A MIRROR FOR MAGISTRATES: being a true Chronicle Historie of the untimely falles of such unfortunate Princes and men of note, as have happened since the first entrance of Brute into this Iland, untill this our latter Age. Newly enlarged with a last part, called A WINTER NIGHTS VISION, being an addition of such Tragedies, especially famous, as are exempted in the former Historie, with a Poem annexed, called ENGLAND'S ELIZA. At London. Imprinted by Felix Kyngston, 1610.

This huge quarto of 875 pages, all in verse, is the final form, though far from the latest impression, of a poetical miscellany which had been swelling and spreading for nearly sixty years without ever losing its original character. We may obtain some imperfect notion of the Mirror for Magistrates if we imagine a composite poem planned by Sir Walter Scott, and contributed to by Wordsworth and Southey, being still issued, generation after generation, with additions by the youngest versifiers of to-day. The Mirror for Magistrates was conceived when Mary's protomartyrs were burning at Smithfield, and it was not finished until James I. had been on the throne seven years. From first to last, at least sixteen writers had a finger in this pie, and the youngest of them was not born when the eldest of them died.

It is commonly said, even by such exact critics as the late Dean Church, that the Mirror for Magistrates was planned by the most famous of the poets who took part in its execution, Thomas Sackville, Lord Buckhurst. If a very clever man is combined in any enterprise with people of less prominence, it is ten to one that he gets all the credit of the adventure. But the evidence on this point goes to prove that it was not until the work was well advanced that Sackville contributed to it at all. The inventor of the Mirror for Magistrates seems, rather, to have been George Ferrers, a prominent lawyer and politician, who was master of the King's Pastimes at the very close of Henry VIII.'s reign. Ferrers was ambitious to create a drama in England, and lacked only genius to be the British Aeschylus. The time was not ripe, but he was evidently very anxious to set the world tripping to his goatherd's pipe. He advertised for help in these designs, and the list of persons he wanted is an amusing one; he was willing to engage "a divine, a philosopher, an astronomer, a poet, a physician, an apothecary, a master of requests, a civilian, a clown, two gentlemen ushers, besides jugglers, tumblers, fools, friars, and such others." Fortune sent him, from Oxford, one William Baldwin, who was most of these things, especially divine and poet, and who became Ferrers' confidential factotum. The master and assistant-master of Pastimes were humming merrily on at their masques and triumphs, when, the King expired. Under Queen Mary, revels might not flourish, but the friendship between Ferrers and Baldwin did not cease. They planned a more doleful but more durable form of entertainment, and the Mirror for Magistrates was started. Those who claim for Sackville the main part of this invention, forget that he is not mentioned as a contributor till what was really the third edition, and that, when the first went to press, he was only eighteen years of age.

Ferrers well comprehended the taste of his age when he conceived the notion of a series of poems, in which famous kings and nobles should describe in their own persons the frailty and instability of worldly prosperity, even in those whom Fortune seems most highly to favour. One of the most popular books of the preceding century had been Lydgate's version of Boccaccio's poems on the calamities of illustrious men, a vast monody in nine books, all harping
on that single chord of the universal mutability of fortune. Lydgate's *Fall of Princes* had, by the time that Mary ascended the throne, existed in popular esteem for a hundred years. Its language and versification were now so antiquated as to be obsolete; it was time that princes should fall to a more modern measure.

The first edition of Baldwin and Ferrers' book went to press early in 1555, but of this edition only one or two fragments exist. It was "hindered by the Lord Chancellor that then was," Stephen Gardiner, and was entirely suppressed. The leaf in the British Museum is closely printed in double columns, and suggests that Baldwin and Ferrers meant to make a huge volume of it. The death of Mary removed the embargo, and before Elizabeth had been Queen for many months, the second (or genuine first) edition of the *Myrroure for Magistrates* made its appearance, a thin quarto, charmingly printed in two kinds of type. This contained twenty lives--Haslewood, the only critic who has described this edition, says nineteen, but he overlooked Ferrers' tale of "Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester"--and was the work, so Baldwin tells us, of seven persons besides himself.

The first story in the book, a story which finally appears at p. 276 of the edition before us, recounts the "Fall of Robert Tresilian, Chief Justice of England, and other of his fellows, for misconstruing the laws and expounding them to serve the Prince's affections, Anno 1388." The manner in which this story is presented is a good example of the mode adopted throughout the miscellany. The corrupt judge and his fellow-lawyers appear, as in a mirror, or like personages behind the illuminated sheet at the "Chat Noir," and lamentably recount their woes in chorus. The story of Tresilian was written by Ferrers, but the persons who speak it address his companion:

*Baldwin, we beseech thee with our names to begin*

--which support Baldwin's claim to be looked upon as the editor of the whole book. It is very dreary doggerel, it must be confessed, but no worse than most of the poetry indited in England at that uninspired moment in the national history. A short example--a flower culled from any of these promiscuous thickets--will suffice to give a general notion of the garden. Here is part of the lament of "The Lord Clifford":

*Because my father Lord John Clifford died,  
Slain at St. Alban's, in his prince's aid,  
Against the Duke my heart for malice fired,  
So that I could from wreck no way be stayed,  
But, to avenge my father's death, assayed  
All means I might the Duke of York to annoy,  
And all his kin and friends for to destroy.*

This made me with my bloody dagger wound  
His guiltless son, that never 'gainst me stored;  
His father's body lying dead on ground  
To pierce with spear, eke with my cruel sword  
To part his neck, and with his head to board,  
Invested with a royal paper crown,  
From place to place to bear it up and down.

