

Plays in College.

DURING the Dark Ages oblivion had overtaken the classical dramatists with the exception of Terence, who doubtless owed his charmed life to his gift of expressing edifying platitudes in elegant phrases. But even Terence was read and not acted, until the opening of the sixteenth century brought with it an outburst of dramatic activity on classical lines. The old classical dramas were again acted and new dramas were written in Latin, especially in Germany. In England practically nothing appears to have been done in the way of acting Roman dramas before about 1520, in which year a play of Plautus was performed at the court of Henry VIII. At the Universities the earliest performance of a Roman play on record took place at Queens' College, Cambridge, in 1522/3.¹ In 1536 the *Plutus* of Arisphanes was given in Greek at St. John's College, Cambridge. Oxford had been familiar with the representation of interludes for many years before this, but the earliest recorded performance of a play at Oxford was given at Cardinal's College in 1530.

From the middle of the sixteenth century great importance was attached to the acting of Latin, and subsequently of English, plays as a part of the University curriculum. The statutes of Queens' College,²

1. Queens' College Archives, *Magnum Journale*, tom. ii, f. 51, b. Item Ricardo Robyns [carpentario] pro opere suo cum agebatur comedia Plauti, etc.iii^d.

2. Qu. Coll. Archives, *Codex Chadertonius*, ch. 36, f. 43, 44.

dated 1546, direct that any student refusing to take part in the acting of a comedy or tragedy in the college or absenting himself when such a performance takes place be punished by rustication or fine, and that the expense of such performance be defrayed from the college treasury.

That the properties or "playynge gere"¹ constituted an important part of the college possessions is evident from the care with which they were inventoried and stored in the college tower,² and that the performances were regarded as a valuable item in the college curriculum is clear from the amounts expended on them and duly recorded in the College Books.³ From the allusions in the *Magnum Journale*⁴ it is inferred that a raised stage was constructed at the north end of the Hall,⁵ and that a small wooden staircase⁶ led up to the stage. Music⁷ was provided by musicians placed in the gallery over the screen at the south end of the Hall.

Plautus appears to have been the favourite dramatist at Queens' in the earliest days: the *Poenulus*, *Miles*

1. *Ib.*, *Miscellanea A.*, f. 11, 44b, 46b, 51—53.

2. *Ib.*, *Miscellanea A.*, f. 46b. Players garmentes brought up i[nto the] Tower postridie purificat. 15[46].

3. *Qu. Coll. Archives, Magn. Journ.*, tom. iii, annis 1536 sqq.

4. For these and other references to the College Archives the writer gratefully acknowledges his indebtedness to the work of the late Rev. W. G. Searle.

5. *Magn. Journ.*, tom. iii, f. 79, annis 1540/1. Item 18^o die [ffeb] Johanni Dowse cum quinque famulis ad quinque dies parantibus ac erigentibus scenam in aula pro comediis agendis...vi^o. viii^o.

6. *Ib.* Item Nicolao Ott pro 6 oblongis clavis quibus affigebantur gradus quibus ascendebant ad scenam.....viii^o.

7. *Ib.* Item [1^o Martii] Tusher qui pulsabat organa in agendis comediis.....xii^o.

Gloriosus, and *Stichus*¹ are mentioned in the Archives as having been performed in the college. But modern comedies were also given. Before 1555 there are references in the *Magnum Journale* to various dialogues, comedies, and tragedies composed by contemporary authors. In 1594/5 the well known Latin play *Laelia* was acted before the Earl of Essex at Queens' College, and Dr. Moore Smith in his edition² argues that the authors were two Junior Fellows, Messrs. Meriton and Mountaine.³ But from an entry⁴ in the Archives written in 1546 relating to "New made garmentes at the Comœdia of Lælia Modenas" it would appear that this play was first adapted not long after the publication in 1543 of the French translation from the Italian original, *Gl' Ingannati*, a prose comedy acted at Siena in 1531.

A Latin play which long maintained its popularity was George Ruggle's *Ignoramus*. It was presented at Clare Hall on the occasion of James I.'s visit in 1615, when men from Queens' were prominent among the actors. The royal visit was repeated within two months and the play was given again.

In 1623 Queens' produced the *Fucus Histriomastix*,

1. Dr. F. S. Boas, *University Drama in the Tudor Age* (Oxford Press, 1914), p. 21, speaks of a play called "*Strylius* by Nicholas Robinson of Queens', Cambridge, afterwards Bishop of Bangor, acted in 1552/3." This is an error. The play in question is the *Stichus* (of Plautus); see *Magn. Journ.*, tom iii, f. 220, ann. 1553/4. *Sumptus comœdiæ Stichus editæ ut patet per billam M^ri Robinsoni.....X1^s. X1^d.* Dr. Boas' note on p. 22 seems to indicate that he is not quite satisfied with the evidence for the so-called *Strylius*.

2. Cambridge Press, 1910. See also Dr. Boas, *Univ. Drama*, pp. 289—296.

3. Afterwards respectively Dean and Archbishop of York.

4. *Miscellanea A*, f. 46b.

a play which was probably written by Rob. Warde, Fellow of the college. Most of the actors in the original cast were Queens' men.

Another Queens' playwright of this period was Peter Hausted, who wrote (in Latin) the *Senile Odium* in 1631, and a play in English, *The Rival Friends*, in 1632.

His popularity, however, was eclipsed by that of Thomas Randolph, of Trinity, whose *Jealous Lovers* was very well received on the occasion of the King's visit in 1632.

William Johnson, of Queens', wrote his *Valetudinarium* in 1637 and during the next few years the poet Cowley, of Trinity, produced some dramas; but about this time the discipline of the University appears to have been at a very low ebb, and the general laxity in morals was reflected in contemporary plays. It is not surprising therefore that public stage plays were forbidden by an Ordinance of Parliament in 1642, which gave the death blow to the custom of acting plays in college, after it had survived for more than a century.

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