

Shakespeare and the Post-Horses : a New Study of "The Merry Wives of Windsor." By J. CROFTS. (University of Bristol Studies No. 5.) Bristol : published for the University by J. W. Arrowsmith, 1937. Pp. 231. 10s. 6d. net.

THE horse-stealing episode in *The Merry Wives* is altogether a mysterious affair, nor has research uncovered any posting scandal connected with Count Mömpelgart, or any such trick of impersonation as seems to be implied by the fossilized fragments embedded in the play. Professor Crofts, dating the piece 1596-7 in deference to Mr. Hotson's speculations about William Gardiner, has unearthed a very real posting scandal (incidentally in Somerset) which he interweaves with the contemporary intrigues of Essex and the Lord Admiral at Court. Thus the "cozening Germans" became the "cousin-germans" of Elizabeth, and the "Duke de Iarmanie" the Earl of Nottingham¹; the earlier Windsor version was revamped by Shakespeare for performance at Essex House on 14th February 1598 by the Earl's players, the "third company" suppressed by the Privy Council's letter of the 19th. It is all very ingenious, quite amusing, and highly improbable.

We pass on to the text. There are in the bad quarto of 1602 about a dozen phrases or short sentences that critics have shown some disposition to regard as Shakespeare's, though they are not found in the folio. Professor Crofts observed that these passages tend to occur at intervals of 62 *quarto* lines, or multiples of that number, and he suggests that they are absent from the folio because, standing at the foot of various pages, they had been thumbed away in the manuscript which Shakespeare had before him when revising and partly rewriting the play to produce the later version. But Shakespeare obviously cannot have worked on the pirated report that served as "copy" for the quarto. It follows that the report either agreed exactly and continuously in length with the original manuscript, or (as Professor Crofts appears to think) shortened it throughout in

¹ Incidentally "cosen garmombles" becomes the reporter's version of an actor's slurring of a dangerous allusion to "cousin-germans"—in fact, one might suggest "cosen ger—(mumbles)"!

a constant ratio. Either seems to me inconceivable. Moreover, Shakespeare's revision is assigned to 1597, so that the piratical report, though not printed till 1602, must presumably have been in existence before that date. But the quarto contains a line: "What is the reason that you vse me thus?" which is an actor's interpolation from *Hamlet*, and makes it very unlikely that the performance upon which the report was based can have been earlier than 1600. I can hardly agree with Professor Croft's description of himself as "an unimaginative investigator." At the same time I have no alternative explanation to propose of the curious fact he has observed—if indeed it be a fact and not a mirage.

The author has some interesting speculations concerning the alterations the play must at one time or another have undergone, but they would have been more convincing for greater economy of hypothesis. His final "History of the Play" is almost too imaginative to submit to criticism.

Incidentally the book contains much useful information in regard to the Elizabethan posting system, which is the outcome of considerable research: unfortunately the references to authorities are sometimes careless.