CROSSES AND CROWNS
A STUDY OF COINAGE
IN THE ELIZABETHAN DRAMATISTS
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The plays of the Elizabethan period have left us an exceptionally full record of the language of the time. Coins and monetary transactions are frequently mentioned in them, both in the prose and in the verse parts, and we can extract from them what must be a fairly complete list of the ways in which the coins were spoken of. The English coinage of the Elizabethan period is very well known and presents few problems; consequently the greater part of the references to coins are readily understandable. Anachronisms, of course, occur, especially in the historical plays. Edward the Confessor, for instance, is said in Macbeth to have presented angels to those whom he touched for the King’s Evil, a refinement to the ceremony which was not introduced until the reign of Henry VII. The chief interest, however, of the passages where coins are mentioned lies in the persistence with which coins are made the medium for quibbles. Such names as noble, angel, or crown lent themselves to this treatment, and in other cases colloquialisms, such as “cross” for penny or “ruddock” for gold-piece, provided equal opportunities for the conceits which the Elizabethans loved. In this paper are collected a number of passages where coins are mentioned, in order to illustrate the way in which this happened. In many cases the explanation is obvious, but in a few we have had to enter into a more detailed discussion.

Of the regular gold coins in the reign of Elizabeth the angel is mentioned far more frequently than any other. The pound is often referred to, but chiefly as money of account.¹ This is made quite clear, for instance, in Arden of Feversham. Greene, the agent, offers a bribe of ten pounds in advance and twenty pounds on completion for a murder.

¹ However, the following passage occurs in Two Gentlemen of Verona:

Proteus: Nay, in that you are astray; ’twere best pound you.
Speed: Nay, sir, less than a pound shall serve me for carrying your letter.
Proteus: You mistake: I mean the pound, a pinfold.
This is later converted into twenty and forty angels respectively. Finally the sum is doubled, and Alice, the wife, offers twenty pounds and forty pounds for the same congenial task. She describes the payment by saying, “My hands shall play you golden harmony.”

The angel, however, is mentioned always as a coin. Shakespeare describes it in *The Merchant of Venice*:

*Morocco*: They have in England
A coin that bears the figure of an angel
Stamped in gold, but that’s insculp’d upon.

Elsewhere it is used by him as the occasion for conceits. Here are two examples:

*King John*: And ere our coming, see thou shake the bags
Of hoarding abbots; set at liberty
Imprison’d angels. *(King John.)*

*Chief Justice*: You follow the young prince up and down like his ill angel.

*Falstaff*: Not so... Your ill angel is light, but I hope he that looks upon me will take me without weighing. *(Henry IV, Pt. II.)*

In the last quotation the Chief Justice meant his remark to be taken literally. Falstaff makes a joke of it by taking angel in the sense of coin. No one could accuse him of being a light weight; therefore he cannot be an ill angel.

The crown is mentioned in many places, but in most of these the context shows that the coin intended was not the English crown of 5 shillings, but the French crown or écu, worth about 6 shillings and 4 pence, which circulated freely in this country. In fact we have come across no references in which the crown is definitely English, though in some there is nothing to determine the issue. It is clear, however, that crown in most cases meant French crown, even when the context does not specify its nationality, an interesting reminder of the part played by foreign currency in England. To these French crowns we shall return later.

In addition to coins struck in Elizabeth’s reign, many obsolete coins still circulated and these are occasionally mentioned. In *Henry IV, Pt. II.*, Falstaff says of Prince Henry: “I will sooner have a beard grow in the palm of my hand than he shall get one on his cheek; and yet he will not stick to say, his face is a face-royal; God may finish it when he will, it is not a hair amiss yet; he may keep it still as a face-royal, for a barber shall never earn sixpence out of it.”
Shakespeare clearly had in mind one of the Ryals (or Royals) of Edward IV, which must have been rare by this time. The point of the joke is that the figure of the King on the ryal is beardless,¹ and thus a beardless face can be a "face-royal".

