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Charles Jasper Sisson

Excerpt

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## Chapter I

### INTRODUCTORY

It would be well enough if we could indeed know what song the sirens sung. It would perhaps be better still if we could know more about the scores of Elizabethan plays of which nothing remains but the bare mention of them in Henslowe's *Diary*. Titles survive, the names of authors, and even perhaps the sum of Henslowe's share of the takings day by day. But the flesh and blood of many a great play has been buried beyond recovery, and Henslowe only serves to make us the more sadly aware of the outrages that time and chance have wrought.

Ben Jonson told Drummond 'that the half of his comedies were not in print', and Henslowe's *Diary* bears witness to a number of lost plays in which he had a hand. What would we not give to have Ben Jonson's handling of a murder melodrama in *Page of Plymouth*? What light would be thrown on the art of Shakespeare in one of his greatest and most difficult plays, had Chettle and Dekker's *Troilus and Cressida* survived? How much of the full stature of Dekker, Chapman and Heywood has been hidden from us by the loss of so many plays written in the days of their strength? What obscure dramatists might possibly have stood forth revealed as not unworthy compeers with the great ones?

I am not ready to accept with confidence the belief that all the best of this abundant drama survived, and that the worst only is buried in the oblivion that fell upon almost all plays neglected by the printer. Nor am I without fear that we have lost a play of Shakespeare himself, in the *Love's Labour's Won* mentioned by Meres in 1598, which is so universally assumed, without cause, to be an alternative title

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to some one of the extant plays. We have no manner of certainty concerning the time when Shakespeare set up as dramatist. The accepted date, 1592, when the poet was already twenty-eight years of age, stands on a shaky foundation. And it may well be that several early plays from his hand went no further than the stage and never came into the hands either of printers in his lifetime or of his later colleagues in the Chamberlain-King's Company who collected his works in 1623. Certainly *Love's Labour's Lost* is the work of no prentice beginner, but of one expert already in high comedy.

Our sense of loss may well be heightened when we find evidence from other sources, hitherto unexamined, concerning Elizabethan plays of which no trace remains elsewhere, and when we find that these involve the work of some of the greatest dramatists of the period. Such evidence is to be found in the records of proceedings at law in the Court of Star Chamber. It may well be that the number may be increased as these and other contemporary manuscript records undergo more exhaustive search. From these records we derive not only information concerning the London stage and drama of the great age, but also light upon some minor forms of drama which the printed book ignores, for good reason.

We have long moved in the dark, for example, when discussing the Jig, which was so prominent a feature of the London stage as an afterpiece. What we know about the Jig can hardly be squared with such an example as we find appended to *Twelfth Night*. But in the records of Star Chamber we find at least two complete provincial specimens, with their text and with a full explanation of their origin and mode of performance. So with the provincial drama in general, and in particular with the obscure problem of those May Games which come so frequently under administrative notice, and whose nature is so little known.

To anyone familiar with the conditions of Elizabethan life

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it might seem inevitable that the drama would furnish material for proceedings in Star Chamber as well as in the Privy Council. Topical foundations for a play, or topical references in a play, might affect either public or private susceptibilities, and lead to serious trouble.

Elizabethan and Stuart dramatists fell foul of royal authority often enough, as is well known. While it was tempting to cater for the topical interests of the audiences, and to profit thereby, it was a risky game. Ben Jonson was in trouble in 1597, along with Nashe, over *The Isle of Dogs*, and was imprisoned in the Marshalsea. He came before the Council again to answer for the political and religious implications of *Sejanus*, and in 1605 was imprisoned a second time, with Chapman, for his share in *Eastward Ho!* The satire upon the Scots, and the Scots King of England, would undoubtedly please the audiences of London. There is further evidence of this in Day's *Isle of Gulls* in 1606, as a result of which 'sundry were committed to Bridewell'. Even classical tragedy, in the shape of Daniel's *Philotas* in 1604, which is apt to weary a modern reader, created stir and excitement in its own day. For it was held by the Privy Council to be a reflection of the dangerous matter of the dead Earl of Essex. Four years earlier, indeed, Essex had foreseen such things in a complaint to the Queen:

Shortly they will play me in what forms they list upon the stage.

