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Life in Shakespeare’s England

A Book of Elizabethan Prose

John Dover Wilson
THE CAMBRIDGE ANTHOLOGIES

LIFE IN
SHAKESPEARE'S ENGLAND

A BOOK OF
ELIZABETHAN PROSE
THE QUEEN AS PATRON OF LETTERS

George Gascoigne, poet and dramatist, presenting his Hemones the Heremyte (c. 1579) to Elizabeth
LIFE IN
SHAKESPEARE’S ENGLAND

A BOOK OF
ELIZABETHAN PROSE

COMPILED
BY
JOHN DOVER WILSON, C.H.

CAMBRIDGE
AT THE UNIVERSITY PRESS
1956
THE CAMBRIDGE ANTHOLOGIES are intended for the general reader, who, whilst he is familiar with the greater masters, has little leisure, and, it may be, little inclination, to become a professed student of literature. They seek to provide such a reader with first-hand knowledge of the literary atmosphere and social conditions in which these masterpieces were created. At present, this need is satisfied only by reference to histories of literature, which have too many preoccupations to deal justly with it, or to authorities even less accessible.

It is the object of this series to let each age speak for itself, and to give coherence and prominence to what seem to be its significant features. Thus, the thought, temper, manners and activities of the period of Shakespeare, which is the theme of the first two volumes, are exemplified in selections from contemporary poetry and prose. The former illustrates the literary interests, models and aspirations, as well as the lyrical and rhetorical quality of the time; the latter gives a picture of the Elizabethan Englishman, painted by himself, in pursuit of his business, sport or roguery.

Volumes dealing in like manner with other periods will follow, and the series will include a history of English literature for general readers.

J. DOVER WILSON
W. T. YOUNG

October 1911
IN MEMORY OF

MY FATHER-IN-LAW

E. C. BALDWIN
PREFACE

A reference to the table of contents will acquaint the reader with the plan of this book. That meagre framework of facts which we call the life of Shakespeare has been made its basis, and the various extracts are so arranged as to illustrate the social atmosphere which surrounded our greatest poet at different periods of his career. The country lay at his door in infancy, with its shepherds and milkmaids, its witches and fairies. Stratford had its grammar-school, which he probably attended, and, though he did not proceed to college nor as far as we know ever leave the kingdom, sections on the university and travel have been added to complete the picture of an average Elizabethan gentleman’s education. With the youth of twenty-two we then journey to London, noting on our way the vileness of the roads and the comfort of the inns, we see the chief sights of the capital, we stand amazed at its turbulence and gaiety, we catch glimpses of the temptations that beckoned the future dramatist to enter that ‘primrose way to the everlasting bonfire’ down which his predecessors Marlowe and Greene had wandered to their undoing. Next we pass to the conditions which surrounded Shakespeare as author, actor and playwright, concluding this stage of our itinerary with a visit to the court, which was the constant supporter of the theatre against a puritanical civic government and the true centre, though not always the kindly patron, of all literary activity. In the last three chapters of the book we follow the dramatist, now crowned with fame and prosperity, to the retirement at Stratford which terminated with his death. William Harrison and others give our fancy the entry to his house, his garden and his orchard, and even allow us to picture him at his table or in his bed-chamber. Moreover since this was the period when Shakespeare’s dramatic genius played around the land-rogues and water-rogues which add so much that is splendid and picturesque to Elizabethan life, it seemed proper to insert here chapters on vagabondage and seafaring. Finally the varied activities of the age are summarized
in a charming and little known passage from Breton, giving an account of a single Elizabethan day. It will be noticed that from this list of topics one, the greatest and to Englishmen of that day the most engrossing of all, has been omitted—I mean religion. The omission, it might be said, is really Shakespeare’s. Nothing is more remarkable in his work than its silence concerning the religious life and violent theological controversy of his time. And since this collection professes to deal with Shakespeare’s England and not Elizabeth’s, it is at least excusable if religion finds no special treatment in it. In point of fact the subject deserves a prose anthology to itself, and I hope some day to undertake one.

