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The Age of Shakespeare

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TO THE MEMORY OF CHARLES LAMB

When stark oblivion froze above their names
Whose glory shone round Shakespeare's, bright as now,
One eye beheld their light shine full as fame's,
One hand unveiled it: this did none but thou.
Love, stronger than forgetfulness and sleep,
Rose, and bade memory rise, and England hear:
And all the harvest left so long to reap
Shone ripe and rich in every sheaf and ear.

A child it was who first by grace of thine
Communed with gods who share with thee their shrine:
Elder than thou wast ever now I am,
Now that I lay before thee in thanksgiving
Praise of dead men divine and everliving
Whose praise is thine as thine is theirs, Charles Lamb.

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THE AGE OF SHAKESPEARE

CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE

The first great English poet was the father of English tragedy and the creator of English blank verse. Chaucer and Spenser were great writers and great men: they shared between them every gift which goes to the making of a poet except the one which alone can make a poet, in the proper sense of the word, great. Neither pathos nor humor nor fancy nor invention will suffice for that: no poet is great as a poet whom no one could ever pretend to recognize as sublime. Sublimity is the test of imagination as distinguished from invention or from fancy: and the first English poet whose powers can be called sublime was Christopher Marlowe.

The majestic and exquisite excellence of various lines and passages in Marlowe's first play must be admitted to relieve, if it cannot be allowed to redeem, the stormy monotony of Titanic truculence which blusters like a simoom through the noisy course of its ten fierce acts. With many and heavy faults, there is something of genuine greatness in "Tamburlaine the Great"; and for two grave reasons it must always be remembered with distinction and mentioned with honor. It is the first poem ever written in English blank verse, as distinguished from mere rhymeless decasyllabics; and it contains one of the noblest passages—perhaps, indeed, the noblest in the literature of the world—ever written by one of the greatest masters of poetry in loving praise of the glorious delights and sublime submission to the everlasting limits of his art. In its highest and most distinctive qualities, in unfaltering and infallible command of the right note of music and the proper tone of color for the finest touches of poetic execution, no poet of the most elaborate modern school, working at ease upon every consummate resource of luxurious learning and leisurely refinement, has ever excelled the best and most representative work of a man who had literally no models before him, and probably or evidently was often, if not always, compelled to write against time for his living.

The just and generous judgment passed by Goethe on the "Faustus" of his English predecessor in tragic treatment of the same subject is somewhat more than sufficient to counterbalance the slighting or the sneering references to that magnificent poem which might have been expected from the ignorance of Byron or the incompetence of Hallam. And the particular note of merit observed, the special point of the praise conferred, by the great German poet should be no less sufficient to dispose of the vulgar misconception yet lingering among sciolists and pretenders to criticism, which regards a writer than whom no man was ever born with a finer or a stronger instinct for perfection of excellence in execution as a mere noble savage of letters, a rough self-taught sketcher or scribbler of crude and rude genius, whose unhewn blocks of verse had in them some veins of rare enough metal to be quarried and polished by Shakespeare. What most impressed the author of "Faust" in the work of Marlowe was a quality the want of which in the author of "Manfred" is proof enough to consign his best work to the second or third class at most. "How greatly it is all planned!" the first requisite of all great work, and one of which the highest genius possible to a greatly gifted barbarian could by no possibility understand the nature or conceive the existence. That Goethe "had thought of translating it" is perhaps hardly less precious a tribute to its greatness than the fact that it has been actually and admirably translated by the matchless translator of Shakespeare—the son of Victor Hugo, whose labor of love may thus be said to have made another point in common, and forged as it were another link of union, between Shakespeare and the young master of Shakespeare's youth. Of all great poems in dramatic form it is perhaps the most remarkable for absolute singleness of aim and simplicity of construction; yet is it wholly free from all possible imputation of monotony or aridity. "Tamburlaine" is monotonous in the general roll and flow of its stately and sonorous verse through a noisy wilderness of perpetual bluster and slaughter; but the unity of tone and purpose in "Doctor Faustus" is not unrelieved by change of manner and variety of incident. The comic scenes, written evidently with as little of labor as of relish, are for the most part scarcely more than transcripts, thrown into the form of dialogue, from a popular prose *History of Dr. Faustus*, and therefore should be set down as little to the discredit as to the credit of the poet. Few masterpieces of any age in any language can stand beside this tragic poem—it has

hardly the structure of a play—for the qualities of terror and splendor, for intensity of purpose and sublimity of note. In the vision of Helen, for example, the intense perception of loveliness gives actual sublimity to the sweetness and radiance of mere beauty in the passionate and spontaneous selection of words the most choice and perfect; and in like manner the sublimity of simplicity in Marlowe's conception and expression of the agonies endured by Faustus under the immediate imminence of his doom gives the highest note of beauty, the quality of absolute fitness and propriety, to the sheer straightforwardness of speech in which his agonizing horror finds vent ever more and more terrible from the first to the last equally beautiful and fearful verse of that tremendous monologue which has no parallel in all the range of tragedy.