In 1599 Sir Francis Vere and Sir Robert Sydney were closely personated in a play upon the siege of Turnholt. Two years later the Curtain was presenting, less openly, but recognizably, other living persons of importance. And a contemporary letter of 1604 describes a play, upon the Gowry Plot, which went to the extreme length of bringing the King himself into dramatic action. This crowning indiscretion was laid to the door of the King's Men, and we may have some doubts about the matter. But there was no doubt that the French Ambassador took the strongest exception to the

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performance in 1608, by the Blackfriars Children, of Chapman's play *The Conspiracy of Biron*, with its portrait of the living King of France in a story of recent French history.

These plays, and others, were judged to be of seditious import, and to implicate the Crown or Crown policy. They were therefore dealt with by the Privy Council. Such were the perils of which Tilney, Master of the Revels and Censor of Plays, acting for the Lord Chamberlain, a Crown official, warned the authors and actors of the proposed play *Sir Thomas More*, when he sent it back to them with his orders for drastic revision. It was for this reason also that in 1631 Massinger had to set to work to transmute the Portuguese Don Sebastian and the Catholic Hermit of his *Believe as You List*, based on comparatively recent events, into the Syrian King Antiochus and the Stoic Philosopher of a sufficiently remote and fictitious antiquity.

Nor was it in London alone that such misdemeanours or indiscretions roused the attention of jealous authority. The records of Star Chamber furnish us with an infinity of details upon the strange and tragic story of a performance in Yorkshire, by a travelling company of provincial actors, of a play which set forth the life of St Christopher, in 1609. What might at first sight appear to be a harmless diversion of a country knight and his retainers takes its place, when the story is fully told, in dark and dangerous annals of strife, suspicion and conspiracy. For players and audience alike were Catholics. Their play ridiculed the Church by law established in England, and spread disaffection among its hearers. In all its circumstances and setting it was too closely related to the recent Gunpowder Plot to be lightly treated. It was nothing to the great ones of the Court and at Westminster Hall that the magic name of Shakespeare is evoked by these humble players, who included among their repertoire two plays fresh from the press, and toured all Yorkshire with the precious quartos of *King Lear* and *Pericles* which served them for prompt copies. The name which

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appeared upon both title-pages had but little significance to attentions riveted upon the names of hunted priests, Father Gerrard or Father Mushe, or of traitors dead in torment, Robert and Thomas Winter. The complexity of the issues involved in these events, however, and the wide ramifications of significant material bearing upon them, forbid inclusion of an account of this play in the present volume. It demands independent, and fuller, treatment.

But the stage could also cause offence to humbler antagonists, in its capacity as a mirror of events and persons of topical notoriety. And we find ourselves taken, in pursuit of such matters, into two of the principal London theatres, Paul's and the Red Bull, on the track of unrecorded plays of the highest interest, for one of them was the work of Chapman, and the other the joint work of Dekker, Webster, Ford and Rowley. We arrive at high circles when we examine the two sets of documents among the records of Star Chamber which report suits wherein citizens of London seek redress against actors and dramatists for stage comments upon their life and private affairs. I am bound to say that before reaching those great names we find ourselves moving in very low circles indeed, in that underworld of London which was apt to be so closely associated with the stage and the drama.

Both these plays contained material for accusations of libel and defamation, though neither was fought specifically or mainly upon this issue. The Court of Star Chamber had a long arm and a wide scope. In essence a judicial committee of the Privy Council delegated by the Crown, it investigated misdemeanours such as could not be satisfactorily dealt with in the ordinary process of law. It still maintained in theory its original status, as we may see from the occasional presence, under James I, of the King himself. During the greater part of its history it was a most valuable Court of Equity. Among other matters it enquired into conspiracies, libels, and interferences with justice. All three offences were capable of the widest interpretation, and injured parties

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could make it their business to discover and allege such implications in the making of plays for the popular stage to which they objected on personal grounds. If they were fortunate enough to persuade the Attorney-General that their complaint was of public importance, they had enlisted a valuable ally against a stage which had powerful interests behind it. It was the Attorney-General who, in the traditional formula, 'informed' the King that offences had been committed when the five London dramatists fell foul of their victims. In most cases, however, personal complaint was made when individuals felt themselves aggrieved on such grounds.

