

Chapter 3

DOLLARS AND DRAMA

EARLY ENGLISH PLAYS AND THE AMERICAN BOOK TRADE 1906–1926

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ON JANUARY 10, 1922, Philadelphia dealer A. S. W. Rosenbach wrote to Henry E. Huntington, detailing the upcoming sale of a manuscript of medieval English biblical plays, anticipated to fetch £10,000–£15,000.¹ Today the manuscript is Huntington Library, MS HM 1 (Figure 3.1). Had the manuscript sold for £15,000, it would also have been more expensive than the Hours of Jeanne de Navarre, which had sold in 1919 for the record price of £11,800.² HM 1 would also have been more costly on its own than the twenty English manuscripts Rosenbach acquired from Thomas Fitzroy Fenwick in 1923 (costing £11,500 in total).³ Moreover, at £15,000, the manuscript would have been only £100 less than the most expensive printed volume to have ever sold: a copy of *Venus and Adonis* which realized £15,100 or \$75,000 in 1919.⁴

The manuscript lacked illuminations and possessed no known ties to notable literary or historical figures, raising the question of what led Rosenbach to believe that it could become one of the costliest books ever sold. In what follows, I will explore the American commercial appetite for early English drama between two pivotal sales, occurring in 1906 and 1926. This study will focus on the nationalistic beliefs, scholarship, and bibliophilic trends that influenced the commercial circulation of early dramatic literature.

1 Correspondence relating to the sale can be found in San Marino, Huntington Library, HEH INST. ARCHIVES 31.1.1.39.1. My sincere thanks to Stephen Tabor of the Huntington Library for sharing the sale invoice: mssHEH 5:1.

2 The manuscript was acquired by Baron Edmond de Rothschild (now BnF, NAL 3145). Christopher de Hamel, “Cockerell as Entrepreneur,” *The Book Collector* 55 (2006): 49–72 at 56.

3 This purchase included four Chaucerian manuscripts, two Langland manuscripts, and one astrological manuscript formerly belonging to John Dee. A. S. G. Edwards, “A State of Absolute Rarity,” *The Book Collector* 65 (2016): 433–45 at 433.

4 Sold at a Britwell Court sale on December 16, 1919, to George D. Smith, buying on behalf of Huntington. Quaritch was the underbidder. Donald C. Dickinson, *Henry E. Huntington's Library of Libraries* (San Marino: Huntington Library, 1995), 131–32.

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It was not uncommon for early twentieth-century American collectors to regard English dramatic literature as national possessions *and* sound investments, perceptions rooted in prevailing notions about a shared Anglo-American heritage, rising market prices, provenance values, and active efforts by members of the trade.

Although swollen prices became less surprising as the century progressed (even dealers could be shocked by how well dramatic literature performed commercially), the profitability of medieval literary manuscripts was never guaranteed. E. P. Goldschmidt described the manuscript trade overall as “a peculiar business,” writing that, “A manuscript lacking all pictorial decoration, whatever its contents or its historical interest, is a thing of little commercial value...from a business point of view the handling of old manuscripts without pictures in them is unattractive and unprofitable.”⁵ Furthermore, as A. S. G. Edwards has noted, Middle English manuscripts were not typically the most commercially successful rare books in the nineteenth or early twentieth centuries, and saleable, highly priced manuscripts were not necessarily profitable.⁶

Nonetheless in 1922, Rosenbach, arguably the leading bookseller in the world following his recent successes at the 1921 Britwell sale, appeared confident that collectors would pay enormous sums for a late medieval English drama manuscript.⁷ Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scholars insisted on the literary and historical significance of the manuscript, aware that it preserved one of the few remaining English cycles. The manuscript was believed to have been produced in or around Wakefield as a form of popular entertainment, with one prominent scholar even arguing that it contained the writings of England’s “first great comic dramatist.”⁸ Among American dealers, Rosenbach was particularly well-positioned to turn scholarship to commercial advantage, having earned a PhD in early modern drama from the University of Pennsylvania. Rosenbach would have been acutely aware of how seldom such texts entered the market.

The earliest extant examples of “early English drama” are identified as having been written or printed prior to the emergence of London’s commercial theatre around 1575. Particularly in manuscript, early dramatic literature suffered high attrition rates, leaving behind only a small body of works.⁹ Play texts were lost for a multitude of reasons, including censorship, overuse by previous owners, material limitations, and, occasionally, deliberate destruction.¹⁰ Throughout the course of the sixteenth century, loss rates decreased as plays were increasingly printed and subsequently preserved. Nonetheless,

5 E. P. Goldschmidt, “The Period Before Printing,” in *Talks on Book-Collecting*, ed. P. H. Muir (London: Cassell, 1952), 25–39 at 25–28.

