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978-1-108-0088-9-1 - College Plays: Performed in the University of Cambridge

George Charles Moore Smith

Excerpt

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CAMBRIDGE PLAYS

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OUTLINES OF THEIR HISTORY

OUR chief source of knowledge in regard to the acting of plays in the different colleges of the University of Cambridge apart from that derived from the plays themselves printed or in MS. is the Bursarial Accounts. Unfortunately however this source often fails us. At St John's there are no college accounts extant of earlier date than 1555 and so we have no record of the performance of the plays seen in the college hall by Ascham. At Caius there are no accounts before 1609, though we know of the performance of a play at Caius just thirty years earlier. Even where the accounts exist, their mention of performances known to us from other sources is only haphazard, especially after the earliest period. And where they do mention a performance, more often than not they omit the name of the play.

Long before plays were acted by members of the University in their several colleges, players, musicians and jesters of the town or strollers attached to some great household frequently made their appearance and received an acknowledgement from the colleges of the performances they gave. Entries of such payments are found in the accounts of King's Hall (preserved in Trinity College) as early as Michaelmas 1448-1449 (27 Henry VI).

Payments to the town-waits ('mimis,' 'tubicinibus')

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of Cambridge occur in various college accounts annually throughout the whole period¹. They probably received further payment when called upon, as they frequently were, to provide music at college plays².

The earliest evidence of the production of plays by the members of a college themselves is found in the accounts of King's College. Thus:

1482-83: 'Item sol. Goldyng pro vestimentis per
eundem emptis pro lusoribus erga primum diem
Januarij xx^d

Item sol. Goldyng & Suthey pro expensis circa ludos
in festo Natalis dni vijs ijd^d

¹ The Waits held their office by election by the town. There were three of them. Cooper, *Annals*, II, 62, quotes a minute from the Corporation Day Book showing that on Hock Day (May) 1552 the Commoners of Cambridge agreed that John Richemond and John Clerke should continue waits and the Town minstrels during good behaviour and that Benet Pryme should be the third if he would. This was apparently an unsuccessful attempt to patch up a quarrel, as Mere on 2nd Feb. 1556/7 (see J. Lamb, *Letters, Statutes, etc.*, 1838) while mentioning that Benet Pryme and his men were present at King's College when Mere dined there, distinguishes them clearly from the waits of the town. The same distinction is made in the accounts of the Steward of Trinity College for 1557-8: 'gyuen in rewarde vnto wydowe prymes men both for shewes & playes & y^e whayttes rewarde—xx^s.'

As late as 1820 the waits of Westminster held office under the High Constable and Court of Burgesses and allowed of no interlopers (Chambers' *Book of Days*, II, 743).

² Cp. the accounts of Christ's, 1531, 1532, 1553, 1559, King's, 1552 (Benet Pryme), 1576, Trinity, 1561, 1669, Corpus, 1576.

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1484-85: '(Liber Communarum. Term. Nativ. 5th week.) Item pro communis ij pictorum per totam septimaniam pro le disgysyns erga festum purificationis

xvj^d

ibid. 6th week. Item pro communis duorum pictorum per v. dies pro le disgysyng

xx^d

1496-97: 'Item sol. m. Stalis pro expensis suis circa ludos tempore natalis dni anno xii^o

xx^s

1508-09: 'Item xiiij^o die Januarij m. Stephins pro lusu tempore Natalis dni

xx^s

1510-11: 'Item m. West pro lusu in tempore Natalis dni

xx^s

1535-36: 'Item in Regardis datis Mro Viceproposito pro supervisione ludorum in tempore Natalis dni

xx^s

1536-37: 'Item in Regardis datis Mro Rivete pro supervisione Ludorum in tempore Natalis dni

xx^s

1541-42: 'Item pro supervisione ludorum hoc anno

xx^s

1544-45: 'Item pro supervisione ludi natalis

xx^s

1545-46: 'Item m. Parkyn pro expensis suis circa ludos natalicios

xx^s

1548-49: 'Item pro supervisione ludorum tempore natalis

lvij^s vij^d

At King's College down to this date we have no information of the character of the plays performed. Such indications we get first in two items of the accounts of King's Hall.

1510-11: 'Item solutum est pro comedia Terentij in Ludo

vi^s vij^d

1516-17: 'Item in regardis m^{ro} thrope pro ludo puerorum suorum therencij

iiij^s iiij^d

Mr Thrope was 'locum tenens' or vice-master of King's Hall at this time, the master being apparently non-resident. The second item makes it clear that his

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pupils presented a play of Terence in the winter of 1516–17, and, as Terence was not likely to be acted by strolling players, we may conclude that the performance in 1510–11 was also given by undergraduates of King's Hall.

