

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00261-5 - Life in Shakespeare's England: A Book of Elizabethan
Prose

John Dover Wilson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE LIBRARY COLLECTION

Books of enduring scholarly value

Literary studies

This series provides a high-quality selection of early printings of literary works, textual editions, anthologies and literary criticism which are of lasting scholarly interest. Ranging from Old English to Shakespeare to early twentieth-century work from around the world, these books offer a valuable resource for scholars in reception history, textual editing, and literary studies.

Life in Shakespeare's England

A journey around Elizabethan England through texts, this 1956 anthology paints a vivid picture of the world in which Shakespeare lived. Using the playwright's life as the framework – his birth, education, his move to London, his life in theatre, his death – the book uses selected extracts from key publications of the time to embody the atmosphere of this period. From sport to superstition, from festival to fashion, from the plague to playhouses, the significant features of the age are described through its prose, providing the reader with first-hand accounts of the conditions in which Shakespeare's masterpieces were created. All chapters are prefaced with illustrative Shakespearean quotations; the collection representing a commentary on the work as well as the life of Shakespeare. All texts have been modernised to assist the reader, and a glossary is included which explains names, unfamiliar words and difficult passages.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00261-5 - Life in Shakespeare's England: A Book of Elizabethan
Prose

John Dover Wilson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Cambridge University Press has long been a pioneer in the reissuing of out-of-print titles from its own backlist, producing digital reprints of books that are still sought after by scholars and students but could not be reprinted economically using traditional technology. The Cambridge Library Collection extends this activity to a wider range of books which are still of importance to researchers and professionals, either for the source material they contain, or as landmarks in the history of their academic discipline.

Drawing from the world-renowned collections in the Cambridge University Library, and guided by the advice of experts in each subject area, Cambridge University Press is using state-of-the-art scanning machines in its own Printing House to capture the content of each book selected for inclusion. The files are processed to give a consistently clear, crisp image, and the books finished to the high quality standard for which the Press is recognised around the world. The latest print-on-demand technology ensures that the books will remain available indefinitely, and that orders for single or multiple copies can quickly be supplied.

The Cambridge Library Collection will bring back to life books of enduring scholarly value across a wide range of disciplines in the humanities and social sciences and in science and technology.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00261-5 - Life in Shakespeare's England: A Book of Elizabethan
Prose

John Dover Wilson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Life in Shakespeare's England

A Book of Elizabethan Prose

JOHN DOVER WILSON



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00261-5 - Life in Shakespeare's England: A Book of Elizabethan
Prose

John Dover Wilson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge New York Melbourne Madrid Cape Town Singapore São Paulo Delhi

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781108002615

© in this compilation Cambridge University Press 2009

This edition first published 1956

This digitally printed version 2009

ISBN 978-1-108-00261-5

This book reproduces the text of the original edition. The content and language reflect
the beliefs, practices and terminology of their time, and have not been updated.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00261-5 - Life in Shakespeare's England: A Book of Elizabethan
Prose