6 Edwards, “A State of Absolute Rarity,” 443. See also Chapter 2 in this book.

7 C. G. des Graz, “The Doctor,” *The Book Collector* 1 (1952): 177–80 at 177–78.

8 Charles Mills Gayley, “The Later Miracle Plays of England,” *International Quarterly* 12 (October 1905): 67–88 at 67.

9 According to Darryll Grantley, thirty-one non-cycle English manuscripts survive: eleven are in the British Library; five are in the Bodleian; two are in the Huntington; thirteen are elsewhere. See Darryll Grantley, *English Dramatic Interludes, 1300–1580* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

10 David McInnis, *Shakespeare and Lost Plays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 3–5.

research indicates that of those plays produced between 1567 and 1642, as many as 744 have been lost, hundreds remain untraceable, and only 543 have survived.¹¹

For the earliest plays that survived into the twentieth century, the shadow of Shakespeare both generated interest and, to some degree, skewed scholarly inquiry. It was commonplace for scholars to place dramatic literature within an evolutionary framework: with successive dramatic forms understood to replace older, inferior forms. As Carol Symes has argued, such an approach reduces medieval plays to “deracinated curiosities,” and forces them to remain “medieval, unenlightened, crude, in order to undergird modernity’s cultural superiority.”¹² In 1908, distinguished scholar Felix E. Schelling (who Rosenbach studied under at the University of Pennsylvania) characterized medieval drama as possessing a “crude and realistic simplicity,” and primarily serving as a “censor of morals and conduct.”¹³ Schelling remained predictably dismissive of the earliest dramatic forms, referring to such plays as “the old popular drama of the citizens,” and observing in 1910 that the “accession of Queen Elizabeth found England without a genuine drama.”¹⁴ Rosenbach himself described medieval biblical plays as: “naïve and simple to a degree...reminiscent of the spirit of the pictorial representations to be found in the illuminated missals and other service books of the same period, where the treatment is equally naïve.”¹⁵ Medieval cycle plays, moralities, and early sixteenth-century interludes all suffered from the widespread conviction that literary significance was measured by proximity to Shakespearean drama.

However, those barriers to deeper scholarly examination—the antiquity of individual plays, perceptions of their simplicity, and a history of appealing to provincial audiences—drew the attention of both collectors and members of the trade. Moreover, scholars had established conditions that allowed dealers and collectors to connect any early play to the Shakespearean stage. While scholarly assessments do not always align directly with commercial pricing, as David Pearson explains: “Both dealers and collectors wish to find out what is known about the book in front of them, where it stands in the canon of cultural values, and particularly how rare it is.”¹⁶ A. W. Pollard expressed similar sentiments in 1910, noting that the most collectible books appeal to the collector’s “eye, his mind or to his imagination, and many famous books appeal to all three.”¹⁷ Collectors could appreciate early plays not only for their association with Shakespeare, but also for their role in preserving aspects of pre-modern festivity and spiritual belief

11 McInnis, *Shakespeare and Lost Plays*, 1.

12 Carol Symes, “The History of Medieval Theatre/Theatre of Medieval History: Dramatic Documents and the Performance of the Past,” *History Compass* 7 (2009): 1032–44 at 1036.

13 Felix E. Schelling, *Elizabethan Drama, 1558–1642* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1908), xxviii, xxiii.

14 Felix E. Schelling, *English Literature During the Lifetime of Shakespeare* (New York: Holt, 1910), 63.

15 A. S. W. Rosenbach, *A Book Hunter’s Holiday* (Boston: Riverside Press, 1929), 234.

16 David Pearson, “Patterns of Collecting and Trading in Antiquarian Books,” in *Out of Print & Into Profit*, ed. Giles Mandelbrote (London: British Library, 2006), 201–15 at 206.

17 A. W. Pollard, “Book-Collecting,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 11th edn., vol. 4 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1910), 224.

that might otherwise have been lost. In his study of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century collectors, Robert Alan Shaddy observed a tendency towards “books, manuscripts and other collectibles [that] allowed the recovery of an idealized past which had slipped or was slipping away from them.”¹⁸ The prolonged history of neglect suffered by such texts not only amplified their sentimental and emotional value, but also elevated their overall desirability among collectors.

