

The Cambridge History of English Literature ed. by Sir A. W. Ward and A. R. Waller, (Cambridge), 1964. Vol. I The Drama to 1642, Part Two

p. 114 In 1647, five years after the closing of the theatres, Humphrey Moseley, the bookseller, bought out a folio which professed to contain all the plays of Beaumont and Fletcher that had not hitherto been printed, with the exception of one, of which the copy had been mislaid. Moseley declared that it had been his intention to print Fletcher's works by themselves, but he had finally decided not to separate him from Beaumont. It is probable that he could not have done so if he had desired; but the publication of this folio produced a protest in verse . . . from Sir Aston Cokayne, against the general ascription to Beaumont of plays in which, for the most part, he had no share; and, since nearly all the dramas in the composition of which

p. 115 Beaumont was concerned had already been printed and were consequently, excluded from this edition, it cannot be denied that the complaint was well founded. . . .

p. 115 A good deal of labour and ingenuity has been expended in the endeavour to solve, by critical methods, the very intricate problems of authorship which present themselves, and it has been found possible to arrive at a tolerably clear idea of the main characteristics of Beaumont's work as distinguished from that of his partner.¹ In certain particular cases, however, there remains much uncertainty, and opinions of various kinds have been maintained with a confidence of assertion which is by no means justified by the available evidence. When a critic, with no external evidence of authorship before him, concludes that a certain play was originally written by Beaumont, afterwards revised by Fletcher and finally re-written by Middleton, he is evidently dealing in mere guesswork. On the other hand, these investigations have, undoubtedly, been accomplished by a more accurate and systematic study than had previously been made of the individual marks of style by which the dramatists of the period are distinguished, and have, doubtless, helped towards a clearer perception of the true value of metrical tests, as well as of the dangers of a too-mechanical application of them.

The general result of criticism seems to be as follows. It is probable that, of the fifty-two plays which have commonly passed

p. 116 under the joint names, at least one belongs to Beaumont alone, and that in some eight or nine others he cooperated with Fletcher, taking, usually, the leading part in the combination; that Fletcher was the sole author of about fifteen plays, and that there are some two-and-twenty, formerly attributed to the pair conjointly, in which we find Fletcher's work combined with that of other authors than Beaumont, besides five or six in which, apparently, neither Fletcher nor Beaumont had any appreciable share. To the general total may be added Henry VIII, by Shakespeare and Fletcher, which is commonly regarded as Shakespeare's; A Very Woman, which passes under the name of Massinger, but in which Fletcher, probably, had a share; and Sir John van Olden Barnavelt, by Fletcher and Massinger, which remained unprinted till quite recently.

¹ The progress made in recent times may be estimated partly by the remark of Hallam in 1843, that no critic had perceived any difference of style between the two dramatists (Literature of Europe, vol. III, p. 98).