Although the accounts of King's Hall are preserved down to the year 1543 when it was about to be dissolved, they contain no other mention of plays acted by members of the Hall. It is therefore extremely fortunate that they show that Terence was acted in Cambridge as early as 1510 and that the Renaissance influence was by that date already at work. No doubt it was some time before this influence became predominant. The plays which Bale assigns to Thomas Artour, fellow of St John's 1520–1532, to judge by their titles (*Microcosmus* and *Mundus Plumbeus*) partook of the character of Moralities. But at Christmas 1536 Aristophanes' *Plutus* was acted at St John's in Greek with the Erasman pronunciation and about 1540 Thomas Watson's Latin tragedy *Absalon*, an imitation of the tragedies of Seneca, was acted at the same college.

Aristophanes' *Pax* was given at Trinity in Greek, probably at Christmas 1546, the first Christmas in the life of the college. It must have been either that Christmas or after 1553 that Christopherson's *Jephthes* was played, if it was ever played at all, i.e. at Trinity. The Greek version is extant in two manuscripts, to be dated c. 1544¹: the Latin version, if it

¹ Cp. Boas, *University Drama*, p. 45.

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ever existed, is lost. After this we hear no more of plays in Greek, but the original Latin comedies of Plautus and Terence and the original Latin tragedies of Seneca continued to be given on college stages at least down to 1583.

Dr Boas' book gives such an admirable account of the development of the Academic drama till 1603 that it will not be necessary to do more than remind his readers of the main features, and add a few supplementary touches.

Seneca's tragedies and Plautus and Terence's comedies were gradually replaced on college stages by modern imitations of them—borrowed or original—and by other forms of drama, generally in Latin, occasionally in English. Tragic and serious subjects were provided by the Bible, and Cambridge saw Ziegler's (?) *Heli* (1548), Christopherson's *Jephthes* (1546 or 1555–6?), Birck's (?) *Sapientia Solomonis* (1559–60), Buchanan's (?) *Baptistes* and Foxe's *Christus Triumphans* (1562–3), Udall's *Ezechias* (in English) (1564), Legge's (perhaps Buchanan's) *Jephthes* (1566). Protestantism found a controversial weapon in Naogeorgus' *Pammachius* (1545) and in the show of *The Imprisoned Bishops* (1564). The 'Prodigal Son' plays of the continent seemed to provide edification for young students and they too were staged on our boards: *Hypocrisis* in 1548/9, *Acolastus* in 1560–1, *Asotus* in 1565–6.

English history furnished its lessons of Senecan morality when Dr Legge's *Richardus Tertius* in

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three actions was presented at St John's in the spring of 1578/9¹.

Cambridge, however, as Dr Boas has pointed out, was especially given to Romantic Comedy. In this genre it composed its own plays, though generally on the basis of some Italian play or story. One is inclined to date the beginnings of Italian influence in the last quarter of the 16th century: certainly *Gammer Gurton's Needle* (c. 1552?) knows nothing of it, but is a farcical comedy of English invention owing a little of its form to Plautus. Yet there is evidence hard to get over, evidence which was not known to Dr Boas, that before *Gammer Gurton* was written, the Italian influence had already operated. The play *Lælia*, based on a French translation of *Gli Ingannati*, has been assigned to the year 1594/5 when it was acted at Queens' College before the Earl of Essex and other noblemen. Yet among the archives of Queens' there is a paper of the date 1546/7 which is headed 'New made garmentes at the comœdie of Lælia Modenas.' One cannot say that the play as we know it had not been rewritten later. But the fact that it was produced at Queens' College in 1594/5 suggests that those responsible for it then had the old Queens' play before them. And one may ask, if they had not had it, would they have been likely to hit on a foreign play for imitation written and printed so many years earlier?

¹ Reference to the College accounts will make it almost certain that this date and not 1579/80, as generally given, is the right one.

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Assuming however that a Latin version of the *Lælia* story was produced in 1546/7, there is a gap in time before the next comedies known to us—namely, Fraunce's *Victoria* (c. 1579), *Hymenæus* of about the same date and the three plays of c. 1597 (introduced by the revived *Lælia* of 1594/5), *Silvanus*, *Hispanus*, and *Machiavellus*. All five were produced at St John's.

Meanwhile plays had been written in which the interest was sought in topical satire. They were headed by *Pedantius* (1581), the author of which is now ascertained to have been Edward Forset, Fellow of Trinity¹. Its butt was Gabriel Harvey. The three *Parnassus* plays of St John's College satirizing in English verse the woeful prospects of the poor student were acted between 1598 and 1602. In 1599 the coarse but brilliant *Club Law* embodied the contempt and hatred of young University men for the civic authorities of Cambridge—thus taking up again a theme which had been treated in 1582/3 by one Mudde of Pembroke in a little play now lost.

Meanwhile another Italian genre, Pastoral, had made its appearance with a Latin version of L. Groto's *Penitimento Amorosus*, *Parthenia*, and another of Guarini's *Pastor Fido*, *Pastor Fidas* (c. 1595–1600?). Two writers within the next twenty years were conspicuous pastoralists, Phineas Fletcher, who produced an English comedy at King's in 1606, and his English piscatory, *Sicelides*, in 1614/5, and Dr Samuel Brooke of Trinity whose *Scyros* (a version

¹ See *Times Literary Supplement*, 10 Oct. 1918.