In 1906, the discovery of an old book of plays in Ireland caught the attention of the trade. Seymour de Ricci provides an account of how the owner, curious to see if the book was valuable, tore out a page and sent it to Sotheby’s for inspection.¹⁹ After being assured that the book was indeed worth something: “he posted the book tied up with string, without even a wrapper round it.”²⁰ The volume contained seventeen pre-Elizabethan printed plays, including three presumed lost and four unknown altogether. Sotheby’s sold the plays in June 1906 for more than £2,000.²¹ With lots ranging from £82 to £233, all went to the dealer Bernard Alfred Quaritch.²² This sale prompted speculation about where valuable plays might surface next. In his 1907 *Recently Recovered “Lost” Tudor Plays*, John S. Farmer assured readers that, “in the most unlikely quarters and when least expected other lost plays of the Tudor period might turn up.”²³

Five of these plays eventually made their way into one of the most significant American collections of early drama: the library of Alexander Smith Cochran. With a fortune of \$50 million dollars from his family’s New York carpet business, Cochran “spent as though his resources were limitless.”²⁴ Cochran purchased the plays from Quaritch on December 11, 1908, “apparently on the spur of the moment.”²⁵ According to Edmund H. Dring, Cochran had originally intended to build a collection of English poetry, but Quaritch recommended he pursue drama in its place: this was a less crowded field.²⁶ Within just three years, Cochran had formed the greater part of his library. Cochran’s collec-

18 Robert Alan Shaddy, “A World of Sentimental Attachments: The Cult of Collecting, 1890–1930,” *The Book Collector* 43 (1994): 185–200 at 186.

19 Seymour de Ricci, *English Collectors of Books & Manuscripts (1530–1930) and Their Marks of Ownership* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1930), 177–78.

20 De Ricci, *English Collectors*, 177.

21 De Ricci gives the price of £2,000 in *English Collectors*, 177; Farmer gives a hammer price of over £2,600, in his *Recently Recovered “Lost” Tudor Plays* (London: EEDS, 1907), v.

22 Farmer also mentions this in his *Recently Recovered “Lost” Tudor Plays*, vi. However, Farmer additionally notes that “the rarest and best items of the collection, the ‘lost’ plays and unrecorded editions, were bought for the nation,” vi. De Ricci, *English Collectors*, 178, claims that the biggest buyers were the British Museum and W. A. White.

23 Farmer, *Recently Recovered “Lost” Tudor Plays*, v; see also De Ricci, *English Collectors*, 177.

24 Alan Bell, “The Foundation of the Elizabethan Club Library,” *The Book Collector* 35 (1986): 337–45 at 338; Walter Goffart, *The Industrialist and the Diva* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), 39.

25 Bell, “Foundation,” 340.

26 Gilbert McCoy Troxell, “The Elizabethan Club: Its Origins and Its Books,” *The Yale University Library Gazette* 27 (July 1952): 19–28 at 24.

tion was built relatively quietly, particularly given that his library would eventually be ranked third in importance for permanent American collections of early dramatic materials, surpassed only by the libraries of Huntington and Henry Clay Folger.

Several years into his collecting, Cochran wrote to his former Yale professor, William Lyons Phelps. Phelps had taught Elizabethan drama, and he remembered Cochran as a shy student with no special enthusiasm for the subject.²⁷ Cochran told Phelps that while living in England he amused himself by purchasing Elizabethan literature and offered to send Phelps a list of his collected items. Phelps recalled that when this list reached him, he nearly fell out of his chair.²⁸ Every item was one of extreme rarity, worth hundreds of thousands in total.²⁹ In 1911, Cochran gave his library to Yale, founding the Elizabethan Club with Phelps's help. Cochran's intention was to encourage undergraduates to discuss art and literature, telling Phelps that "the one thing he had missed at Yale was good conversation."³⁰ Yale was not uniformly enthusiastic about the Club, with one of the earliest librarians recalling that "very few thought that it was destined for anything more than complete and rather dismal failure."³¹

Cochran's focus seldom remained fixed on a single pursuit for long, and his collecting career was no different. Walter Goffart sums up Cochran's collecting as follows: he collected Shakespeareana and Elizabethan books for three years, gave his collection to the Club, added three further purchases, "then never again owned a rare book."³² While Cochran's collecting had largely ceased by 1917, the Quaritch firm had guaranteed that his short-lived venture into collecting had proven remarkably successful. Cochran was initially reluctant to bid at the Robert Hoe sale, so Quaritch cautioned: "It is rarely that such opportunities occur to purchase the early English plays."³³ Quaritch also encouraged him to make private purchases from the Huth library in 1911, preceding the auction. This decision became a major transaction in the history of book collecting, with Cochran spending thirty thousand guineas to acquire forty-two prime lots.³⁴ However, despite his achievements as a collector, Alan Bell suggests that it was the "lukewarm reception" given to the Elizabethan Club by Yale in 1911 that ultimately brought Cochran's collecting to an end.³⁵

Cochran's methods, heavily dependent on the knowledge of commercial agents, assertive acquisition, and the creation of a permanent institution to house his collection, quickly evolved into standard practice for American collectors. These undertakings were legitimized by the belief that early English literature played a vital educational and

