Recently Recovered Manuscripts at St John's College, Oxford

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RECENTLY RECOVERED MANUSCRIPTS AT ST JOHN'S COLLEGE, OXFORD.

St John's College, Oxford, was, especially in the first half of the seventeenth century, one of the chief centres of academic drama, and MS. copies of a number of the plays acted there are still preserved in the College Library, the Bodleian, and the British Museum.

Through the kindness of Mr W. H. Stevenson, Fellow and Librarian of St John's, I am able to give a short account of three manuscripts which have recently been added to the College Library, and which I had an opportunity of examining during a recent visit to Oxford.

Two of these MSS. were discovered by chance in 1914 amongst legal documents in a lawyer's office in London. How they came to be there is not known, but as they were evidently the work of St John's men, the finders, with commendable public spirit, offered to deposit them, on certain conditions, in the College Library. They are both original Latin plays, and as they are bound in limp vellum, and tied with silk ribands, they have the appearance of presentation copies.

One of the MSS. is entitled *Mercurius siue Literarum Lucta*. It consists of 22 folios, written on both sides, and is signed at the end 'Joannes Blencow.' This John Blencowe was born in London on 29 January, 1608, and entered Merchant Taylors' School in 1621. Thence he proceeded to St John's, matriculating on 13 November, 1629¹, and graduating B.C.L. on 25 June, 1633. He was elected to a fellowship, and took orders. A copy of a sermon which he preached at St Paul's, *Michael's Combat with the Diuel; or, Moses his Funerall* (1640), is in the British Museum.

The plot of *Mercurius*, though suggested by various classical episodes, is, so far as I am aware, original. Before the action opens Mercury, on his way back from the slaying of Argus, has procured from Hebe a draught of nectar for a maiden who has inspired him with

¹ This is the date given by J. Foster, *Alumni Oxonienses*, i, 138. The *D. N. B.* makes him enter Merchant Taylors' in 1620 and matriculate in 1627.

love. In the first scene Jupiter, furious at such a misuse of the drink of the Gods, banishes Mercury from Heaven.

While he is wandering disconsolate on earth he encounters Cupid who propounds a novel scheme by which he may secure his restoration to the abodes of bliss. The god of love undertakes to make the three Fates fall in love with Mercury. In a striking and amusing scene we are shown the infatuation of Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos who outvie one another in the endearments that they heap upon the exiled divinity. He pretends to reciprocate the passion of these ancient dames till he procures from them a promise that, to revenge his wrongs, they will thrust Jupiter down to Tartarus.

They are true to their word, and Jupiter is seen lamenting his overthrow among the shades. But Mercury having gained his end immediately throws off the mask, and in another scene full of somewhat acid humour, makes mock of the enamoured Fates. Stung by his insults they resolve to 'reverse their doom,' to restore Jupiter to his throne, and to send Mercury in his place to hell.

There is another striking scene in which Charon endeavours to overpower Mercury and to transport him in his bark. But the Ferryman of Styx has to acknowledge defeat. The Fates themselves cannot overcome one who as the deity of Letters has eternal vitality. But as they cannot rob Learning of immortality they take their revenge by coupling with it the gift of poverty. This ordinance, however, is blunted of its terrors, for Mercury turns to salute the buildings of St John's where Sir Thomas White has provided an asylum for the votaries of Letters.

Thus the play closes with a skilful compliment to the Founder of the College. There is no indication in the MS. of its having been acted, but with its variety of characters and scenes, its humours and surprises, it certainly looks as if it were written for the St John's stage. In any case it is a welcome addition to the list of extant academic plays.