It is now a commonplace of criticism to observe and regret the decline of power and interest after the opening acts of "The Jew of Malta." This decline is undeniable, though even the latter part of the play is not wanting in rough energy and a coarse kind of interest; but the first two acts would be sufficient foundation for the durable fame of a dramatic poet. In the blank verse of Milton alone, who perhaps was hardly less indebted than Shakespeare was before him to Marlowe as the first English master of word-music in its grander forms, has the glory or the melody of passages in the opening soliloquy of Barabas been possibly surpassed. The figure of the hero before it degenerates into caricature is as finely touched as the poetic execution is excellent; and the rude and rapid sketches of the minor characters show at least some vigor and vivacity of touch.

In "Edward II." the interest rises and the execution improves as visibly and as greatly with the course of the advancing story as they decline in "The Jew of Malta." The scene of the king's deposition at Kenilworth is almost as much finer in tragic effect and poetic quality as it is shorter and less elaborate than the corresponding scene in Shakespeare's "King Richard II." The terror of the death scene undoubtedly rises into horror; but this horror is with skilful simplicity of treatment preserved from passing into disgust. In pure poetry, in sublime and splendid imagination, this tragedy is excelled by "Doctor Faustus"; in dramatic power and positive impression of natural effect it is as certainly the masterpiece of Marlowe. It was almost inevitable, in the hands of any poet but Shakespeare, that none of

the characters represented should be capable of securing or even exciting any finer sympathy or more serious interest than attends on the mere evolution of successive events or the mere display of emotions (except always in the great scene of the deposition) rather animal than spiritual in their expression of rage or tenderness or suffering. The exact balance of mutual effect, the final note of scenic harmony between ideal conception and realistic execution, is not yet struck with perfect accuracy of touch and security of hand; but on this point also Marlowe has here come nearer by many degrees to Shakespeare than any of his other predecessors have ever come near to Marlowe.

Of "The Massacre at Paris" it is impossible to judge fairly from the garbled fragment of its genuine text, which is all that has come down to us. To Mr. Collier, among numberless other obligations, we owe the discovery of a striking passage excised in the piratical edition which gives us the only version extant of this unlucky play; and which, it must be allowed, contains nothing of quite equal value. This is obviously an occasional and polemical work, and being as it is overcharged with the anti-Catholic passion of the time, has a typical quality which gives it some empirical significance and interest. That anti-papal ardor is indeed the only note of unity in a rough and ragged chronicle which shambles and stumbles onward from the death of Queen Jeanne of Navarre to the murder of the last Valois. It is possible to conjecture what it would be fruitless to affirm, that it gave a hint in the next century to Nathaniel Lee for his far superior and really admirable tragedy on the same subject, issued ninety-seven years after the death of Marlowe.

The tragedy of "Dido, Queen of Carthage," was probably completed for the stage after that irreparable and incalculable loss to English letters by Thomas Nash, the worthiest English precursor of Swift in vivid, pure, and passionate prose, embodying the most terrible and splendid qualities of a personal and social satirist; a man gifted also with some fair faculty of elegiac and even lyric verse, but in nowise qualified to put on the buskin left behind him by the "famous gracer of tragedians," as Marlowe had already been designated by their common friend Greene from among the worthiest of his fellows. In this somewhat thin-spun and evidently hasty play a servile fidelity to the text of Virgil's narrative has naturally

resulted in the failure which might have been expected from an attempt at once to transcribe what is essentially inimitable and to reproduce it under the hopelessly alien conditions of dramatic adaptation. The one really noble passage in a generally feeble and incomposite piece of work is, however, uninspired by the unattainable model to which the dramatists have been only too obsequious in their subservience.