The passage we have just quoted is an obvious anachronism. A worse example occurs in the same play: "And here's four Harry ten shillings in French crowns for you." The Harry ten shillings are, of course, the base half-sovereigns of the end of Henry VIII's reign. By the time this play was written they were current at a very much reduced rate, scarcely above the value of their gold content. It seems probable that they were accepted as the rough equivalent of a French crown and therefore the sum which passed hands consisted of four French crowns.

The names of English gold coins were picturesque enough not to call for more elaborate nicknames, but occasionally gold coins are referred to under the name of ruddock. Strictly speaking ruddock was another name for robin, but it occurs quite as often in its secondary sense. In The London Prodigal it is applied to the noble: "He hath the nobles, the golden ruddockes he." In Sir John Oldcastle, however, it is clear from the context that it refers to angels. In a similar passage from The Case is Altered the Jew murmurs as he picks up his golden pieces, "O my fair feathered, my red breasted birds". In this case the context shows that he is referring to crowns. We have, therefore, three instances in each of which the word ruddock or its equivalent refers to a different gold coin. The use of the word must have been suggested by the reddish colour of the gold; it is clear from many passages that the Elizabethans were very interested in the colour of their coins. Indeed, it was by the colour that they could most easily tell the quality of the metal. Gold, as we have seen, is thought of as red; hence the connexion with ruddock or redbreast, but it is also mentioned as yellow. Silver, on the other hand, is always thought of as white. Indeed, "white money" was a regular medieval and Tudor name for silver coins, and "blanching" was a

¹ Medieval representations of kings were generally beardless, irrespective of whether the king represented had a beard or not. It is not only true of coins, but, for instance, of the royal heads which so frequently appear amongst the corbels of medieval churches. Indeed, there seems to be a close affinity between the portrait types in both cases.
process in their manufacture. In the Morocco scene of the Merchant of Venice there occurs the line:

What says the silver with her virgin hue?

an interesting example of this use, for virgin is intended to convey the idea of purity and whiteness. We shall meet other examples of this interest later.

Silver coins in Elizabeth’s reign were naturally more numerous than gold and are mentioned more often. Of these the groat and the penny are the commonest, though both shillings and sixpences are often mentioned too. Both shilling and groat could be used as moneys of account, as in the phrase “seven groats in mill-sixpences”, to which we shall return later. The shilling, when thought of as a coin, was more usually called by the name testoon. In one place Shakespeare has “coined” the impossible word “testerned” (“To testify to your bounty, I thank you, you have testerned me”, Two Gentlemen of Verona). Base testoons of Henry VIII’s or Edward VI’s reigns are occasionally the subject of jokes. When worn, the coins became reddish and lost all appearance of silver. A contemporary couplet runs:

These testoons look red; how like you the same?
'Tis a token of grace; they blush for shame.

Here we have another example of the interest in the colour of coins.

In Elizabeth’s reign the groat was rapidly being displaced in the popular favour by the sixpence, an almost new denomination. Sixpences are often mentioned in the plays, but do not raise any problems except in the few instances where they are called “mill-sixpences”. These fine coins, as is well known, were the first products of the “mill and screw” technique which was introduced to this country by Eloi Mestrel in Elizabeth’s reign. One would expect that coins so greatly superior in all respects to their predecessors of the hammered coinage would have been welcomed by the public. Actually there is some evidence, which the Elizabethan dramatists support, that the contrary was the case.

In The Merry Wives of Windsor Slender says that he has been robbed of: “seven groats in Mill Sixpences and two Edward Shovel-boards, that cost me two shillings and two pence apiece of Yead Miller, by these gloves.” Seven groats
or twenty-eight pence is not divisible into sixpences, and it was suggested by Sir John Evans that the coins may have commanded a premium and passed at 7d. each. A passage from The Gypsy's Metamorphosis is consistent with this:

Clod: No, but a mill sixpence of my mother I loved as dearly, and a twopence I had to spend over and above; besides the harper that was gathered amongst us to pay the piper.

It is clear in this passage that the mill-sixpence was regarded with affection, but it does not necessarily follow that it commanded a premium. It may equally have been treasured as a keepsake. (With the harper we shall deal later; it was an Irish harp-shilling.)

A third mention of the coin strongly supports the latter alternative. It is from Davenant's *News from Plymouth*:

A few mill'd sixpences with which
My purser casts accompt is all I've left.