The other Latin play, like *Mercurius*, consists of 22 folios written on both sides. The MS. has no title, but from its subject the play may be called *Cephalus et Procris*. Its author is Joseph Crowther, who afterwards attained considerable academic and ecclesiastical prominence. He was born about 1610 at Blackwall in Middlesex, entered St John's College, matriculating on 20 October, 1626, and was elected to a fellowship in 1628. He took the degrees of B.A. (1629), M.A. (1633), B.D. (1638) and D.D. (1660). He was Regius Professor of

Greek, 1660–5, and Principal of St Mary's Hall, 1664–89. He also obtained varied clerical preferment. He was appointed prebendary and precentor of St Paul's 1642, and was vicar of Great Dunmow, Essex, from 1640 to 1646. After the Restoration he became prebendary of Worcester, and rector of Tredington, co. Worcester. He was chaplain to James, Duke of York, and celebrated the midnight marriage between him and Anne Hyde on 3 September, 1660. In 1689 he had a quarrel with Sir Thomas Draper who procured his committal to the Fleet Prison, where he died on 16 December. He was buried in St Paul's.

Crowther's career shows that he must have been a man of varied gifts, and it is therefore interesting to recover a work from his pen. But *Cephalus et Procris* is a juvenile production. It is not dated, but the play is dedicated in a prefatory epistle to 'ornatissimo doctissimóq; viro Gulielmo Juxon,' President of the College and Vice-Chancellor of the University. Juxon, who became President of St John's in 1621, was Vice-Chancellor from 22 July, 1626, to 24 July, 1628. The congratulatory tone of the dedication suggests that it was written soon after Juxon's election, and Crowther speaks apologetically of his 'Academica infantia.' Hence there can be little doubt that *Cephalus et Procris* was written in his freshman's year, 1626–7. It is therefore not surprising to find that it treats the Ovidian story on conventional lines. A provisional examination of the play suggests that it has little claim to originality. A more detailed study may modify this impression, but, in any case, its interest will chiefly lie in its authorship and in the additional proof that it affords of Juxon's good-will towards academic drama.

The third manuscript added to the St John's library is connected with a greater name in dramatic annals than Blencowe or Crowther. When Alexander Dyce edited the works of George Peele in 1828 he included the blank-verse narrative poem *Polyhymnia*, which commemorates the tilting before the Queen on 17 November, 1590, the thirty-second anniversary of her accession, when Sir Henry Lee, the Master of the Armoury, resigned his office to the Earl of Cumberland. Dyce printed the poem from a slightly mutilated copy of the quarto edition of it issued in 1590–1. This copy had belonged to Drummond of Hawthornden, who had presented it to the library of the University of Edinburgh in 1626. Ten lines of it were missing or fragmentary. When Dyce published his second edition of Peele's works in 1829 he drew attention to the fact that *Polyhymnia* was now 'given complete;

the omissions having been supplied through the kindness of the Rev. Dr Bliss, from a MS. copy of the poem discovered in an old family mansion in Oxfordshire. Like other old transcripts of our early poetry, it presents several variations from the printed copy, which I have markt' (II, 192).

Dr Bliss was keeper of the University Archives from 1826 to 1857. Whether he personally owned the MS., 'discovered in an old family mansion in Oxfordshire,' which he allowed Dyce to collate is not clear. In any case the MS. seems to have afterwards disappeared, for when Mr Bullen published his edition of Peele in 1888 he did not quote the variants in *Polyhymnia* at first hand but from Dyce's notes¹. The MS. must, however, have somehow found its way into the President's Lodgings at St John's, for when Dr Bellamy resigned office in 1909, it was discovered by chance by Mr Stevenson among other papers. It consists of seven folios, written on both sides, and seems to have been begun by one hand and completed by another.

As there is no other extant manuscript, so far as I know, of a work of Peele, the recovery of *Polyhymnia* in this form is a matter for congratulation. Dyce understated the case when he spoke of it as presenting 'several variations' from the printed copy. He himself records over forty, and as he used modernised spelling, he did not include differences of orthography. Any future editor of Peele will now have access to the MS. in the library of St John's, though Peele, of course, unlike Blencowe and Crowther, was not an *alumnus* of that college, but of Christ Church.

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¹ Mr Bullen mentions a second copy of the quarto 'in the Duke of Devonshire's library' (ii, 281), but does not say whether he collated it. Has this now gone to America with other Chatsworth treasures?