It is as nearly certain as anything can be which depends chiefly upon cumulative and collateral evidence that the better part of what is best in the serious scenes of "King Henry VI." is mainly the work of Marlowe. That he is, at any rate, the principal author of the second and third plays passing under that name among the works of Shakespeare, but first and imperfectly printed as "The Contention between the two Famous Houses of York and Lancaster," can hardly be now a matter of debate among competent judges. The crucial difficulty of criticism in this matter is to determine, if indeed we should not rather say to conjecture, the authorship of the humorous scenes in prose, showing as they generally do a power of comparatively high and pure comic realism to which nothing in the acknowledged works of any pre-Shakespearean dramatist is even remotely comparable. Yet, especially in the original text of these scenes as they stand unpurified by the ultimate revision of Shakespeare, there are tones and touches which recall rather the clownish horseplay and homely ribaldry of his predecessors than anything in the lighter interludes of his very earliest plays. We find the same sort of thing which we find in their writings, only better done than they usually do it, rather than such work as Shakespeare's a little worse done than usual. And even in the final text of the tragic or metrical scenes the highest note struck is always, with one magnificent and unquestionable exception, rather in the key of Marlowe at his best than of Shakespeare while yet in great measure his disciple.

It is another commonplace of criticism to affirm that Marlowe had not a touch of comic genius, not a gleam of wit in him or a twinkle of humor: but it is an indisputable fact that he had. In "The Massacre at Paris," the soliloquy of the soldier lying in wait for the minion of Henri III. has the same very rough but very real humor as a passage in the "Contention" which was cancelled by the reviser. The same hand is unmistakable in both these broad and boyish out-

breaks of unseemly but undeniable fun: and if we might wish it rather less indecorous, we must admit that the tradition which denies all sense of humor and all instinct of wit to the first great poet of England is no less unworthy of serious notice or elaborate refutation than the charges and calumnies of an informer who was duly hanged the year after Marlowe's death. For if the same note of humor is struck in an undoubted play of Marlowe's and in a play of disputed authorship, it is evident that the rest of the scene in the latter play must also be Marlowe's. And in that unquestionable case the superb and savage humor of the terribly comic scenes which represent with such rough magnificence of realism the riot of Jack Cade and his ruffians through the ravaged streets of London must be recognizable as no other man's than his. It is a pity we have not before us for comparison the comic scenes or burlesque interludes of "Tamburlaine" which the printer or publisher, as he had the impudence to avow in his prefatory note, purposely omitted and left out.

The author of *A Study of Shakespeare* was therefore wrong, and utterly wrong, when in a book issued some quarter of a century ago he followed the lead of Mr. Dyce in assuming that because the author of "Doctor Faustus" and "The Jew of Malta" "was as certainly" — and certainly it is difficult to deny that whether as a mere transcriber or as an original dealer in pleasantries he sometimes was — "one of the least and worst among jesters as he was one of the best and greatest among poets," he could not have had a hand in the admirable comic scenes of "The Taming of the Shrew." For it is now, I should hope, unnecessary to insist that the able and conscientious editor to whom his fame and his readers owe so great a debt was over-hasty in assuming and asserting that he was a poet "to whom, we have reason to believe, nature had denied even a moderate talent for the humorous." The serious or would-be poetical scenes of the play are as unmistakably the work of an imitator as are most of the better passages in "Titus Andronicus" and "King Edward III." Greene or Peele may be responsible for the bad poetry, but there is no reason to suppose that the great poet whose mannerisms he imitated with so stupid a servility was incapable of the good fun.

Had every copy of Marlowe's boyish version or perversion of Ovid's *Elegies* deservedly perished in the flames to which it was

judicially condemned by the sentence of a brace of prelates, it is possible that an occasional bookworm, it is certain that no poetical student, would have deplored its destruction, if its demerits—hardly relieved, as his first competent editor has happily remarked, by the occasional incidence of a fine and felicitous couplet—could in that case have been imagined. His translation of the first book of Lucan alternately rises above the original and falls short of it; often inferior to the Latin in point and weight of expressive rhetoric, now and then brightened by a clearer note of poetry and lifted into a higher mood of verse. Its terseness, vigor, and purity of style would in any case have been praiseworthy, but are nothing less than admirable, if not wonderful, when we consider how close the translator has on the whole (in spite of occasional slips into inaccuracy) kept himself to the most rigid limit of literal representation, phrase by phrase and often line by line. The really startling force and felicity of occasional verses are worthier of remark than the inevitable stiffness and heaviness of others, when the technical difficulty of such a task is duly taken into account.

One of the most faultless lyrics and one of the loveliest fragments in the whole range of descriptive and fanciful poetry would have secured a place for Marlowe among the memorable men of his epoch, even if his plays had perished with himself. His "Passionate Shepherd" remains ever since unrivalled in its way—a way of pure fancy and radiant melody without break or lapse. The untitled fragment, on the other hand, has been very closely rivalled, perhaps very happily imitated, but only by the greatest lyric poet of England—by Shelley alone. Marlowe's poem of "Hero and Leander," closing with the sunrise which closes the night of the lovers' union, stands alone in its age, and far ahead of the work of any possible competitor between the death of Spenser and the dawn of Milton. In clear mastery of narrative and presentation, in melodious ease and simplicity of strength, it is not less pre-eminent than in the adorable beauty and impeccable perfection of separate lines or passages.