Here it is implied that mill-sixpences were of no value as ordinary money and could only be used as counters. Counters were, of course, worthless, and were usually made of brass.

This possibility that mill-sixpences were of little or no value as coins receives considerable support from the coins themselves. When found in hoards they have invariably received damage quite out of proportion to their natural wear and tear. They have been intentionally hammered and dented until it requires more than a casual glance to distinguish them from "hammered" sixpences. So regular is this that it can hardly be a coincidence. We can only conclude that it was difficult to pass the coins so long as they preserved their fresh and shiny appearance. People long accustomed to the indifferent quality of medieval and Tudor coins viewed with suspicion anything so spectacular. Milled sixpences could only be used, then, as counters or keepsakes, or passed for less than their face value. The issue, in fact, only lasted a few years. Slender's "seven groats in mill sixpences" may well have meant seven mill-sixpences. Or perhaps the joke is that his mathematics were as bad as his sense of business.

The shovel-boards which are mentioned in the same con-

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1 Published 1673; hence the reference could not be to a milled sixpence of Charles II, which was first struck in 1674.
text were fine metal testoons of Edward VI. They were used in a game called "Shovel-Board", a Tudor form of shove-halfpenny. They are mentioned in a number of places in Elizabethan drama and the game was quite as popular as its successor to-day. There is a poem by Taylor, the Water Poet, which describes the Edward shillings used in it:

You see my face is beardless, smooth and plaine,
Because my Sovereign was a child, 'tis known,
Whenas he did put on the English crown.
But had my stamp been bearded as with hair,
Long before this it had been worn and bare.
For why? With me the unfit everyday
With my face downwards do at Shove-board play
That had I had a beard, you may suppose
Th' had worn it off as they have done my nose.

The nose of Edward VI on these coins must have been the first part to get rubbed, for he is shown full face. In Jonson's Everyman in his Humour begging petitions are made to "run as smooth off the tongue as shove-groat shillings". The name given to the game here implies that groats had been used in the game before the general introduction of testoons. Before Henry VIII groats were of much the same diameter as Edward VI shillings.

The silver coin which gave the Elizabethan dramatists their best opportunity for conceits was the penny. Occasionally it is mentioned as such, occasionally under the medieval name of sterling ("An if my word be sterling yet in England", Richard II), but most often it is referred to as a "cross". The name was due to the fact that from time immemorial the penny had borne a cross on its reverse side. Other coins often had the same device, and in one case at any rate "cross" refers to coinage in a general way:

And yet I'll give her many a golden cross,
With Christian posies round about the ring.¹

(Marlowe, Jew of Malta.)

The "golden cross" is not likely to be any particular coin, though many gold coins, including the French crown, fit the description.

The name could also be used to mean the reverse itself; in Wycherley's Love in a Wood "throwing up cross or pile"

¹ Compare Hamlet: "Pray God your voice, like a piece of uncurrent gold, be not cracked within the ring."
Crosses and Crowns

is used to mean what we should now describe as tossing heads or tails. In the vast majority of cases, however, it is used simply as the equivalent of penny and was the source of a large number of plays on words. Here are two instances from Shakespeare:

Chief Justice: Not a penny, not a penny; you are too impatient to bear crosses. 
(Henry IV, Pt. II.)

Armado (protesting): I love not to be crossed.¹
Moth: He speaks the mere contrary; crosses love not him. 
(Love's Labour's Lost.)

The name has survived to-day in the gipsy's "Cross my hand, lady".

A coin peculiar to this reign, the three-farthing piece, is the subject of a very pretty allusion in King John:

My face so thin,
That in mine ear I durst not stick a rose,
Lest men should say "Look where three farthings goes".

As is well known, in Elizabeth's reign the sixpence and its fractions, the threepence, the penny-halfpenny, and the three-farthings were distinguished from the groat and its fractions, the half-groat and the penny, by the presence of a rose behind the queen's head. But for this some of the coins could easily have been confused. In this passage the Bastard is describing what he would do if he had the misfortune to be as thin as his brother. All he says, in effect, is that he would be as thin² as a three-farthings, but, true to the Elizabethan convention, he drags in the elaborate parallel of the rose which distinguished this diminutive coin from the penny. It was the smallest coin on which the queen's portrait appeared.