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of Bonarelli's *Filli di Sciro*) was acted in 1612/3 before Prince Charles and the Elector Palatine, and whose *Melanthe* entertained King James in 1614/5.

In the first twenty years of the 17th century there was a curious revival of the morality-type of play, in which the characters were abstract conceptions. It was perhaps suggested by the Oxford play *Bellum Grammaticale*, which had an Oxford successor in Zouch's *Fallacy* (called in its revised form *The Sophister*). Three Cambridge plays of this type, all in English, are possibly all the work of Thomas Tomkis of Trinity (author of the English comedy *Albumazar* acted before King James in 1614/5). These are *Lingua*, probably produced as early as 1602, the imperfect *Locus, Corpus*, etc., c. 1604/5, and *Pathomachia* (perhaps never acted), (c. 1617). We may also more doubtfully assign to Tomkis the two shows, *Band, Cuffe and Ruffe* (entitled in its revised form *Exchange Ware*) and *Worke for Cutlers*. They were both printed in 1615, the former being entered on the Stat. Reg. as 'A Dialogue between Ruffe, Cuffe and Band' to Miles Patricke, 10 Feb. 1614/5, the second on 4 July 1615. Other plays of this type are in Latin, such as the anonymous play, *Microcosmus*, etc. (Trinity MS. R. 10. 4), *Stoicus Vapulans* acted at St John's in 1618, and *Fucus* (Queens' 1622/3). Meanwhile romantic and satirical comedy continued its course with *Leander* (1598/9 and 1602/3) and *Labyrinthus* (1602/3)—both by Walter Hawkesworth of Trinity, *Adelphe* (1611/2)

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by S. Brooke of Trinity, *Albumazar* (1614/5) by T. Tomkis of Trinity, *Euribates* (?1616) by Aquila Cruso of Caius, *Fortunia* (or *Susenbrotus*)—acted by Trinity men before King James and Prince Charles in 1616, perhaps at Royston—*Fraus Honesta* by Edmund Stub, Trinity (1618/9 and 1629), *Pseudomagia* by W. Mewe, Emmanuel (c. 1625), *Cancer* (of unknown date and college), *Paria* by T. Vincent of Trinity acted before King Charles 1627/8—the two last adapted respectively from L. Salviati's *Il Granchio* and E. Luchetti's *Le due Sorelle Rivali*,—P. Hausted's *Senile Odium* (Queens', ?1628/9)—possibly *Senilis Amor* (c. 1635/6).

Satire of Common Lawyers, especially of the Recorder of Cambridge, had found expression in *Ignoramus*, acted before King James twice in 1615, satire of Jesuits and Puritans in J. Hacket's *Loiola*, acted at Trinity before King James in 1622/3, and in the semi-morality *Fucus Histriomastix* by R. Ward of Queens', acted before the king at Newmarket a week or two later. The anti-Puritan spirit appears also in Hausted's *Rivall Friends*, 1631/2, W. Johnson's *Valetudinarium* (Queens', 1637/8) and A. Cowley's *Nafragium Foculare* (Trinity, 1638/9). Between 1626 and 1631 we must put Randolph's witty productions, *Aristippus*, *The Conceited Peddler*, *The Entertainment* (*Muses Looking-Glasse*), *Hey for Honesty*, etc. *Aristippus* was presented at Trinity 'in a private shew,' *The Conceited Peddler* 'in a strange shew'; it does not appear if *Hey for Honesty*

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was ever acted. Hausted's *Rivall Friends*, and Randolph's *Jealous Lovers*, were acted before King Charles and Queen Mary in 1631/2, A. Cowley's *The Guardian* before Prince Charles in 1641/2. All three are of course in English. It is hard to decide if the anonymous *Fraus Pia*, supposing it to be a Cambridge play, dates from this time or from the Restoration.

Before the outbreak of Civil War, most colleges had ceased to give plays. After 1620 we hear no more of plays at St John's, so famous for its plays in earlier times: no more of the more sporadic performances which used to take place at King's, Jesus, Christ's, Peterhouse, Caius. Trinity and Queens' seem to have been the only colleges left in which plays were still performed with distinction. Queens' was, as we have seen, especially active in the thirties when it had Peter Hausted to set against Tom Randolph of Trinity. Before the end of the decade it had built itself a Comedy House:

Alas regardless of their doom
The little victims play.

In 1642 Puritanism, which the prologue of *Fucus* (1622/3) had described as striving

ut comœdias quotannis parturientem Academiam
abortum facere cogeret,

at last achieved its purpose. For eighteen years no more plays were presented and even the Restoration brought but a flickering revival.

It is time to turn back from a résumé of the types