The place and the value of Christopher Marlowe as a leader among English poets it would be almost impossible for historical criticism to overestimate. To none of them all, perhaps, have so many of the greatest among them been so deeply and so directly indebted. Nor was ever any great writer's influence upon his fel-

lows more utterly and unmixedly an influence for good. He first, and he alone, guided Shakespeare into the right way of work; his music, in which there is no echo of any man's before him, found its own echo in the more prolonged but hardly more exalted harmony of Milton's. He is the greatest discoverer, the most daring and inspired pioneer, in all our poetic literature. Before him there was neither genuine blank verse nor genuine tragedy in our language. After his arrival the way was prepared, the paths were made straight, for Shakespeare.

JOHN WEBSTER

There were many poets in the age of Shakespeare who make us think, as we read them, that the characters in their plays could not have spoken more beautifully, more powerfully, more effectively, under the circumstances imagined for the occasion of their utterance: there are only two who make us feel that the words assigned to the creatures of their genius are the very words they must have said, the only words they could have said, the actual words they assuredly did say. Mere literary power, mere poetic beauty, mere charm of passionate or pathetic fancy, we find in varying degrees dispersed among them all alike; but the crowning gift of imagination, the power to make us realize that thus and not otherwise it was, that thus and not otherwise it must have been, was given—except by exceptional fits and starts—to none of the poets of their time but only to Shakespeare and to Webster.

Webster, it may be said, was but as it were a limb of Shakespeare: but that limb, it might be replied, was the right arm. "The kingly-crownèd head, the vigilant eye," whose empire of thought and whose reach of vision no other man's faculty has ever been found competent to match, are Shakespeare's alone forever: but the force of hand, the fire of heart, the fervor of pity, the sympathy of passion, not poetic or theatric merely, but actual and immediate, are qualities in which the lesser poet is not less certainly or less unmistakably pre-eminent than the greater. And there is no third to be set beside them: not even if we turn from their contemporaries to Shel-

ley himself. All that Beatrice says in *The Cenci* is beautiful and conceivable and admirable: but unless we except her exquisite last words—and even they are more beautiful than inevitable—we shall hardly find what we find in "King Lear" and "The White Devil," "Othello" and "The Duchess of Malfy"—the tone of convincing reality; the note, as a critic of our own day might call it, of certitude.

There are poets—in our own age, as in all past ages—from whose best work it might be difficult to choose at a glance some verse sufficient to establish their claim—great as their claim may be—to be remembered forever; and who yet may be worthy of remembrance among all but the highest. Webster is not one of these: though his fame assuredly does not depend upon the merit of a casual passage here or there, it would be easy to select from any one of his representative plays such examples of the highest, the purest, the most perfect power, as can be found only in the works of the greatest among poets. There is not, as far as my studies have ever extended, a third English poet to whom these words might rationally be attributed by the conjecture of a competent reader:

We cease to grieve, cease to be fortune's slaves,
Nay, cease to die, by dying.

There is a depth of severe sense in them, a height of heroic scorn, or a dignity of quiet cynicism, which can scarcely be paralleled in the bitterest or the fiercest effusions of John Marston or Cyril Tourneur or Jonathan Swift. Nay, were they not put into the mouth of a criminal cynic, they would not seem unworthy of Epictetus. There is nothing so grand in the part of Edmund; the one figure in Shakespeare whose aim in life, whose centre of character, is one with the view or the instinct of Webster's two typical villains. Some touches in the part of Flamineo suggest, if not a conscious imitation, an unconscious reminiscence of that prototype: but the essential and radical originality of Webster's genius is shown in the difference of accent with which the same savage and sarcastic philosophy of self-interest finds expression through the snarl and sneer of his ambitious cynic. Monsters as they may seem of unnatural egotism and unallayed ferocity, the one who dies penitent, though his repentance be as sudden if not as suspicious as any ever wrought by mi-

raculous conversion, dies as thoroughly in character as the one who takes leave of life in a passion of scorn and defiant irony which hardly passes off at last into a mood of mocking and triumphant resignation. There is a cross of heroism in almost all Webster's characters which preserves the worst of them from such hatefulness as disgusts us in certain of Fletcher's or of Ford's: they have in them some salt of manhood, some savor of venturesome and humorous resolution, which reminds us of the heroic age in which the genius that begot them was born and reared—the age of Richard Grenville and Francis Drake, Philip Sidney and William Shakespeare.

