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Lost Plays of Shakespeare's Age

C.J. Sisson (1885-1966) was Lord Northcliffe Professor of Modern English Literature in the University of London. His main research interest was Shakespeare, but in this study, first published in 1936, he explores what legal records can tell us about lost early modern plays and entertainments. The Court of Star Chamber prosecuted a number of offences against moral order and frequently took action against the dramatic representation of sedition and libel. Its records often provide the only evidence of Tudor plays and entertainments never printed and lost in manuscript. Sisson explores several cases in detail, identifying the people who filed complaints against libel as well as exploring all possible evidence about what the plays contained. Sisson's study remains of value as the first to uncover archival information about lost works of Chapman, Dekker, Ford and Webster as well as anonymous jigs, verse satires and libels.

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LOST PLAYS
OF
SHAKESPEARE'S AGE

BY

C. J. SISSON

*Lord Northcliffe Professor of
Modern English Literature in the University of
London*



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PREFACE

My object in this book has been as much to tell stories of life and people in Shakespeare's day as to add to our knowledge of the Elizabethan stage and drama or to record texts rescued from their burial in legal evidences and now submitted to the unforeseen test of literary criticism, which they can scarcely abide with equanimity.

I have therefore avoided footnotes as far as possible, and have relegated to an appendix a list of documents which have furnished me with material and are available for re-examination. I have also refrained from the exact reproduction of quotations and have generally extended abbreviations, except in so far as the texts themselves are recorded as literary documents, and also in documents of especial importance. I have even, on occasion, taken upon me to put narrative in dialogue form, while preserving the actual words of the document. I have not, however, modernised my sources. Those who may care to follow my steps through a jungle of law-records and other material will find, I hope, essential faithfulness in the use I have made of them for my purpose. The manuscript of the jig *Fool's Fortune*, for example, was as reverently examined and deciphered as if it had been a jewel of price, as indeed in its way it is. Mr A. E. Stamp, Deputy Keeper of Public Records, kindly checked with me some doubtful readings.

To Mrs J. E. Neale I owe the communication of the document containing the text of *Michael and Frances*, during my search for it. Mr Godfrey Davies of the Huntington Library kindly made a précis for me of the relevant Ellesmere manuscript, formerly at Bridgewater House. The Rev. J. O. Hichens, Vicar of Guilsborough, though aware of the trend of my story, magnanimously allowed me to consult his Parish

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Registers to pursue my enquiries into the chequered career of his predecessor Nicholas Cartmell, who kept those Registers so well and loved his church, and thereby perhaps balanced his account in a more august Register. My colleague Miss Winifred Husbands has ensured accuracy, as far as is humanly possible, in the proof-reading, and has also kindly contributed the Index. And to the Bibliographical Society and the editors of *The Library* I am grateful for permission to reprint in a revised form the story of *Keep the Widow Waking*. The Society of Antiquaries has kindly permitted me to reproduce here part of the broadside relating to the murder plot of *Keep the Widow Waking*. My friend Professor Hyder Rollins allowed me to consult him upon the tunes to which reference is made. I had intended to give an account, in Chapter IV, of a May Game at Horncastle in 1601, but in the meantime this has been described in Mr N. J. O'Connor's *Godes Peace and the Queenes*.

I hope that this book may impart something of the pleasure that has lightened the path of exploration and that comes chiefly from intimate contact with Shakespeare's contemporaries, even if that intimacy is not invariably edifying.

C. J. SISSON

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