

RECORDS OF EARLY ENGLISH DRAMA

Pre-publication Collections

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Eton College Introduction by Alexandra F. Johnston

Eton was founded in 1440 by King Henry VI as 'Kynges College of Our Ladye of Eton besyde Windesore' to provide free education for 70 poor boys who would then go on to King's College, Cambridge, which he founded 1441. The two institutions were closely connected. The dramatic records of the school include not only evidence of the plays put on by the boys but also the Boy Bishop inversion of order ceremony on St Nicholas day (Dec. 6) and payments made to the entertainers of other people. These payments are almost entirely to the entertainers of the royal house presumably when the sovereign was in residence in Windsor Castle across the Thames from the school.

Playmaking was considered important training for the boys, most of whom would eventually have careers in public life – particularly as priests or lawyers. In 1561, William Malim, the then Headmaster, wrote *Consuetudinarium Vetus Scholae Etonensis* describing the rules and daily life of the school probably for the inspectors who visited the school that year. He wrote that although 'the art of the actors a trivial one' it taught the boys 'the action of orators' and 'gesture or movements of the body' as nothing else did as well as how to speak with 'acumen and wit.'

With the exception of the founding statutes and Malim's *Consuetudinarium*, all the records of playing in Eton are found in financial accounts. The evidence for actual plays being acted by the boys themselves begins in 1470-71 when five shillings was paid to a college functionary called John Waters who was sent to London 'for costumes made in London for dressing players'. The next reference is to making properties for the plays in 1485-6. These seem to be for plays that were performed by the boys at Christmas time. There is no other payment for 'in house' productions until 1519-20 when costumes for the play are once again being made this time by someone called simply 'George'. However, there is reason to believe that plays had been being performed in the intervening 35 years. In 1519, William Horman published his *Vulgaria*, a collection of phrases and sentences in English for schoolboys to translate into Latin. Horman entered Winchester College in 1468 and went up to New College Oxford where he received his MA in 1483. He became headmaster of Eton 1486 where he was

until 1494 when he moved to Winchester as headmaster – a post he held for seven years before returning to Eton in 1501 where he became a fellow or a member of the governing body of the school until his death in 1535. *Vulgaria* was published in 1519 during this second period of association with Eton. There are several sentences that Horman provided for translation that provide us with hints about the plays he saw in both Eton and Winchester and elsewhere:

‘we haue played a comedie of greke’, ‘we haue played a comedy of latten’ (p. 87); ‘In solemne shewynges: that be one a nyghtis tyme men hange vp mastis full of burnyng lampis;’ (pp. 191v-2); ‘Let vs daunce a comedy daunce’, ‘Let us daunce a tragedy daunce’ (p. 278v); ‘He can pley the desard with a contrefet face properly’ ‘We lacke pleyers garments both for sad partis and mad’ (p. 280); ‘The apparel of this pley coste me moche money’ (p. 280v); ‘I am sent for: to playe well a parte in a playe’ (p. 281); ‘I am a pryncipall player;’ ‘I delyte to se enterludis’ (p. 281v); ‘He put me out of the pleye’ (p. 282v)

He also provides sentences that seem to refer to the staging of large outdoor plays performed in the round such as *The Castle of Perseverance*:

‘I wyll haue made .V. stages/ or bouthis in this pleye’; ‘I wolde haue a place in the middyl of the pley: that I might se euery paiaunt’ (p. 280).

He also refers to royal entries and banquet drama:

‘There were made many gay pageantis and pleasurris: for loue of the kyngis commyng: and some deuised one thyng: some an other’ (p. 187v); ‘There were .V. coursis in the feest: and as many paiantis in the pley’ (p. 189).

There are also two rather doleful sentences that may refer to his own experience:

‘whyle he wass lokyng on the play his hous al on fire’ (p. 279v); ‘The stages of the play fel adowne: and no man hurt that sate in the setis’ (p. 281v).¹

In 1525-6 more costumes were acquired for two plays at Christmas and in the next year properties of the plays were purchased. 1531-2 provides the first of several inventories of costumes and we find that some have come from Horman himself and others from James Denton, dean of Lichfield. These were apparently inadequate and the next year (1532-3) more costumes were borrowed, apparently from the earl of Derby and the next year (1533-4) more costumes were borrowed from Lord Windsor and others mended. More repairs were done in 1534-5). 1534 was the year that the playwright, Nicholas Udall became headmaster of the school. He served until the early 1540s and took some Eton boys to play for his previous employer, Thomas Cromwell, in 1538. Unfortunately, no records from Eton itself survive from 1534-5 until 1548-9 by which time Udall was a member of the household of Queen Catherine Parr and had worked closely with Princess Mary on a translation of Erasmus’ *Paraphrases upon the New Testament* published 31 January, 1548. The record for 1548-9 is in the Bursar’s running

account not a proper Audit Book and is a brief macaronic note of the purchase of six beards at 10 d. a beard and 4 white costumes at 5 d. a costume. When the next Audit Book begins in 1550-1 there are many records indicating that the boys were playing for people who had come to the school to see them. It is in these records that we hear first of the lighting (candles and links or torches) used in the hall for lighting when they played on dark winter days and evenings. Many costumes were made that year for a play that seems to be just the sort of interlude that was popular in the reign of Edward VI.