27 William Lyon Phelps, *Autobiography with Letters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939), 292.

28 Troxell, "Elizabethan Club," 84.

29 Phelps, *Autobiography*, 293.

30 Phelps, *Autobiography*.

31 Troxell, "Elizabethan Club," 83.

32 Goffart, *Industrialist and the Diva*, 19.

33 Bell, "Foundation," 339.

34 Bell, "Foundation," 341.

35 Bell, "Foundation," 342.

cultural role for the nation. As one theatre historian explained in 1917, “the heritage of today is a heritage which for fourteen hundred years has been ripening for the British Empire and America alike,” insisting that “America still holds to the wisdom of her Shakespearean ancestors.”³⁶ American collectors had traditionally regarded English literature through a patriotic lens. Without drawing a distinction between American and British audiences, the Grolier Club’s 1902 *One Hundred Books Famous in English Literature* proclaimed that English literature “reads like a physical map by peak, river and coast, and sees in miniature the intellectual conformation of a nation.”³⁷ By acquiring English books, especially Elizabethan texts, Americans were essentially safeguarding their own cultural heritage. When Folger decided to place his collection in the nation’s capital, the justification given was simply: “I finally concluded I would give it to Washington; for I am an American.”³⁸

By 1924 the national practice of conserving early drama for the benefit of the American public had firmly taken root, with the *New York Times* declaring that American collectors enjoyed “preserv[ing] the results of their endeavors in book-gathering by converting their libraries into special organizations for the use of the public.”³⁹ With so much dramatic literature permanently exiting the market, the American market had already begun to contract by 1923, even as auction prices continued to escalate. The *New York Times* attributed the vanishing commercial market to “the unwillingness of collectors here to part with these supreme monuments of English literature of which so many are in America.”⁴⁰

These developments were met with less enthusiasm on the other side of the Atlantic. As early as 1899, *The Athenæum* was openly appealing to the British public to take greater interest in early drama, arguing that “the dramatic literature of mediæval England is in many respects the most valuable and distinctly English of the literary productions of our country.”⁴¹ The article warned against “the earliest monuments of a great English art leav[ing] our shores.”⁴² In a 1919 article entitled “Selling the Nation’s Heirlooms,” scholar Frederick Boas petitioned for measures to be taken against the loss of rare books to foreign buyers. Boas wrote that “[English] dramatic poetry, is amongst the world’s most precious possessions.”⁴³ His praise extended to the works of lesser-known

36 Charles Mills Gayley, *Shakespeare and the Founders of Liberty in America* (New York: Macmillan, 1917), vii, 202.

37 George Woodberry, *One Hundred Books Famous in English Literature* (New York: Grolier Club, 1902), xiii.

38 Stephen H. Grant, *Collecting Shakespeare: The Story of Henry and Emily Folger* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 139.

39 “Notes on Rare Books,” *NYT*, August 17, 1924, 19.

40 “Notes on Rare Books.”

41 “Drama,” *The Athenæum*, December 2, 1899, 769.

42 “Drama.”

43 Frederick Boas, “Selling the Nation’s Heirlooms,” *The Nineteenth Century* 86 (August 1919): 262–65 at 262.

dramatists and more eminent figures. Without explicitly mentioning Huntington, Boas expressed regret over recent acquisitions attributed to him, including items from the sale of Lord Mostyn's library.

Like the Irish Find of 1906, the Mostyn sale of 1919 involved the recovery of "lost" and extraordinarily valuable plays. There had been longstanding rumours that Mostyn Hall held valuable early plays, but little was known with certainty about the library's composition prior to the sale.⁴⁴ Readers of the Sotheby's catalogue were astonished at the 364 lots available for purchase.⁴⁵ While many of the items were of extreme rarity, some were unique copies, commercially available for the first time. This was not Mostyn's first sale: in 1907, he had anonymously tested the market with sixty-eight early plays.⁴⁶ According to the British press these were "mostly bought at high prices by American collectors."⁴⁷ Members of the American trade were enthusiastic about the upcoming 1919 sale, with *Publishers' Weekly* declaring that: "No such collection has ever been sold in England or America before."⁴⁸ British members of the trade had a more varied response: even at the risk of losing further Mostyn plays to American buyers, most members recognized the vital function auctions played in establishing pricing for items lacking an established commercial history.⁴⁹

Although it came as no shock that the Mostyn plays performed well commercially, the prices exceeded predictions, raising over £40,800 across two days of sales.⁵⁰ The *Sunday Times* reported that the sale had "inflamed the public imagination," detailing how "A few fat old volumes, long mouldering in a cupboard, are pulled out, broken up and sold for £40,000."⁵¹ Huntington alone spent £10,012 at the sale.⁵² Members of the trade were stunned, declaring the Mostyn high prices of "early and little known English plays...one of the surprises of the season."⁵³ The *New York Times* characterized the bidding as "keen," with Quaritch and George D. Smith emerging as leading buyers and claiming the most expensive lots.⁵⁴ Quaritch spent £3,020 (\$15,100) on a previously

44 Llewelyn Nevill Vaughan Lloyd-Mostyn, 3rd Baron Mostyn.

45 "Notes on Sales," *The Times Literary Supplement* no. 885, January 2, 1919, 12; *Catalogue of A Most Important & Interesting Collection of Early English Plays The Property Of The Lord Mostyn ... Which Will be Sold by Auction ... 20th of March, 1919* (London: Sotheby, Wilkinson & Hodge).