John Dover Wilson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

THE CAMBRIDGE ANTHOLOGIES

LIFE IN
SHAKESPEARE'S ENGLAND

A BOOK OF
ELIZABETHAN PROSE

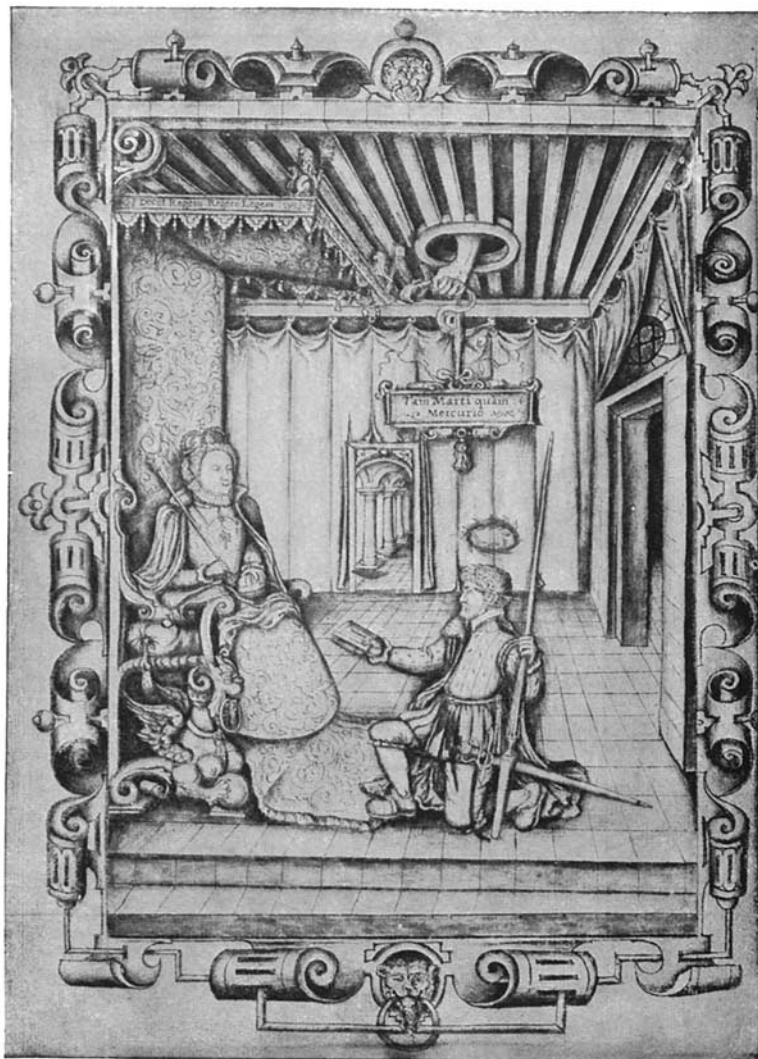
Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00261-5 - Life in Shakespeare's England: A Book of Elizabethan Prose

John Dover Wilson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)



THE QUEEN AS PATRON OF LETTERS

George Gascoigne, poet and dramatist, presenting his *Hemetes the Heremyte* (c. 1579) to Elizabeth

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00261-5 - Life in Shakespeare's England: A Book of Elizabethan
Prose

John Dover Wilson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

LIFE IN
SHAKESPEARE'S ENGLAND

A BOOK OF
ELIZABETHAN PROSE

COMPILED
BY
JOHN DOVER WILSON, C.H.

CAMBRIDGE
AT THE UNIVERSITY PRESS
1956

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00261-5 - Life in Shakespeare's England: A Book of Elizabethan
Prose

John Dover Wilson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

PUBLISHED BY
THE SYNDICS OF THE CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

London Office: Bentley House, N.W.1

American Branch: New York

Agents for Canada, India and Pakistan: Macmillan

First Edition 1911

Second Edition 1913

Reprinted 1915

1920

1925

1926

1939

1945

1947

1949

1956

*Printed in Great Britain at the University Press, Cambridge
(Brooke Crutchley, University Printer)*

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00261-5 - Life in Shakespeare's England: A Book of Elizabethan Prose

John Dover Wilson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00261-5 - Life in Shakespeare's England: A Book of Elizabethan
Prose

John Dover Wilson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

IN MEMORY OF
MY FATHER-IN-LAW
E. C. BALDWIN

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00261-5 - Life in Shakespeare's England: A Book of Elizabethan
Prose

John Dover Wilson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00261-5 - Life in Shakespeare's England: A Book of Elizabethan Prose

John Dover Wilson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

PREFACE

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

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00261-5 - Life in Shakespeare's England: A Book of Elizabethan
Prose

John Dover Wilson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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. M^cKerrow for the extracts taken from his edition of *Nashe*, to Dr W. W. Greg

