

**THE KING'S
LIBRARY. THE
GULL'S HORNBOOK**

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The King's Library. The Gull's Hornbook by Thomas Dekker & R. B. McKerrow

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THOMAS DEKKER & R. B. MCKERROW

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EDITED BY PROFESSOR GOLLANCZ

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BOOK BY THOMAS
DEKKER, EDITED
BY R. B. M^cKERROW

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INTRODUCTORY NOTE

THE AUTHOR.—Thomas Dekker, the author of the *Gull's Hornbook* was, while not perhaps one of the greatest, certainly one of the most prolific writers of his time. Poet, playwright, pamphleteer, and moralist, no subject and no style of writing seems to have come amiss to him. Born however, as he was, in London and brought up there, forced apparently from his youth to earn a living, harder then than now, by his pen, he had neither time, opportunity, nor perhaps learning to range far in the search for material. He turned by preference to what was nearest at hand, to what was every day before his eyes—the life of his contemporaries. There is little, if any, of his best work which does not deal in some way with the London in which he lived.

And it is just this which makes what remains of his writings, his prose especially, so valuable to us at present. In the *Gull's Hornbook* and in other works of a similar nature we can see, when we make due allowance for the exaggeration of the satirist, how Londoners really lived and behaved three hundred years ago. We feel in his descriptions the sure touch of complete and minute knowledge. In the very modernness of the humours portrayed we are sensible of their truth to nature. Change but the setting and the "Gulls" of the *Hornbook* are but a slightly coarser variant of a certain class of townsman of to-day, and this may well satisfy us of the accuracy of the whole picture.

Of Dekker's life little is known. It was in all probability a hard hand-to-mouth sort of existence whose only incident was an occasional visit to the debtor's prison, "that university" as it is called in a play written by him in conjunction with Middleton, "where men pay more dear for their wit than anywhere." Born about 1570, the early years of his literary life were spent for the most part in revising old plays or in working at new ones in collaboration with one or other of the well known dramatists of his time.

Drayton, Wilson, Chettle, Day, Webster, Munday, Middleton and Jonson are but a few of those with whom he joined. The fact that between 1598 and 1602 he wrote eight plays of his own, besides collaborating in some twenty-five others, shows the extraordinary facility with which he worked.

In 1598 he came into notice as the author of an indifferent but very popular poem called *Canaan's Calamity*. It is a description of the fall of Jerusalem, a favourite subject of Elizabethan writers and moralists. The treatment is entirely commonplace and gives little indication of the poetic talent which his plays show him to have certainly possessed.

With the latter we are not concerned here. *The Shoemaker's Holiday*, *Old Fortunatus*, and *Satiromastix* deserve mention, though very different opinions as to the value of his dramatic work have been expressed by critics. It may be said in general that while almost all contain detached passages of great delicacy and beauty, the effect of the whole is often marred by hasty and careless workmanship.

His first important prose work was *The Wonderful Year* 1603, a vivid description of the ravages of the plague in London during that year. In 1606 he published *The Seven Deadly Sins of London*, which presents under the form of an allegory a lurid picture of contemporary life. Dekker calls it on the title page "Opus septem dierum"; if it was in truth but a week's work it is an extraordinary instance of rapidity of composition. In the same year appeared *News from Hell* (reissued in the following year as *A Knight's Conjuring*). This, he tells us, was written in imitation of "ingenious, ingenuous, fluent, facetious T. Nash," and is in some measure a sequel to the latter's *Piers Penniless his Supplication to the Devil*. Passing over some less important pieces, we come in 1608 to *The Bellman of London: Bringing to Light the Most Notorious Villanies that are now Practised in the Kingdom*. This book, which the numerous editions show to have been very popular, continued the series of descriptions of rogues

and vagabonds, their tricks and their habits, of which the most notable were Harman's *Caveat for Curstors* (1566) and Robert Greene's "Coney-Catching" pamphlets (1591-2); indeed from the first of these books Dekker borrowed no small part of his material. Later in the same year he published a second part under the title of *Lanthorn and Candle-light, or the Bell-man's Second Night's Walk* (republished with considerable additions in 1612). In 1609 appeared *The Raven's Almanac*, a parody on the terrible prognostications of almanac-makers, and the book which is here reprinted, *The Gull's Hornbook*. His other prose works are of less interest; several of them are of a religious turn, for Dekker, in common with Greene and most other writers of the period, if, probably, not over-particular in his manner of life, had at least a marvellous facility in repentance.

From 1613 to 1616 Dekker seems to have been confined in the king's bench prison; the reason is not known but is more likely to have been debt than anything else, unless perhaps it was thought that, for a law-abiding person, he possessed an unreasonably exact knowledge of the innumerable methods of swindling. In 1622, in conjunction with Massinger, he wrote *The Virgin Martyr*, which shows him at his best as a dramatist. In a tract published in 1625, entitled *A Rod for Run-aways*, he describes the state of terror caused by the visitation of the plague in that year, thus returning to one of his earliest subjects. In 1628 and 1629 Dekker composed the Lord Mayor's Pageants, namely, *Britannia's Honour* and *London's Tempe*, a fact which probably indicates that towards the end of his life he was in somewhat better circumstances, for such work as this seems generally to have been given to men of some recognised standing. His last work was probably the republication of *Lanthorn and Candle-light*, in 1637. He is supposed to have died shortly after.

One of the best known incidents of Dekker's life was his quarrel with Ben Jonson. It is an interesting and curious piece of literary history, but I have no space to discuss it here. The leading facts are these: after having collaborated with Dekker in the production of

two plays, in 1599, Jonson suddenly attacked him in *Every Man out of His Humour* and *Cynthia's Revels* (1600), and again with more virulence in *The Poetaster* (1602). The cause of the quarrel is quite uncertain. Jonson's own words of excuse that he had been provoked by his opponents "with their petulant styles on every stage" are too vague to help us much. Shortly after, Dekker answered in the *Satiromastix*, a badly constructed, but in some scenes very amusing, play, and with this the quarrel seems to have been tacitly dropped, though so late as 1619 Jonson still considered, as is shown by his conversations with Drummond, that Dekker was a "knave."

The best and most complete summary of all that is known regarding Dekker is to be found in Mr. A. H. Bullen's article on him in the *Dictionary of National Biography*. To this I must refer readers desirous of more detailed information.

SOURCES.—The *Gull's Hornbook*, as regards general tone and plan, is founded on the *Grobianus* of Frederick Dedekind (c. 1525-1598). This work, a poem in Latin elegiac verse, was first published in two books in 1549, and again, in a much revised form and enlarged to three books, in 1552. It had an immense popularity, at least on the Continent of Europe, as is shown by the numerous editions which were published both of the original and of a contemporary German translation.

"Grobianus"* (from the German *groß*—rude, boorish) is the name of a supposed ignoramus to whom the poem is addressed, and to whom are given directions as to his conduct under a variety of circumstances, these directions being calculated to increase his offensiveness to the highest possible limit; it is in short a kind of satire in the imperative mood. This is not, of course, the first employment

* The name "Grobianus" seems to be borrowed from Sebastian Brant's famous poem *Das Narren Schiff*, in the course of which he describes the worship paid to a new Saint "Grobian," the patron of boors. It is found later in several works of the period besides Dedekind's.