¹ According to current interpretations of the play Armado is a thinly disguised representation of Raleigh, whose membership of the atheistic School of Night is hinted at in the phrase, "I love not to be crossed".

² All coins at this period were, of course, relatively thin. In Sir John Oldcastle, Sir John of Wrotham breaks an angel with his teeth on the stage, and gives one half to Henry V. A similar situation occurs in Shakespeare's Henry V, but there they exchange gloves. Perhaps Shakespeare had too much respect for angels!

In Henry VIII mention is made of a coin folded in two. Anne Bullen tells an Old Lady that "not for all the riches under heaven" would she be a queen; to which the Old Lady replies:

'Tis strange; a threepence bow’d would hire me,
Old as I am, to queen it.

Such "bow’d" coins were used as lovers' tokens. The mention of a "threepence" is of course an anachronism in the reign of Henry VIII.
There is a passage to be compared with this in Beaumont and Fletcher's *Scornful Lady*. Loveless, speaking of Morecraft, the Usurer, says:

He had a bastard, his own toward issue,  
Whipped and then cropped, for washing out the roses  
In three farthings to make them pence.

Actually the smallest coin of the realm at this time was the silver halfpenny, but it did not bear a portrait. It is often mentioned in the plays; in *Henry IV*, *Pt. I*, it is referred to under its medieval name of obol. The last entry on Falstaff's bill is "Item . . . bread . . . ob"; to this Prince Henry exclaims. "O monstrous! but one half-penny worth of bread to this intolerable deal of sack!"

Farthings did not form part of the official currency of Elizabeth's reign. They were not issued until James I's reign, when they took the form of small brass tokens. They are referred to in Massinger's *Virgin Martyr*. Angelo asks for "a piece of silver", and Spungius replies, "A piece of silver! I never had but two calves in my life and those my mother left me. I would sooner part from the fat of them than from a mustard-token's worth of argent!" The interest of this passage lies in the word "mustard", which seems to refer to the yellow colour of the brass. "Calf" may also have been a colloquialism for some coin, but its identity is not known.

Though references to English coins are generally clear and unambiguous, the same cannot be said of references to foreign coins. Some of these raise literary problems which are difficult to solve. The foremost of these is the mystery which surrounds the French crown. There can be no doubt what coin was generally intended by this name; it was the French écu, sometimes also referred to by its true name or by the name "scute". It was a gold coin having on one side a floral cross and on the other a shield with the arms of France. It appears, however, that the name was used in a wider sense as well to cover other varieties of foreign coins which circulated in this country and were of roughly similar appearance. The various Flemish gulden or gilders were coins of more or less equal weight, but of a poorer gold alloy; they often had a pattern not unlike that of the French écu, and could be passed off on the ignorant as the equivalent of the more valuable coins. In Marlowe's *Faustus* is a passage
which shows clearly that guilders could be described as French crowns.

_Wagner_: Hold, take these guilders.
_Clown_: Gridirons? What be they?
_Wagner_: Why! French crowns.
_Clown_: Mass, but for the name of French crowns, a man were as good have as many English counters.

The Clown has a very low opinion of the guilders, for he can describe them as no better than English counters. On the other hand, he regards French crowns as well worth having. Yet the name "French crowns" could be applied to the guilders.

Thus we see that French crowns were of at least two qualities. Though in most cases they are simply described as such, there are a number of passages in which they are referred to as "bald", and there is no doubt this was used as a term of disapproval. Here are some instances:

Angelo: Bestow it, bid thy hands shed golden drops;
Let these bald French crowns be uncovered.

(Jonson, _The Case is Altered._)

_Falstaff_: Thy precious rich crown for a pitiful bald crown.

(Henry IV, Pt. I.)

_Fool_: Thou had'st little wit in thy bald crown
When thou gavest thy golden one away.

(King Lear.)

_Bottom_: I will discharge it in . . . your French-crown beard, your perfect yellow.

_Quince_: Some of your French crowns have no hair at all and then you will play bare faced.

(Midsummer-Night's Dream.)