The earliest play of Webster's now surviving—if a work so piteously mutilated and defaced can properly be said to survive—is a curious example of the combined freedom and realism with which recent or even contemporary history was habitually treated on the stage during the last years of the reign of Queen Elizabeth. The noblest poem known to me of this peculiar kind is the play of "Sir Thomas More," first printed by Mr. Dyce in 1844 for the Shakespeare Society: the worst must almost certainly be that "Chronicle History of Thomas Lord Cromwell" which the infallible verdict of German intuition has discovered to be "not only unquestionably Shakespeare's, but worthy to be classed among his best and maturest works." About midway between these two I should be inclined to rank "The Famous History of Sir Thomas Wyatt," a mangled and deformed abridgment of a tragedy by Dekker and Webster on the story of Lady Jane Grey. In this tragedy, as in the two comedies due to the collaboration of the same poets, it appears to me more than probable that Dekker took decidedly the greater part. The shambling and slipshod metre, which seems now and then to hit by mere chance on some pure and tender note of simple and exquisite melody—the lazy vivacity and impulsive inconsequence of style—the fitful sort of slovenly inspiration, with interludes of absolute and headlong collapse—are qualities by which a very novice in the study of dramatic form may recognize the reckless and unmistakable presence of Dekker. The curt and grim precision of Webster's tone, his terse and pungent force of compressed rhetoric, will be found equally difficult to trace in any of these three plays. "Northward Ho!" a clever, coarse, and vigorous study of the realistic sort, has not a note of poetry in it, but is more coherent, more sensi-

bly conceived and more ably constructed, than the rambling history of Wyatt or the hybrid amalgam of prosaic and romantic elements in the compound comedy of "Westward Ho!" All that is of any great value in this amorphous and incongruous product of inventive impatience and impetuous idleness can be as distinctly traced to the hand of Dekker as the crowning glories of "The Two Noble Kinsmen" can be traced to the hand of Shakespeare. Any poet, even of his time, might have been proud of these verses, but the accent of them is unmistakable as that of Dekker.

Go, let music
Charm with her excellent voice an awful silence
Through all this building, that her sphery soul
May, on the wings of air, in thousand forms
Invisibly fly, yet be enjoyed.

This delicate fluency and distilled refinement of expression ought properly, one would say, to have belonged to a poet of such careful and self-respectful genius as Tennyson's: whereas in the very next speech of the same speaker we stumble over such a phrase as that which closes the following sentence:

We feed, wear rich attires, and strive to cleave
The stars with marble towers, fight battles, spend
Our blood to buy us names, *and, in iron hold,*
Will we eat roots, to imprison fugitive gold.

Which he who can parse, let him scan, and he who can scan, let him construe. It is alike incredible and certain that the writer of such exquisite and blameless verse as that in which the finer scenes of "Old Fortunatus" and "The Honest Whore" are so smoothly and simply and naturally written should have been capable of writing whole plays in this headlong and halting fashion, as helpless and graceless as the action of a spavined horse or a cripple who should attempt to run.

It is difficult to say what part of these plays should be assigned to Webster. Their rough realistic humor, with its tone of somewhat

coarse-grained good-nature, strikes the habitual note of Dekker's comic style: there is nothing of the fierce and scornful intensity, the ardor of passionate and compressed contempt, which distinguishes the savagely humorous satire of Webster and of Marston, and makes it hopeless to determine by intrinsic evidence how little or how much was added by Webster in the second edition to the original text of Marston's *Malcontent*: unless—which appears to me not unreasonable—we assume that the printer of that edition lied or blundered after the manner of his contemporary kind in attributing on the title-page—as apparently he meant to attribute—any share in the additional scenes or speeches to the original author of the play. In any case, the passages thus added to that grimmest and most sombre of tragicomedies are in such exact keeping with the previous text that the keenest scent of the veriest blood-hound among critics could not detect a shade of difference in the savor.

The text of either comedy is generally very fair—as free from corruption as could reasonably be expected. The text of "Sir Thomas Wyatt" is corrupt as well as mutilated. Even in Mr. Dyce's second edition I have noted, not without astonishment, the following flagrant errors left still to glare on us from the distorted and disfigured page. In the sixth scene a single speech of Arundel's contains two of the most palpably preposterous:

The obligation wherein we all stood bound

* * * * * *

Cannot be concealed without great reproach

To us and to our issue.

We should of course read "cancelled" for "concealed": the sense of the context and the exigence of the verse cry alike aloud for the correction. In the sixteenth line from this we come upon an equally obvious error:

Advice in this I hold it better far,

To keep the course we run, than, seeking change,

Hazard our lives, our honors, and the realm.