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00261-5 - Life in Shakespeare's England: A Book of Elizabethan
Prose

John Dover Wilson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00261-5 - Life in Shakespeare's England: A Book of Elizabethan
Prose

John Dover Wilson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

CONTENTS

	PAGE
PREFACE	vii
CHAPTER I. ENGLAND AND THE ENGLISH	I
<i>(Richard II, Henry V, etc)</i>	
England, the English, birth and rank, snobbery, English women.	
PART I	
SHAKESPEARE'S YOUTH, STRATFORD	
1564-1586	
Born 1564: son of a farmer and shopkeeper of Stratford-on-Avon: probably attends the free grammar school of the town	
CHAPTER II. THE COUNTRYSIDE	10
<i>(Midsummer Night's Dream, Induction to the Taming of the Shrew, As You Like It, Winter's Tale)</i>	
§1. COUNTRY-FOLK	10
A country gentleman, a franklin, a farmer, a milkmaid, a shepherd	
§2. SPORT	16
Hunting, football, bowling, a cock-fight, a local play	
§3. FESTIVAL	22
Christmas, Good Friday, Easter, May-day, Robin Hood, the Lord of Misrule	
CHAPTER III. SUPERSTITION	29
<i>(Midsummer Night's Dream, Julius Caesar, Macbeth, Hamlet, King Lear, The Tempest)</i>	
§1. THE NATURE OF SUPERSTITION	29
§2. GHOSTS AND SPIRITS	31
Exorcism	

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00261-5 - Life in Shakespeare's England: A Book of Elizabethan Prose

John Dover Wilson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

CONTENTS

	PAGE
§3. WITCHCRAFT Witches in Scotland, the witches' cauldron, transformation	33
§4. FAIRYLAND	40
§5. ASTROLOGY	45
CHAPTER IV. EDUCATION <i>(Love's Labour's Lost, Merry Wives of Windsor)</i>	48
§1. CHILD AND PARENT Two views of childhood, parents and children	48
§2. THE GRAMMAR-SCHOOL An interesting parallel, the school day, punish- ment, country schoolmasters	51
§3. THE UNIVERSITY The universities of England, the life at Oxford, a young gentleman of the university, a mere scholar	62
§4. TRAVEL The use and abuse of travel, the Italianate Englishman	67

PART II

SHAKESPEARE IN LONDON

1586-1608

Goes to London (? on foot) c. 1586: recognised as a rising dramatist 1592: publishes *Venus and Adonis* 1593: acts before the Queen at Greenwich 1594

CHAPTER V. LONDON <i>(1 and 2 Henry IV, Much Ado About Nothing, Measure for Measure)</i>	74
§1. THE ROAD TO LONDON The state of the roads, means of com- munication, inns, highwaymen	74

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00261-5 - Life in Shakespeare's England: A Book of Elizabethan Prose

John Dover Wilson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

CONTENTS

	PAGE
§2. FIRST IMPRESSIONS OF LONDON	83
A foreign view, the buildings, the Thames, a water-man, London Bridge, Cheapside, a shop-keeper, Paul's walk, noise and bustle	
§3. DISORDERS	91
A busy week for the authorities, duelling and street brawling, constables and watchmen, London at night	
§4. TEMPTATIONS	101
A. Drink: its effects, a fearful example, ale-houses, taverns, English sobriety. B. Tobacco: a tobacco seller, royal disapprobation. C. Dicing and Gaming: cheaters, a gaming-house, false dice, card-sharping. D. Debt and Usury: a usurer, the debtors' prison	
§5. DRESS AND FASHION	121
Fashion in general, gorgeous attire, a dandy, fashion descends, barbers, fashionable ladies, pride of merchants' wives, lap-dogs	
§6. THE PLAGUE	134
The beggar's opportunity, medical treatment, flight from London	
CHAPTER VI. BOOKS AND AUTHORS	139
Patronage, portrait of a poet, an author's complaint, a pot-poet, a worthy poet, ballads and monsters, troubles of authorship, fashion in books, stationers and booksellers	
CHAPTER VII. THE THEATRE	153
<i>(Midsummer Night's Dream, Henry V, Hamlet)</i>	
§1. THEATRICAL CONDITIONS IN 1580	153
Aesthetic and moral condemnation	
§2. PLAYHOUSES AND BEAR-GARDENS	158
The first London theatres, a German at the theatre, structure of a playhouse, playhouses, English and Italian theatres, Paris-garden	