Among the many misdemeanours which came under the jurisdiction of Star Chamber, the offence of libel was the one which most enlivens its records, and it furnishes the searcher with a notable quantity of literary material of a sort. Libel found an inadequate place in the provisions of the Common Law. Nor could the Courts of Chancery or of Requests or of Exchequer deal with it, being concerned with property. But the Court of Star Chamber took a wider view of offences against the social order. And libel could take away what to many minds, especially in Elizabethan days, was of greater value than property even. The thought of the 'golden opinions' he has gained turns Macbeth against his dreadful crime, even though a crown was to be its reward, and in the end the loss of honour weighs heavily upon him. 'I have offended reputation', cries Antony in extremest bitterness of spirit. So with Cassio, whose lost reputation is 'the immortal part of myself'. It is in the mouth of Iago, of all men, that we find Shakespeare's most direct discourse upon the theme:

Good name in man or woman, dear my lord,  
Is the immediate jewel of their souls:  
Who steals my purse steals trash; 'tis something, nothing;  
'Twas mine, 'tis his, and has been slave to thousands;  
But he that filches from me my good name  
Robs me of that which not enriches him,  
And makes me poor indeed.

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Elizabethan tragedy has no more frequent theme. It is the explanation of the uncompromising Elizabethan view of physical chastity, and justifies the suicide of Lucrece. Iago is but repeating the thoughts of Lucrece, who 'hath lost a dearer thing than life', leaving 'Lust, the thief, far poorer than before':

Let my good name, that senseless reputation,  
For Collatine's dear love be kept unspotted:  
If that be made a theme for disputation,  
The branches of another root are rotted,  
And undeserv'd reproach to him allotted.

It is no small matter that Shakespeare shows us Othello transcending this powerful motive in his accusation of Desdemona. He could bear affliction, he tells her, and could have found patience:

but, alas, to make me  
The fixed figure for the time of scorn  
To point his slow and moving finger at.

'Yet could I bear that too', he continues. Few Elizabethans could even have conceived that any motive could lie deeper than this, even the love of man for woman that Othello sees as the very spring of life for him. Heywood too shows love overtopping the thought of dishonour in *A Woman Killed with Kindness*, but it is a paradox which is illuminated by Anne Frankford's own comment:

He cannot be so base as to forgive me,  
Nor I so shameless to accept his pardon.

Nothing less than her death can expiate his dishonour.

The intimate records of the lives of Elizabethans tell a thousand stories of men 'jealous in honour, sudden and quick in quarrel', either seeking or more often guarding 'the bubble reputation'. It was an age of litigation. And both Elizabeth and James frowned upon duelling:

Cheveril cries out my verses libels are,  
And threatens the Star Chamber and the Bar.

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When an Elizabethan, wounded in his reputation, seeks redress in Star Chamber, his Bill of Information sets forth in its preamble how he has hitherto lived in good repute and high esteem among his neighbours. This is the intangible but precious possession which has been damaged. Richard Harris, for example, a Colchester cleric, accused and libelled by Brownist opponents in 1603, protests how he

ever Lived in good fame and reputation as well for his life and conversation as for matters of doctryne.

Pecuniary damages, the mainspring of most libel actions of today, are no ordinary part of an Elizabethan suit of the kind with which we are concerned. The fines levied, in fact, fell as welcome manna into the Royal Treasury.