With this striking exception, the life of sixteenth century England pulses through all Shakespeare’s plays, not excluding those whose scene is laid in Italy or ancient Rome. This book, therefore, is intended as a commentary on the work as well as the life of Shakespeare. The section on roads, for example, has a direct bearing upon the escapades of Falstaff, the passage on ‘witches in Scotland’ throws an interesting and, I believe, a new light upon the weird sisters in Macbeth, Autolycus is the hero of the chapter on rogues, and so on. Partly in order to increase the utility of the book in this direction, all the chapters and a large number of the extracts have been prefaced with quotations from Shakespeare. But considerations of space have compelled me to make them as brief as possible, and they are sometimes little more than hints to remind the reader of scenes and speeches which he should look up for himself. It will be frequently observed how closely Shakespeare’s thought and phrase resemble those of his contemporaries.

Such being the general aim of this volume, there has been no attempt to make it an anthology of the best Elizabethan prose. It contains no Hooker and very little Bacon, but, in so far as it draws considerably upon a number of excellent writers of the second rank such as Nashe, Harrison, Stubbes, Earle and Markham, the main characteristics of sixteenth and early seventeenth century prose are, I hope, sufficiently exemplified. I hope also that the reader will not be too conscious of the compiler’s scissors, to which, as a matter of fact, Elizabethan prose authors lend themselves with great readiness. There are, for example, the ‘character-writers,’ Earle, Overbury and the rest, whose work has been laid
PREFACE

under full contribution, while most of the earlier pamphleteers are continually dropping into the 'character' vein and are full of such admirable little vignettes as the portrait of the bookseller from Nashe on p. 152. This, however, is not always the case, and that more use has not been made, for instance, of the work of Greene is to be set down to the fact that interesting passages are not easily detachable from the main body of his text. In collecting material for this scrap-book, I have in all cases given the preference to those specimens which are at once entertaining and complete in themselves. The majority of the extracts, it should be added, have been taken from books or documents written between 1564 and 1616, the dates of Shakespeare's birth and death, out of the sixty-nine used only four being earlier and some half dozen later than this period.

Finally, since the collection has been made primarily in the interests of the general reader and the student rather than of the professed scholar, I have striven to make it as attractive and as easy to read as possible. The text has been modernised throughout, an undertaking which has convinced me that Elizabethan editors save themselves a vast deal of trouble and risk by adhering to the original spelling, and, while not shirking the labour, I fear I cannot altogether have avoided the dangers. Free changes also have been made in the punctuation where sense or the modern eye seemed to require them. The glossary at the end ought to explain most of the names, strange words and difficult passages, and the reader will find it more useful if he remembers that words which have a modern look have often altered their meaning since Shakespeare's day. The text of all extracts is based upon the originals, except in the cases for which acknowledgement is here made and in a very few others where the British Museum contains no early edition. The word Rye in brackets following a title indicates that the passage has been taken from W. B. Rye's England as seen by foreigners in the days of Elizabeth and James, a translation from the journals of distinguished visitors to the country. In these instances, of course, the English is modern and not Elizabethan. My thanks are due to the following gentlemen for kind permission to use their text or illustrations: to my friend Mr R. B. McKerrow for the extracts taken from his edition of Nashe, to Dr W. W. Greg
PREFACE

for the contract on p. 160 from his Henslowe Papers and the letters on pp. 91 and 178 from the Collections of the Malone Society, to Professor Gollancz and Messrs Chatto and Windus for the last six passages in Chapter X taken from Rogues and Vagabonds in Shakespeare’s Youth in The Shakespeare Library, to the last mentioned firm again for the illustration facing p. 208 from their edition of Harrison’s Description of England and to Dr Victor E. Albright for permission to reproduce his interesting sketch of the Elizabethan stage. Nor can I close this list of acknowledgements without confessing my obligation to Mr A. R. Waller and to the readers of the University Press for much care and assistance in the production of the book; and to my wife without whose patient help the task could never have been undertaken.

J. D. W

September 1911
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