46 Seymour de Ricci, *Fulgens and Lucre* (New York: Smith, 1920), 9. Quaritch purchased twenty sixteenth-century plays from the Mostyn sale in 1907. Of these, eight ended up in the Elizabethan Club collection. See Bell, "Foundation," 343.

47 "Sixteenth Century Quarto Plays in the Sale-Room: The Mostyn Collection," *Illustrated London News*, February 8, 1919, 8.

48 *Publishers' Weekly*, March 1, 1919, 571.

49 "Rare English Plays," *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, January 31, 1919, 4.

50 *Publishers' Weekly*, April 19, 1919, 1097.

51 Edmund Gosse, "Gossip In A Library," *The Sunday Times*, April 6, 1919, 5.

52 Dickinson, *Henry E. Huntington's Library of Libraries*, 124.

53 *Publishers' Weekly*, May 3, 1919, 1235.

54 "Keen Bidding For Plays," *NYT*, March 22, 1919, 7.

unrecorded copy of *Fidele and Fortunio*—listed in the catalogue as the foundation play for Shakespeare's *Two Gentlemen of Verona*.⁵⁵ Smith spent even more on the unique copy of *Fulgens and Lucres*, paying £3,400 (\$17,000).⁵⁶ The British press labelled *Fulgens and Lucres* the earliest Elizabethan drama yet discovered.⁵⁷ *Publishers' Weekly* praised the play as the "bright particular jewel" of the sale, boasting that the copy "will come to America, its buyer paying the record price of the year, \$17,000, for it."⁵⁸ For members of the trade, the results of the Mostyn sale proved that "London seems to be in accord with New York so far as its appreciation of Early English literature is concerned," and there were predictions that the success of the sale would lure other drama collections out into the market.⁵⁹

There was indeed a surge of commercial activity following the Mostyn sale, fostered by the favourable market conditions of the early 1920s: motivated buyers were presented with unique opportunities. Prominent sales of early drama included the Herschel V. Jones sales of 1918 and 1919, the sale of William A. White's library in 1923 to Huntington for \$260,000, and the 1926 sale of John L. Clawson's library.⁶⁰ The Clawson sale is now recognized as the "monetary peak of the enthusiasm for the Elizabethans," producing an average price per lot that broke all records in American book-auction history.⁶¹ Scholars of early English drama must have observed the market in astonishment. As early as 1902, the *New York Times* reported that an American collector who had acquired a first edition of "Merry Devil of Edmonton" for £300 had been:

scoffed at by certain bibliographical writers who cannot understand the present appreciation of rare examples of the early English drama. The other native collector who paid in February, 1901, the large sum of £620 for Shakespeare's "Titus Andronicus," 1611, was criticized by the same all-wise authorities, who referred to it as 'a fantastic price.'⁶²

Collectors often justified their acquisitions by asserting that their libraries provided researchers with improved access to rare texts. As one of the original trustees of the Huntington Library insisted: "Manuscripts that have reposed in private coffers and books that have escaped the scholar in the safe retreat of country houses will soon serve for the production of new chapters in the history of literature."⁶³ Charles Mills Gayley, arguably the foremost American drama scholar of the period, openly acknowledged

55 Lot 107; *Publishers' Weekly*, April 12, 1919, 1019.

56 Lot 226; *Publishers' Weekly*, May 3, 1919, 1235.

57 Gosse, "Gossip," 5.

58 *Publishers' Weekly*, May 3, 1919, 1235. Today the copy is Huntington Library 62599.

59 *Publishers' Weekly*, April 19, 1097.

60 Dickinson, *Henry E. Huntington's Library of Libraries*, 193.

61 Wolf and Fleming, *Rosenbach: A Biography*, 252–53.

62 "Early Plays. Their Rarity and Rise in Value," *NYT*, December 6, 1902, 35.

