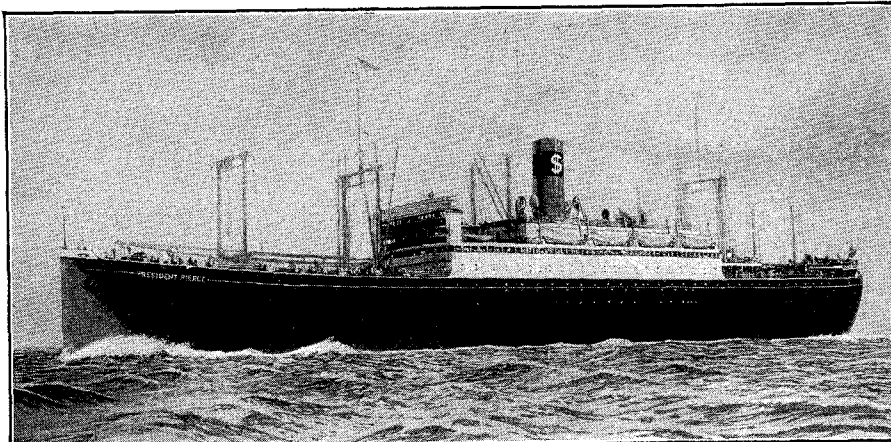
I am inclined to believe that the main reason for the emptiness of this period was economic—that is to say, the writing of plays did not bring an adequate reward, and the writing of novels did. As a result fiction flourished and drama died.

Professor Watson sets before us the history of the British drama from 1800 to 1865; and in so doing he gives us the story of the London stage in those three-score years. It is an agreeably told tale, based on solid research. It is made more illuminative by a score of well-selected illustrations—the last of which is a scene from Robertson's "M.P.," acted in 1870, still dimly remembered by the present reviewer across the gulf of fifty-six years.

In her conscientious account of Tennyson's plays Dr. Japikse<sup>3</sup> gives us most of the information we have a right to demand. But she does not give us all of it. For one thing, she fails to provide an adequate analysis of Tennyson's structure. That is to say, her criticism does not cut deep; and at its best it is literary criticism rather than dramatic criticism. She does not answer the question why it was that Tennyson, who ardently longed for success on the stage and who composed all his plays with the hope that they might be performed in

<sup>2</sup> Sheridan to Robertson: A Study of the Nineteenth Century London Stage. By Ernest Bradley Watson. The Harvard University Press, Cambridge. \$5.

<sup>3</sup> The Dramas of Alfred Lord Tennyson. By Cornelia G. H. Japikse. Macmillan & Co., London.



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the playhouse—why it was he was never really successful, excepting only with "Becket," and only after that drama had been cut and rearranged and in many ways modified by Henry Irving. Dr. Japikse does not provide this analysis apparently because she has no intimacy with the essential principles of the drama, no understanding of its unwritten laws, no intimacy with the theater itself, which is the only place where the living drama reveals its vitality.

That Tennyson had his share of the needful dramatic power is not to be disputed by any one who remembers "Rizpah" and the "Northern Farmer." Charles Reade made a fairly successful play out of "Dora;" and a dramatization of "Enoch Arden" had a prosperous career here in the United States, with Edwin Adams as its ill-fated hero. Tennyson had the dramatic power which is necessary, but he lacked the theatrical skill, which is even more necessary (and which can be acquired by taking thought—as Victor Hugo had

proved, and Victor Hugo had less true dramatic power than Tennyson). It is this theatrical skill which Browning also lacked, although it would be idle to deny dramatic power to the author of "Men and Women" and the "Ring and the Book." And it is to be noted also that both Browning and Tennyson suffered from the absence of helpful models. They were obviously patterning their plays on Shakespeare's, not on his closely knit tragic masterpieces, but rather on his loosely jointed chronicle plays and dramatic romances. Shakespeare had adjusted his plays to the special conditions of the Elizabethan theater; he had to do this, for he knew no other. But the conditions of the Victorian theater were widely dissimilar from those of the Elizabethan, and they demanded a modified craftsmanship, difficult to acquire and more or less disdained by both Browning and Tennyson, who may have had it in them, had they only learned how to construct poetic dramas; instead of which they

contented themselves with writing dramatic poems which proved to be unable to sustain themselves on the stage.

### Fiction

**THE GOLDEN KEY.** By Henry van Dyke. Charles Scribner's Sons, New York. \$2.

Dr. van Dyke calls these dozen agreeable and interesting tales "stories of deliverance." Each concerns a situation of peril or difficulty, spiritual or material or both, whence the way out is not easy to find, nor when found leads always along the expected road; yet in each instance there is a gate toward escape and a golden key that will unlock it. The stories vary greatly in style and period. Some are developed from ancient themes—as those of Ishmael and Esther—and others are of the present day. One of these, "A Wilful Andromeda," invites a doubt or a protest. Girls, we know, do fall in love with some very queer specimens, but could such an obviously blatant boulder as General Earl really captivate a nice young thing like Nancy? He is supposed to be something of a spellbinder, but that is a kind of spell to which men are more susceptible than women. If Dr. van Dyke had even allowed him a fair share of elderly good looks—but he is bald, dark, pudgy, and with a fat upper lip! It looks as if the author's distaste for the type was so complete he could not bring himself, despite the probabilities, to allow him one alleviating charm. One feels (but sympathetically) that Dr. van Dyke jabbed epithets at his helpless victim in much the same spirit in which a boy might execute a gleeful war-dance on the body of a decapitated rattlesnake.

**CORDELIA CHANTRELL.** By Meade Minnigerode. G. F. Putnam's Sons, New York. \$2.

"The strange Cordelia"—"the terrible Cordelia," as Mr. Minnigerode calls his heroine a little too often—is assuredly a strange girl, and at one time terrible to the point of incredibility. She is perhaps rather less fascinating than her creator intended her to be, but she is nevertheless a satisfactory central figure in what he has wisely termed a romance rather than a novel. Old Charleston in and before the Civil War is the scene, and Cordelia, a leading belle, has become before it ends a Confederate spy; yet this is no war story, but a swift-moving and dramatic tale of personal loves and hates, feuds and follies, loyalties and betrayals, among an interesting group of people against a narrow but highly pictorial background. Style and story are in strong contrast to the general output of novels, and though the book can scarcely be counted important, it is eminently readable.

### Children's Books

**IN THE HEART OF THE EVERGLADES.** By Kirk Munroe. The W. A. Wilde Company, Boston. \$1.50.

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**ADVENTURES OF A YOUNGER SON.** By Edward John Trelawny. Harcourt, Brace & Co., New York. \$2.

The fact that Trelawny was the associate of Shelley and Byron probably gave

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