There are records of playing for the decade 1550-1560, none for 1560-65 but for both that year and again the next year there are entries about the stage and set. After 1566-7 payment is only made for the candles and torches used to light the room and the stage. The last playmaking entry is a long inventory of costumes from the end of Audit Book 62/5 dated 1595 by M.R.James.

Two playwrights are associated with Eton College. Henry Medwall, the author of *Fulgens and Lucrece* was a student there from 1475 to 1480 when he went up to King's College Cambridge. There is evidence in these records of payment to a local woman to nurse him through an illness in 1479-80. Nicholas Udall had a longer association.

Udall was associated with Thomas Cromwell and his chief propagandist Richard Morison during the period after Henry VIII broke with Rome.² Morison saw in drama a way to use the tools of the Roman church against it. First he advocated the abolition of Catholic drama and then its replacement by Protestant anti-papal drama in the vernacular,

Howmoche better is it that those plaies shulde be forbidden and deleted and others dyvysed to set forthe and declare lyvely before the peoples eies the abhomynation and wickedness of the bisshop of Rome, monkes, ffreers, nonnes, and suche like, and to declare and open to them thobedience that your subiectes by goddes and mans lawes owe unto your magestie. Into the commen people thynges sonner enter by the eies, then by the eares: remembryng more better that they see then that they heere³

Udall joined John Bale as a playwright to help the cause of the anti-papal campaign launched by Cromwell to gather support for the break from Rome in the mid 1530s. The plays of Bale and Udall paralleled the anti-Catholic university plays and were based on much the same principles. The themes and stories treated were similar with the same purpose of championing the protestant cause. The major difference was that they were written in the vernacular for a less elite audience than the university plays and, especially in Bale's work, modeled on the native tradition of episodic drama rather than the classical forms used in university plays. Bale's players and Udall's Eton boys both performed at court in the last year of Cromwell's power. All this came to an end with the passage of the Act of the Six Articles in May, 1539 by the largely pro-Catholic Privy Council that rescinded many of the tenets of the first Henrician Reformation and brought about Cromwell's fall from power and his execution. Bale fled to the continent where he continued to write evangelical tracts and anti-Roman Catholic martyrologies. Udall remained in England but he lost his appointment at Eton after he was charged and convicted for sexual abuse of one of his students. The evidence is equivocal. The Act against sodomy had been passed in 1533 and carried the death penalty. It was used for various unscrupulous reasons to bring charges against political enemies. In this period, 'political enemy' usually

meant 'religious enemy'. Udall had been a well-known follower of Thomas Cromwell who was detested by the Privy Council. The student Udall was accused of abusing was the son of Thomas Cheyne, Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports and a Catholic Privy Counselor. Udall spent an unspecified time in Marshalsea prison but re-emerged in less than a year in 1542 with the publication of his *Apophthegmes* a translation with commentary of selected passages from the work of Erasmus. This brought him to the attention of the last of Henry's queens, Catherine Parr, who brought him into her household to help with a project she had undertaken with all three royal children to translate Erasmus' paraphrase of the New Testament. Susan James, Catherine's biographer in the new edition of the *Dictionary of National Biography* suggests that the character of Christian Custance in *Ralph Roister Doister* is modeled on Catherine. What is known for certain is that Udall worked closely with Princess Mary on Erasmus' *Paraphrases upon the New Testament* published 31 January, 1548. Their shared scholarly interest may explain why Udall remained in favour during Mary's reign providing entertainments for her court despite his evangelical convictions. It is unfortunate that the loss of the records for the years he was at Eton has robbed us of any real knowledge of his playmaking there.

Some of the records presented here have been published before by Maxwell Lyte (*The History of Eton 1440-1898*, 3rd ed., London (1898), M.R. James (*Etoniana* May 30, 1922), Vail Motter (*The School Drama in England* (London: Longmans, Green, 1929) and most recently David W. Blewitt ('Records of Drama at Winchester and Eton 1397-1576' (Continued) *Theatre Notebook*, vol. 38 (1984), pp. 135-143.) I have noted variant readings. None of these scholars have transcribed all the records provided here.

Select Bibliography

David W. Blewitt, 'Records of Drama at Winchester and Eton 1397-1576' (Continued) *Theatre Notebook*, vol. 38, pp. 135-143.

M.R. James in *Etoniana* May 30, 1922.

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T.H.Vail Motter, *The School Drama in England* (London: Longmans, Green, 1929; reissued Port Washington, New York: Kennikat Press, inc., 1968).

¹ William Horman, *Vulgaria* (London, 1519) S.T.C. 13811.

² For a full discussion of the use of drama by the supporters of the Protestant cause in the mid sixteenth century see Alexandra F. Johnston 'William Cecil and the Drama of Persuasion' in *Shakespeare and Religious Change*, Kenneth Graham and Philip Collington eds. (Palgrave MacMillan, 2009) 63-87

³ Quoted in Paul Whitfield White, *Theatre and Reformation* (Cambridge 1993) 14.