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00261-5 - Life in Shakespeare's England: A Book of Elizabethan Prose

John Dover Wilson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

CONTENTS

	PAGE
§3. THE AUDIENCE	164
General behaviour, a gallant at the playhouse	
§4. THE ACTOR AND HIS CRAFT	170
Shakespeare's opinion, character of a player, magnificence of players' dress, the Queen's players on tour, a royal licence	
§5. PURITAN OPPOSITION TO THE THEATRE	176
Denunciation from Paul's Cross, a sweeping condemnation, attitude of the city authorities, a dramatist's reply, the actors' remonstrance	
CHAPTER VIII. THE COURT	189
<i>(Love's Labour's Lost, Much Ado About Nothing, Hamlet, Historical Plays)</i>	
§1. QUEEN ELIZABETH AT GREENWICH	190
§2. THE COURTIER	192
The ideal, the other side of the picture	
§3. MASQUES AT COURT	197
§4. THE DEATH OF QUEEN ELIZABETH	201

PART III

SHAKESPEARE'S LAST YEARS, STRATFORD
1608-1616

Buys New Place and other property at Stratford 1597: leaves London 1608: writes his last plays *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*: dies 1616

CHAPTER IX. HOUSE AND HOME	207
<i>(Taming of the Shrew, Romeo and Juliet, 2 Henry IV, Coriolanus I. iii, IV. v, The Winter's Tale)</i>	
§1. HOUSES AND FURNITURE	207
§2. GARDENS AND ORCHARDS	211

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00261-5 - Life in Shakespeare's England: A Book of Elizabethan
Prose

John Dover Wilson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

CONTENTS

	PAGE
§3. HOUSEKEEPING AND THE TABLE	213
An English housewife, the table, hospitality, the kitchen, the dairy	
§4. SLEEP AND HEALTH	228
The bedroom, the care of the body, the physician, death	
CHAPTER X. ROGUES AND VAGABONDS	232
<i>(King Lear, The Winter's Tale)</i>	
Rogues and the law, a courtesy man, an Abraham man, rufflers, hookers, two rogues and a parson, a counterfeit crank	
CHAPTER XI. THE SEA	250
<i>(The Merchant of Venice, Antony and Cleopatra, The Tempest)</i>	
England's naval power, a merchant, the sailor's life, the story of the <i>Revenge</i> , discovery, colonization, travellers' tales	
CONCLUSION. AN ELIZABETHAN DAY	273
GLOSSARY AND NOTES	281
INDEX OF AUTHORS	292

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00261-5 - Life in Shakespeare's England: A Book of Elizabethan
Prose

John Dover Wilson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

- George Gascoigne, poet and dramatist, presenting his *Hemetes
the Heremyte* (c. 1579) to Queen Elizabeth *Frontispiece*
- An Elizabethan Huntsman, from Turberville's *Noble Arte of
Venerie*, 1576 *To face p. 16*
- The south bank of the Thames, showing the Globe Theatre
and a bear-garden, from Hollar's *View of London*, 1647 74
- The Southwark Gate of London Bridge, from Visscher's *Map
of London*, 1616 102
- A sixteenth century printer's office, from *A book of trades*,
1568 140
- An Elizabethan stage, from Victor E. Albright's *Shakesperian
Stage*, 1909 154
- Charlecote Hall, from Dr Furnivall's edition of Harrison's
Description of England 208