63 George Ellery Hale, "The Huntington Library and Art Gallery," *Scribner's Magazine* 82.1 (July 1927): 31–43 at 43.

that access to rare texts was a genuine concern. In 1904 Gayley admitted that the “draw-back to scholarship in America is a lack of original manuscripts...scholars of all kinds find it necessary to travel thousands of miles, and to spend thousands of dollars, for the purpose of consulting priceless manuscripts or early printed books.”⁶⁴ However, for Gayley, what American scholars needed was not private collectors bringing more rare books to America, but access to a larger collection of facsimiles. Gayley proposed the creation of a Bureau for the Reproduction of Manuscripts, which would circulate photographic facsimile editions of rare texts to subscribing universities and libraries worldwide. Gayley advocated for the scheme at the 1905 International Congress at Liège for the Reproduction of Manuscripts, Coins, and Seals. The Congress passed a resolution “unreservedly endorsing” the scheme, and Gayley was assured of the “heartly cooperation” of leading European libraries, including the British Museum, the Bodleian, the Bibliothèque Nationale, Trinity College Dublin, and the Vatican.⁶⁵ There was also broad support at home, with the librarian at Brown University, H. L. Koopman, declaring: “I consider the facsimile reproduction of original manuscripts and unique or rare printed books to be a work of the highest importance to American scholarship.”⁶⁶ Ultimately, however, securing sufficient financial support proved impossible, and Gayley’s scheme was never implemented.⁶⁷

If Gayley considered American private libraries an alternative to his Bureau for the Reproduction of Manuscripts, he kept these views quiet. Despite being largely based at the University of California, Berkeley, situated far from both East Coast and European libraries, Gayley produced pioneering scholarship on early English drama. Long before the Towneley manuscript arrived in California, Gayley identified the “Wakefield Master,” a writer he believed to be responsible for the most significant literary works within the manuscript.⁶⁸ By 1905, Gayley had published a landmark study of early English Comedy as well as a successful “medieval” miracle play entitled *The Star of Bethlehem* (performed before both American and English audiences).⁶⁹ Acknowledging these and other contributions to literary scholarship, Gayley was granted honorary membership in the Elizabethan Club in 1912. As a member, Gayley would have had opportunities to interact with notable collectors, including Beverly Chew, George Plimpton, and William A. White. Gayley would also have crossed paths with fellow scholars like George Woodberry, who authored the Introduction to the Grolier Club’s *One Hundred Books Famous in English Literature*, and Schelling.⁷⁰ Curiously, while Club membership could be reason-

64 “The Plan in Detail,” *The Evening Post*, November 19, 1904, 30.

65 “International Congress on Facsimiles,” *The Evening Post*, September 9, 1905, 22.

66 “Plan in Detail,” 30.

67 Benjamin P. Kurtz, *Charles Mills Gayley* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1943), 181.

68 Gayley, “The Later Miracle Plays of England.”

69 Charles Mills Gayley, *Representative Comedies* (New York: Macmillan, 1903); Charles Mills Gayley, *The Star of Bethlehem* (New York: Fox, Duffield, 1904).

70 *The Book of the Elizabethan Club* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1912), 41.

ably expected to foster collaboration between collectors and scholars, Gayley showed little professional interest in private collections.

Though he argued that the Towneley manuscript's *Second Shepherds' Play* was a masterpiece that "excels any other play written before the sixteenth century," worthy of being "read in every college and known by every gentleman to-day," there is no evidence that Gayley advocated for American ownership when the manuscript became available for purchase.⁷¹ The Huntington Library holds no correspondence between Gayley and Huntington.⁷² This remained the case even after Huntington acquired the Kemble-Devonshire plays, a purchase which eventually brought 7,500 English plays and the earliest manuscript of the medieval Chester Cycle to California.⁷³

Although Gayley appeared to resist the commercial aspects of early dramatic literature, American collectors typically made limited use of scholarly views, and primarily to bolster or facilitate commercial assessments. Even the most scholarly dealers, Rosenbach and Gabriel Wells, expressed reservations about scholarly involvement in the formation of collections. Wells remarked that, "Great readers are no respecters of books."⁷⁴ Rosenbach stated more bluntly that:

It is a wonderful and magnificent thing that the gathering of books in this country is in the hands of leaders of her industries, the so-called business kings, and not in the hands of college professors and great scholars. The latter, generally, in forming a collection make a sad mess of it.⁷⁵

While scholars and collectors shared an interest in the historical and political significance of individual plays, collectors were far more invested in provenance, a fact reflected in commercial narratives. For collectors, "provenance is at once a cachet of excellence and a sentimental link in a cultural chain which binds one age to another."⁷⁶ Many early English plays were admired for their outstanding pedigree. Some of the most distinguished nineteenth- and early twentieth-century collectors had acquired early drama, with De Ricci observing that, "Nothing is scarcer, nothing is more desirable for a collector than these...the earliest plays in English literature."⁷⁷ Members of the famous Roxburghe Club had collected drama, and some of the earliest Roxburghe publications featured dramatic texts. Roxburghe editions included: *A Proper New Interlude of the*

71 Charles Mills Gayley, *Plays of Our Forefathers* (New York: Duffield and Co., 1907), 182; Gayley, *Star of Bethlehem*, xvi.