The context of the last quotation shows that Bottom will be playing without a beard. The phraseology makes it clear that not all French crowns can be described as bald.

The bald French crown therefore seems to have been a poorer version of the genuine French crown, and it is probably correct to identify it with the Flemish guilder which we have already met. The similarity between the two was sufficient to explain the use of the name "French crown" for both, but it is very difficult to find any meaning for the word "bald".

There are no Flemish guilders of the time on which a sovereign is represented as bald or beardless, for the passages quoted show that the word may be used in either sense. It is therefore necessary to find some metaphorical meaning for the word which can explain its use in this connexion.
It at first occurred to us that bald or hairless might mean rubbed or worn, but this explanation fails because there is no reason why French crowns should enjoy the exclusive privilege of being rubbed. The word could equally be applied, if this were its meaning, to any worn coin, but there is no trace that this was so. In the passage from Taylor, previously quoted, rubbed shillings are called beardless, but this is not a fair parallel because it refers to the rubbing off of hair from the portrait, not to the general wear and tear of the coin.

A second suggestion is that "bald" might be used as the equivalent of "unadorned" or "dull" in colour. Flemish guilders, as other coins of base gold, could be made to have the same appearance as fine gold when new; but a very little wear was sufficient to produce a reddish tint and a duller surface on the parts in higher relief. This, of course, did not happen with fine gold coins. It seems that the Elizabethan mind could see an analogy between the reddish alloy which showed through the golden yellow surface and a bald pate which shows through thinning locks. That a gold coin could be thought of as blonde or fair is suggested by a passage from Love's Labour's Lost: "Remuneration! why it is a fairer name than French crown." Far-fetched as it seems, this is very likely the right explanation.

There is a passage in Jonson's Everyman in his Humour where the boy has called hounds "forerunners" This is considered "an excellent figure" of speech. Carlo retorts: "You should give him a French crown for it; the boy would find two better figures in that." The probable explanation of this joke is that the two figures are the two faces of the coin, the obverse and the reverse. The word figures would have been pronounced as in French, figures (= faces), a practice for which there are a number of parallels.

A good instance of foreign coins which circulated in England occurs in Marlowe's Jew of Malta. Barabbas, the Jew, is engaged in bargaining over the purchase of a slave. One is offered to him at 200 crowns, and he answers that if his thieving capacities can be guaranteed, he really is worth 300 plats (elsewhere plates). Finally he decides to economize and takes a slave at 200 plats. It seems from this that

1 It is possible that there is also a reference to the baldness produced by the 'French disease', a common Elizabethan jest against the French.
300 plats were equivalent to 200 crowns, and he makes it clear that 200 plats is less than 200 crowns. If the crowns are French crowns, worth about 6s. 4d., we can explain the plats as Spanish silver dollars or pieces of Eight, worth about 4s. 6d. In *The Honest Whore* these coins are called “Cobs” (= herrings). The name “plate” came from the Spanish word for silver, *plata*, and Spain was at this time the chief source of Europe’s supply of silver. We thus have the same sum mentioned twice, each time in terms of foreign currency, on the first occasion in terms of gold and on the second in terms of silver.

Many other foreign coins, of course, are mentioned from ducats to deniers (“My dukedom to a beggarly denier”, *Richard III*), but most of these are too familiar to require illustration. Explanations of a few, however, which are not so obvious, are given below:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coin</th>
<th>Origin</th>
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<tr>
<td>Asper</td>
<td>(Beaumont and Fletcher)</td>
<td>Small Turkish coin.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bagatine</td>
<td>(Jonson)</td>
<td>Small base Venetian coin.</td>
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<td>Gazet</td>
<td>(Massinger and Jonson)</td>
<td>Small Venetian coin, later the price of a newspaper.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Doit</td>
<td>(<em>Henry VI, Pt. II</em>)</td>
<td>Small base Dutch coin.</td>
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<td>Moy</td>
<td>(<em>Henry V</em>)</td>
<td>Portuguese gold coin.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chequin</td>
<td>(Jonson)</td>
<td>Italian gold coin (= zecchino).</td>
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It is hardly right at this time to class as foreign the coins of Ireland. They were struck by the same queen and circulated freely in England, but they were on different standards and had a lower valuation in this country than in Ireland. The commonest Irish coin to be mentioned in the plays is the “harp-shilling”, a coin worth ninepence in England, which had on one side three harps in a shield. It is mentioned in Bainfield’s *Encomion of the Lady Pecunia* in a manner which is typical of the period:

Like to another Orpheus can she play
Upon her treble harp, whose silver sound
... is worth but nine pence at the most.