But cruelty can never 'scape the scourge  
Of shame, of horror, or of sudden death;  
Repentance self that other sins may purge  
Doth fly from this, so sore the soul it slayeth;  
Despair dissolves the tyrant's bitter breath,  
For sudden vengeance suddenly alights  
On cruel deeds to quit their bloody spites.*
The only contribution to this earliest form of the *Mirror* which is attributed to an eminent writer, is the "Edward IV" of Skelton, and this is one of the most tuneless of all. It reminds the ear of a whining ballad snuffled out in the street at night by some unhappy minstrel that has got no work to do. As Baldwin professes to quote it from memory, Skelton being then dead, perhaps its versification suffered in his hands.

This is not the place to enter minutely into the history of the building up of this curious book. The next edition, that of 1563, was enriched by Sackville's splendid "Induction" and the tale of "Buckingham," both of which are comparatively known so well, and have been so often reprinted separately, that I need not dwell upon them here. They occupy pp. 255-271 and 433-455 of the volume before us. In 1574 a very voluminous contributor to the constantly swelling tide of verse appears. Thomas Blener Hasset, a soldier on service in Guernsey Castle, thought that the magisterial ladies had been neglected, and proceeded in 1578 to sing the fall of princesses. It is needless to continue the roll of poets, but it is worth while to point out the remarkable fact that each new candidate held up the mirror to the magistrates so precisely in the manner of his predecessors, that it is difficult to distinguish Newton from Baldwin, or Churchyard from Niccols.

Richard Niccols, who is responsible for the collection in its final state, was a person of adventure, who had fought against Cadiz in the *Ark*, and understood the noble practice of the science of artillery. By the time it came down to him, in 1610, the *Mirror for Magistrates* had attained such a size that he was obliged to omit what had formed a pleasing portion of it, the prose dialogues which knit the tales in verse together, such pleasant familiar chatter between the poets as "Ferrers, said Baldwin, take you the chronicles and mark them as they come," and the like. It was a pity to lose all this, but Niccols had additions of his own verse to make; ten new legends entitled "A Winter Night's Vision," and a long eulogy upon Queen Elizabeth, "England's Eliza." He would have been more than human, if he had not considered all this far more valuable than the old prose babbling in black letter. This copy of mine is of the greatest rarity, for it contains two dedicatory sonnets by Richard Niccols, one addressed to Lady Elizabeth Clere and the other to the Earl of Nottingham, which seem to have been instantly suppressed, and are only known to exist in this and, I believe, one or two other examples of the book. These are, perhaps, worth reprinting for their curiosity. The first runs as follows:--

*My Muse, that whilom wail'd those Briton kings,*  
*Who unto her in vision did appear,*  
*Craves leave to strengthen her night-weathered wings*  
*In the warm sunshine of your golden Clere (clear);*  
*Where she, fair Lady, tuning her chaste lays*  
*Of England's Empress to her hymnic string*  
*For your affect, to hear that virgins praise,*  
*Makes choice of your chaste self to hear her sing,*  
*Whose royal worth, (true virtue's paragon,)*  
*Here made me dare to engrave your worthy name.*  
*In hope that unto you the same alone*  
*Will so excuse me of presumptuous blame,*  
*That graceful entertain my Muse may find*  
*And even bear such grace in thankful mind.*

The sonnet to the Earl of Nottingham, the famous admiral and quondam rival of Sir Walter Raleigh, is more interesting:--

*As once that dove (true honour's aged Lord),*  
*Hovering with weari'd wings about your ark,*  
*When Cadiz towers did fall beneath your sword,*  
*To rest herself did single out that bark,*  
*So my meek Muse,--from all that conquering rout,*  
*Conducted through the sea's wild wilderness*  
*Present great self, to own their names about*  
*Most humbly craves your lordly lion's aid*  
*Gainst monster envy, while she tells her story*  
*Of Britain's princes, and that royall maid*  
*In whose chaste hymn her Clio sings your glory,*  
*Which if, great Lord, you grant, my Muse shall frame*  
*Mirrors most worthy your renownèd name*
But apparently the "great Lord" would not grant permission, and so the sonnet had to be rigorously suppressed.

The *Mirror for Magistrates* has ceased to be more than a curiosity and a collector's rarity, but it once assumed a very ambitious function. It was a serious attempt to build up, as a cathedral is built by successive architects, a great national epic, the work of many hands. In a gloomy season of English history, in a violent age of tyranny, fanaticism, and legalised lawlessness, it endeavoured to present, to all whom it might concern, a solemn succession of discrowned tyrants and law-makers smitten by the cruel laws they had made. Sometimes, in its bold and not very delicate way, the *Mirror for Magistrates* is impressive still from its lofty moral tone, its gloomy fatalism, and its contempt for temporary renown. As we read its sombre pages we see the wheel of fortune revolving; the same motion which makes the tiara glitter one moment at the summit, plunges it at the next into the pit of pain and oblivion. Steadily, uniformly, the unflinching poetasters grind out in their monotonous rime royal how "Thomas Wolsey fell into great disgrace," and how "Sir Anthony Woodville, Lord Rivers, was causeless imprisoned and cruelly wounded"; how "King Kimarus was devoured by wild beasts," and how "Sigeburt, for his wicked life, was thrust from his throne and miserably slain by a herdsman." It gives us a strange feeling of sympathy to realise that the immense popularity of this book must have been mainly due to the fact that it comforted the multitudes who groaned under a harsh and violent despotism to be told over and over again that cruel kings and unjust judges habitually came at last to a bad end.

(The end)
Edmund Gosse's essay: Mirror For Magistrates

By Edmund Gosse