72 I wish to thank the staff of the Huntington Library for providing this information.

73 Dickinson, *Henry E. Huntington's Library of Libraries*, 66. Today the Chester Cycle is San Marino, Huntington Library, MS HM 2.

74 Gabriel Wells, "The Evolution of the Book Collector," *The Bookman* 51.2 (April 1920): 180–86 at 181.

75 A. S. W. Rosenbach, *Books and Bidders* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1927), 254.

76 Edwin Wolf II, "Some Books of Early English Provenance in the Library Company of Philadelphia," *The Book Collector* 9 (1960): 275–85 at 275.

77 Seymour de Ricci, *The Book Collector's Guide* (Philadelphia: Rosenbach, 1921), 312.

World and the Child, Otherwise Called Mundus et Infans (presented to the Club by John Charles Spencer, Viscount Althorp in 1817); *Chester Mysteries* (presented by James Heywood Markland in 1818); *Two Interludes: Jack Jugler and Thersytes* (presented by Joseph Haselwood in 1820); *Magnyfycence: an Interlude* (presented by Joseph Littledale in 1821); and *Judicium, a Pageant. Extracted from the Towneley Manuscript of Ancient Mysteries* (presented by Peregrine Edward Towneley in 1822).

These early Roxburghe editions themselves became collectible. Huntington not only purchased original plays formerly belonging to Roxburghe members, but he also pursued association copies of the earliest Roxburghe publications. In 1914 Huntington acquired the copy of the *Chester Mysteries* signed by James Heywood Markland and dedicated to George John Spencer, second Earl Spencer. In 1922, Huntington purchased the sixth Duke of Devonshire's personal copy of the 1822 *Judicium*. Finally, in 1921, Huntington added a second signed copy of *Chester Mysteries* that had been presented to Viscount Althorp.⁷⁸

While Roxburghe editions of dramatic literature facilitated early nineteenth-century scholarship, making certain texts available to many scholars for the first time, the spread of these reproductions did not appear to diminish the increasing values of original copies. Indeed, these publications may have effectively highlighted the patrician status of selected texts. Even facsimiles produced by scholarly societies could serve to broadcast the commercial viability of specific plays and individual copies. For example, prior to the First World War, John S. Farmer and W. W. Greg both contributed to a flurry of publications containing early English dramatic texts. Farmer undertook the reproduction of play texts for the Early English Drama Society, while Greg was engaged with Malone Society Reprints. In certain instances, these scholarly publications adopted language suitable for explicitly commercial publications. In the 1909 Malone Society edition of *Fidele and Fortunio*, the introduction does not dwell on the play's literary significance, emphasizing instead the physical attributes of the copy, past ownership, and prices achieved at various sales.⁷⁹ Even after the 1909 publication, the Mostyn copy realized the high price of £3,020 at the 1919 sale (lot 107). Conversely, there is little indication that publications placing greater emphasis on the literary significance of individual plays, such as Farmer's 1906 edition of *Gammer Gurton's Needle*, which incorporated quotations from Gayley, stalled rising commercial values within the rare book market.⁸⁰

Despite surviving in relatively large numbers for a sixteenth-century Interlude (twelve copies in total), *Gammer Gurton's Needle* had a remarkably successful commercial history.⁸¹ Throughout the nineteenth century, copies passed through signifi-

⁷⁸ I thank Stephen Tabor for providing this information.

⁷⁹ Anthony Munday, *Fidele and Fortunio*, ed. W. W. Greg (London: Chiswick Press, 1909), v–vi. This is not to suggest that Greg was personally attempting to enhance the text's market value. Greg's interest in scientific or investigative bibliography, particularly in relation to early modern drama, was well known.

⁸⁰ *Gammer Gurton's Needle*, ed. J. S. Farmer (London: Gibbings, 1906), v–xiv. It is worth noting that some collectors did worry that reproductions would damage commercial values.

