

THE OLD ENGLISH DRAMATISTS

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The Old English Dramatists by James Russell Lowell

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JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL

**THE OLD ENGLISH
DRAMATISTS**



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THE
OLD ENGLISH DRAMATISTS

BY
JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL, 1819-1891
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NOTE

In the spring of 1887, Mr. Lowell read, at the Lowell Institute in Boston, six lectures on the Old English Dramatists. They had been rapidly written, and in their delivery much was said extemporaneously, suggested by the passages from the plays selected for illustration of the discourse. To many of these passages there was no reference in the manuscript; they were read from the printed book. The lectures were never revised by Mr. Lowell for publication, but they contain such admirable and interesting criticism, and are in themselves such genuine pieces of good literature, that it has seemed to me that they should be given to the public.¹

CHARLES ELIOT NORTON.

¹ Before their publication in this volume, these Lectures appeared in *Harper's Magazine*, in the numbers from June to November, 1892.

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I

INTRODUCTORY

WHEN the rule limiting speeches to an hour was adopted by Congress, which was before most of you were born, an eminent but somewhat discursive person spent more than that measure of time in convincing me that whoever really had anything to say could say it in less. I then and there acquired a conviction of this truth, which has only strengthened with years. Yet whoever undertakes to lecture must adapt his discourse to the law which requires such exercises to be precisely sixty minutes long, just as a certain standard of inches must be reached by one who would enter the army. If one has been studying all his life how to be terse, how to suggest rather than to expound, how to contract rather than to dilate, something like a strain is put upon the conscience by this necessity of giving the full measure of words, without reference to other considerations which a judicious ear may esteem of more importance. Instead of saying things compactly and pithily, so that they may be easily carried away, one is tempted into a certain generosity and circumambience of phrase, which, if not adapted

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to conquer Time, may at least compel him to turn his glass and admit a drawn game. It is so much harder to fill an hour than to empty one!

These thoughts rose before me with painful vividness as I fancied myself standing here again, after an interval of thirty-two years, to address an audience at the Lowell Institute. Then I lectured, not without some favorable acceptance, on Poetry in general and what constituted it, on Imagination and Fancy, on Wit and Humor, on Metrical Romances, on Ballads, and I know not what else — on whatever I thought I had anything to say about, I suppose. Then I was at the period in life when thoughts rose in coveys, and one filled one's bag without considering too nicely whether the game had been hatched within his neighbor's fence or within his own, — a period of life when it does n't seem as if everything had been said; when a man overestimates the value of what specially interests himself, and insists with Don Quixote that all the world shall stop till the superior charms of his Dulcinea of the moment have been acknowledged; when he conceives himself a missionary, and is persuaded that he is saving his fellows from the perdition of their souls if he convert them from belief in some æsthetic heresy. That is the mood of mind in which one may read lectures with some assurance of success. I remember how I read mine over to the clock, that I might be sure I had enough, and how patiently the clock listened, and gave no opinion except as to duration, on which point it assured me that I always ran over. This is the