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978-0-521-14827-6 - A Study of Elizabethan and Jacobean Tragedy

T. B. Tomlinson

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A STUDY OF
ELIZABETHAN AND
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BY

T. B. TOMLINSON



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EDITIONS OF PLAYS

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Beaumont and Fletcher (Select Plays), Mermaid, 2 vols. (London, 1887)

The Tragedies of George Chapman, ed. Parrott (London, 1910)

Five Plays of John Ford, Mermaid Dramabooks (N.Y., 1957)

The Plays of John Marston, ed. H. H. Wood, 3 vols. (Edinburgh, 1934)

The Plays of Christopher Marlowe, World's Classics (London, 1939)

Thomas Middleton (Ten Plays), Mermaid, 2 vols. (London, 1887-90)

The Changeling, ed. N. W. Bawcutt, Revels Plays (London, 1958)

The Works of Cyril Tourneur, ed. Allardyce Nicoll (London, 1930)

Webster and Tourneur (Chief Tragedies), ed. J. A. Symonds, Mermaid (London, 1948)

Works of John Webster, ed. F. L. Lucas, 4 vols. (London, 1927)

The Minor Elizabethan Drama, Everyman (London, 1910)

Elizabethan Plays, ed. Hazelton Spencer (London, 1934)

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PREFACE

The study of Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedy has suffered from the twin evils of excessive concentration on scholarly ‘background’ (textual variants, biographical material, mediaeval and Tudor history and philosophy, etc.) and, more recently, a tendency to abstract themes and ideas from the plays in which they are embodied (or alternatively to illustrate Elizabethan ‘themes’ from isolated examples taken at random from various plays and with no reference to the quality of the work considered). In this study I have attempted to combine a consideration of general issues which affect English tragedy with particular comment on the plays. The amount of detailed comment needed on a given play will clearly vary, but I felt it was of first importance to deal with plays as wholes, or at least with significant sections of plays, rather than illustrating ‘themes’ and problems from isolated scenes and passages. The meaning of a play, and consequently its place in English literary history, is dependent on the quality of the dramatist’s insight. We cannot take any play as significant of a trend or development unless at the same time we are considering how good (or bad) it is.

The first two chapters raise questions about the special contribution drama has to make to English literature (What is the nature and validity of the truths about experience the *dramatist* is led to see? How does ‘dramatic’ truth differ from other kinds of truth?) and about the key position Shakespeare occupies in relation to other dramatists. These are followed by detailed studies of key plays of the period. Here it seems to me essential to stress qualitative differences between well-known plays and to see three playwrights – Shakespeare, Middleton, Tourneur – as dominating the

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period and offering, when taken together, a controlling insight into what we now find of value in Elizabethan and Jacobean drama. The way to place accurately the other dramatists (including, I feel, the less impressive Webster) is first to see the sort of tensions and oppositions that arise between the work of these three.

The book concludes with a comment on elements in seventeenth-century society which, for various reasons, helped defeat the drama, to the consequent impoverishment of English literature and English life. Where any society loses its grip on the substance of dramatic truth and dramatic experience an attenuation or etiolation follows which – at least in the case of English literature – the cultivation of poetry alone as a dominant form cannot overcome. With English literature, and English life, we have to wait for the rise to maturity of the novel – comparatively late in the nineteenth century – for the body and substance of literature, lost with the eclipse of tragedy in the seventeenth century, to be replaced.

I have not considered textual problems except in the few cases where they are directly relevant to the overriding concern of what is, and what is not, of value in Elizabethan drama to us now. Most of the textual arguments at present being conducted – as particularly in the case of the Middleton-Tourneur controversy – seem to have got to the point of attrition. Short of any major discoveries being made in this field, our information is so uncertain that it is better to decide from internal evidence alone what are the major interests and achievements of a given writer.

Some of the chapters in this book are in part based on articles I have written for *Essays in Criticism* ('Tourneur's Critics'), *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* ('*The Changeling*'), and *The Melbourne Critical Review* ('Shakespearean Criticism').

MELBOURNE
January, 1963

T. B. T.