It must be remembered that a “treble-harp” was an actual musical instrument, treble here referring to pitch.

The treble-harp-shilling was a coin of good silver; before it was introduced, however, Elizabeth had issued in Ireland a form of shilling with a single harp upon it, the metal of which was peculiarly base, and a similar coin was struck again in the last few years of her reign. It became at once
practically worthless in this country. It was probably this coin, rather than the treble-harp-shilling, which was called the harper; as we have seen, in Jonson's *Gypsy's Metamorphosis* it was considered a suitable tip for the piper. There is in Greene's *James IV* a conundrum, the solution of which seems to lie in the difference between these two forms of harp-shilling. Andrew says:

"Now are two knaves well met and three well parted; if you conceive mine enigma, gentlemen, what shall I be then? faith a plain harp shilling."

The two knaves are the conspirators Jacques and Atenkin, who have just met; the third knave is Andrew himself, who is about to leave them. The three knaves in the enigma are thought of as the three harps on the treble-harp-shilling. On the coin these are arranged in a triangle with the two upper ones side by side ("well met") and the third one below ("well parted"). Andrew, while in the company of the conspirators, helps to form the treble-harp-shilling, but by leaving them will become a single-harp-, otherwise a "plain"-harp-shilling. It would be interesting to know if the audience of the time was able to solve this somewhat forced riddle.

In this passage, as in others we have already met, much play is made with the conception of base coins. These provided a perfect subject for comparison with moral values, especially since money was regarded as the root of all evil. Similar use, too, is regularly made of forgeries, as for instance in this passage from *Arden of Feversham*:

*Mosbie: And now the rain (i.e. tears) hath beaten off thy gilt;
Thy worthless copper shows thee counterfeit.*

Copper or brass, when mentioned in connexion with coins, invariably implies worthlessness, for there was no official coinage until the brass farthings of James I in anything but precious metals. Most passages in which forgery is mentioned are too obvious to require explanation, but an unusual example was discussed in the last issue of this Journal. In *Henry IV, Pt. II*, Falstaff describes his companions as "gilt twopences", comparing himself to them as of fine gold. In this case the forgery consisted of gilding silver half-groats to make them resemble the very similar gold half-crowns, which, indeed, were struck from the same obverse dies. One such gilt twopence is in the British Museum.

In addition to forgeries counters are often mentioned as
worthless. We have quoted one or two instances already. At the time all counters used in this country were imported, the majority from Nuremberg, but some from elsewhere. So far as we know none were made in England. It is therefore hard to explain exactly what is meant in the quotation from Marlowe's *Faustus* by *English* counters. There are counters which closely resemble coin types. Lyly refers to these in his *Euphues*: "There is a copper coin of the stamp that gold is, yet is it not current." It may have been one of these counters made in imitation of an English coin which the Clown had in mind. The remark may, however, be no more than a piece of patriotic misstatement.

Somewhat akin with the tendency to compare monetary and moral values is the tendency for coin references to turn to blasphemy. The names of coins, largely derived from religion, lent themselves to this treatment. "Here are the angels that you sent for to deliver you" (*Comedy of Errors*) is a typical example. In Jonson's *Everyman in his Humour* occurs the phrase "Not a cross, by Jesu", in the sense of "not a penny". In the second edition, printed in the reign of James I, the "by Jesu" was omitted. This was due to James I's prohibition of blasphemy on the stage. There was to be no mention of the name of God, a licence which had been permitted in the court of Elizabeth.

It would be possible to prolong indefinitely this series of quotations, but those we have given are enough to show the chief ways in which coins are mentioned in the plays. There are many more problems awaiting solution, and there is room for much more work on them. Here is another opportunity for the numismatist to apply his knowledge outside the field of coinage proper.