⁸¹ De Ricci, *The Book Collector's Guide*, 312: "Of hardly any Interlude more than four or five copies

cant libraries, including those of notable figures like the Duke of Roxburghe, Frederick Locker-Lampson, George Daniel, Alexander Dyce, and Richard Heber.⁸² In 1912, Huntington purchased the Hoe copy for \$1,010. In July 1918, Jones acquired the Huth copy for £700, reselling it in December 1918 for \$10,000. During the 1919 Mostyn sale, two copies of this play were sold, one for £1,000 and the other for £1,200.⁸³ Buyers were often attracted to the provenance of individual copies and *Gammer Gurton's* significance in the history of theatre was as one of the earliest English comedies, rather than specifically its literary content, which at least one contemporary scholar described as "no longer amusing to educated people," with dialogue containing a "very rudimentary kind of humour which turns on physically disgusting suggestions."⁸⁴

Regardless of textual evaluations, there was a growing consensus among Americans that early plays represented worthy cultural and fiscal investments. By 1924 the *New York Times* was commenting on the strong market for early drama: "Whatever touches that magic name, Midas-like, is overspread with gold...the writings of Shakespeare and the Elizabethans are the most expensive single division of the literature that is being collected to-day."⁸⁵ One contemporary described American collectors "fling[ing] a fortune before a book," so that they could, "with a certain æsthetic pleasure...read the ticker tape of bidding in the open book market and see their purchases rise in value to undreamed of heights."⁸⁶ These high prices tempted collectors who had not previously considered selling. In 1922, White asked Rosenbach to price his 1598 copy of *Richard II*. In 1890 White had paid \$348 for the volume, but Rosenbach estimated he could now get \$50,000. White reportedly told Rosenbach: "I've never sold a Shakespeare quarto in my life, but I'm sorely tempted. I'm itching to tell my sceptical family that I wasn't such a fool when I invested money in what they considered playthings."⁸⁷

Within this dynamic market, manuscript drama held a distinctive position. Esteemed by scholars and collectors for being more unmediated than print, manuscripts were perceived as having closer ties to playwrights and original performance conditions.⁸⁸ On the market, manuscript drama represented the merging of historical significance with commercial value. While not all literary manuscripts achieved commercial success, there was no question that a Shakespearean manuscript would prove extremely desirable for collectors. Folger wrote about the high value he personally placed on manuscripts,

are known."

82 De Ricci, *The Book Collector's Guide*, 251.

83 Provenance and sales details from De Ricci, *The Book Collector's Guide*, 251.

84 Henry Bradley, "William Stevenson," in *Representative Comedies*, ed. Charles Mills Gayley (New York: Macmillan, 1903), 195–204 at 202.

85 "Notes on Rare Books," *NYT*, August 10, 1924, 19.

86 Montrose Moses, "Will Shakespeare in Washington," *The North American Review* 234.3 (August 1932): 139–48 at 142.

87 Wolf and Fleming, *Rosenbach: A Biography*, 160–61.

88 See Paul Werstine, "Plays in Manuscript," in *A New History of Early English Drama*, ed. John C. Cox and David Scott Kastan (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 481–99.

declaring that: "I have felt that they are of greater interest than printed books."⁸⁹ As for Huntington, it is worth noting that his first three manuscript accession numbers were plays: the Towneley manuscript (HM 1), the Chester Cycle (HM 2), and John Bale's *King John* (HM 3).

Returning to our initial discussion of Rosenbach, in 1922 he had estimated that the Towneley manuscript might sell for £10,000–£15,000. Following the London auction, Rosenbach sent Huntington a triumphant telegram informing him that he had just acquired the manuscript for £3,400, far less than Rosenbach had predicted, but still a record price for manuscript drama.⁹⁰ The condition of the manuscript was not pristine, and its textual contents were unfamiliar to many. However, the manuscript had steadily risen in commercial value throughout the nineteenth century. The manuscript's antiquity, its past ownership by an early member of the Roxburghe Club, its perceived status within literary history, and the robustness of the market for early English drama all combined to establish the characteristics of an exceedingly desirable rare book.⁹¹ Furthermore, the manuscript's somewhat enigmatic early history added to its allure: uncertainties persisted about its place of origin and the date of its production.⁹² Nevertheless, what could be affirmed with certainty was that the manuscript had been "recovered" during the early nineteenth century within the aristocratic surroundings of Towneley Hall. All these factors contributed to Rosenbach's assessment of the manuscript's commercial potential, leading him to predict that the Towneley manuscript would rank among the most expensive books in trade history.

89 Grant, *Collecting Shakespeare*, 79.

90 This auction price and details of the sale can be confirmed in various sources, including Edwards, "A State of Absolute Rarity," 442. Correspondence in San Marino, Huntington Library, HEH INST. ARCHIVES 31.1.1.39.1.

91 The manuscript was owned by Roxburghe Club member, Peregrine Edward Towneley.

92 A comparison of sales catalogue entries highlights these uncertainties. The manuscript was first sold in 1814 from the library of John Towneley. In 1815 the manuscript was sold by John Louis Goldsmid, and in 1819 it was sold with the library of John North. In 1883, the manuscript featured in the Towneley library auction and remained with Quaritch until 1900. Subsequently, Edward Coates owned the manuscript until his death in 1921. See Martin Stevens, "The Manuscript of the *Towneley Plays*: Its History and Editions," *The Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 67 (1973): 231–44.