The Bill of Information, fortunately, was compelled to cite the actual libel wherever possible, either quoted within the Bill or attached as a schedule to it. This method of procedure has preserved for us many a libel, in prose, in verse, and not infrequently in dramatic form, often of high interest, though rarely of much literary quality. Unfortunately, the fates that preside over public records of earlier days, preserving or destroying, or merely mislaying, have been as capricious as Browning's Setebos. Among the many libels that have survived, most are of merely curious interest, whatever their legal value. All throw light upon the real lives of men and women, and help to fill in the picture of the background of Elizabethan life against which we see Shakespeare's plays and other literature of honourable standing.

Had the fates been kinder, we might have found among the wrack of these ancient controversies two complete Elizabethan plays by authors of the first rank, both of them Star Chamber matters. Chapman's play certainly appears to have been an exhibit in the case in which he was a defendant. If these plays have been irrecoverably lost, however, we can at least reconstruct them in the main from the abundant evidence given, and add to our knowledge



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both of the Elizabethan drama and of the lives of these dramatists.

Thus, if this great prize has been lost, lesser prizes have been won. The libels preserved furnish numerous instances of the vogue of verse-satire throughout the country which never came into print and which illuminate the official history of printed literature. And when libel takes dramatic form in the provinces, as it frequently does, we find indispensable information, based on full and clear evidence, with complete texts, concerning such obscure types of drama as the Jig and the May Game in Shakespeare's age.

It is clear, indeed, that of the various ways of publishing a libel, none was so effective as presentation in dramatic form, and none was more congenial to the Elizabethan mind. It was laborious to spread a libel by written copies. It could, of course, be printed. But licences and facilities were not always easy to come by. And the printed word was on record, indisputable evidence, and dangerous. There was also more satisfaction in repeating or singing a libellous song in the streets or in taverns. There was an audience to share in the unseemly mirth, and it was a convivial proceeding. But a play or an interlude gave far fuller satisfaction, with its greater publicity and its conformity with an ancient and widespread love of dramatic spectacle, in which ribaldry played no small part. If this took the form in London theatres of full-blown professional plays, in the provinces a more elementary art was content with the Jig as its dramatic vehicle in the hands of amateur actors. There is no mistaking the pride of these provincials in their own labours in this field. So it is that the records of Star Chamber suffice to fill notable gaps in Elizabethan dramatic literature, in which hitherto no actual specimens have been available for study. Those now recovered, when inspected, make it understandable that none has come down to us in print. And the official dislike of the Jig on the London stage is fully explained and justified. It would seem clear that the London

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stage, like the provincial stage, was used to disseminate defamatory mirth, dispensing with the licence of the Master of the Revels for this part of its entertainments.

Action for defamation, in its many forms, was linked up wherever possible with an accusation of conspiracy, in order to bring it more definitely within the ambit of the Court of Star Chamber. So if a libel could be construed as part of a concerted plot to pursue illegal ends, the case was strengthened. And such an accusation is invariably made. The libeller is seeking to traverse a good marriage or to further an improper marriage. He is fomenting a breach of the peace. He is seeking to prejudice a Court of Law. He is offending against the ecclesiastical settlement of the country. He may be guilty of *Scandalum Magnatum*, bringing the Crown into disrepute through its nobles or its ministers. Or he may, in company with others, use a libellous publication as a move in what amounts to a treasonable conspiracy, as in the case of the Yorkshire Catholics and their play of *St Christopher*.

Considerable publicity attended the proceedings of Star Chamber at its meetings on Mondays and Wednesdays during the Law Terms. I have suggested elsewhere<sup>1</sup> that there is a curious parallel to be traced between Shakespeare's play of *As You Like It* and the quarrels of Thomas Lodge with his brother William which they ventilated in that Court in 1593. In a Nottingham case of 1617 it was suggested that if the libel in question came before Star Chamber it would give rise to a play in London. And in 1596 the Lord Treasurer himself, commenting upon a case, is reported as saying that he 'would have those that make the playes to make a Comedie hereof, and to act it with those names'. We cannot well help conceiving the possibility that the Star Chamber may have purveyed to the London stage a great deal of topical material, and that from its records much light may yet be thrown upon Elizabethan comedy. With such reason-

<sup>1</sup> *Thomas Lodge and Other Elizabethans* (Harvard University Press, 1933).