

## THE ANCIENT AND MODERN STAGE.

For some months past an interesting discussion has been carried on in our English magazines and reviews as to the present condition of the drama and its future prospects. It is generally admitted that the stage is in a lamentable state. Tragedy is no longer popular, unless it teems with visible tortures and bloody horrors; burlesque and the broadest farce have quite taken the place of refined comedy; and in the eyes of the many, vulgar spectacular inanity has become the main essential of the drama. The language element of current plays can hardly be dignified by a noble name, and the highest place to which we can assign it is what Ruskin calls "the mud-walks of literature."

In England, laudable attempts are being made by playwrights and critics to elevate the drama, and raise it once more into the sphere of literature and art. But Mr. H. D. Traill has appeared in behalf of realistic pantomime, and has boldly declared that literature and the drama are mutually exclusive spheres. In Greek tragedy and comedy, in Shakespeare and all the other great literary dramatists, these are only combined, not fused together. So far as the great plays we admire are dramatic, they are unliterary, and, so far as they are literary, they are undramatic. Shakespeare, we are told, was a failure as a playwright. For representation on the stage, his plays should have their most brilliant poetry cut out.

Thus would Mr. Traill surrender the drama to the follies of the hour, and reduce the art to the level of Punch and Judy shows or Chambers of Horrors. Happily Henry Irving, though making liberal use of realistic and spectacular display, has awakened a new love for the literary drama of Shakespeare, and David Christie Murray reading the signs of the times, believes he can safely predict that the Victorian era will yet witness a great outburst of dramatic genius—a grand Renaissance of the Stage.

The question at issue to-day is whether our drama is to be literary or pantomime; formerly the dispute was whether it should be scholastic or popular, classical or romantic. In the history of Greek literature, too, there was a famous tragic contest, mirrored for us in the *Frogs* of Aristophanes—the contest between the ideal and the realistic, the conventional and the natural, conservatism in art and progress towards new forms.

In view, then, of the dramatic crisis we have reached to-day, it would be well to review the past history of the art from its earliest days in Greece to its culminating glories in Shakespeare. By so doing we shall learn at least one lesson, viz., that it is only when inspired by loftier motives than the mere amusement of idlers, only when throbbing with the pulse of national life, and only when exalted by literary and artistic genius that the drama performs its proper function and fulfils its true destiny.

The lecturer then traced the development of Greek tragedy from its humble beginnings, showing how in its very form it represents the supreme effort of Greek poetry, gathering up, as it does, into one harmonious and beautiful web the various threads—epic, lyric, gnomic, satiric—of the poetic art.

The mighty master-pieces of Greek dramatic genius could never have seen the light of day had not Marathon been fought and won. In that life or death struggle, the wells of emotion had been stirred to their depths, the reflection of an intellectual people had been quickened to its utmost, the æsthetic genius of a nation of artists had been called from imagination to action and production, patriotism and piety had been heated into fervid glow—and the best channel for the out-pouring of the national heart, the best vehicle for the expression of the nation's exalted soul was found to be a recent creation of art, the tragic drama.

The changes through which the drama passed in the hands of the three great Attic masters, the conditions of the representation of a play of Sophocles, the decline of the art under Roman dramatists, who exaggerated faulty tendencies seen in Euripides, brought the lecturer to Christian times.

The rise of the mediæval religious and popular drama was sketched, and the review at last reaching our first English comedy, Ralph Roister Doister, which is an adaptation from a play of the Roman Plautus, we were reminded that the waves of the Renaissance had broken upon the shores of England.

This remarkable movement, which brought to light the buried stores of Greek and Latin literature, was not felt by England, in its full force, till she had arrived at the grandest epoch in her national life. The Renaissance and the Reformation coincided; spiritual independence was followed by a glorious assertion of national strength; and patriotism was further stimulated and developed by the daring enterprise of English sailors. It was coincident with this outburst of national spirit that classical learning took up its home in England. The study of Greek passed from Padua and Bologna to Oxford and Cambridge. The royal family and aristocracy applied themselves to the ancient classics. To the intellectual enthusiasm of the age England owes many educational foundations. Edward VI. established or restored various grammar schools (among them that at Stratford-on-Avon), where boys of even humble origin could get a sound education, as is shown by the cases of Marlowe and Ben Jonson.

Once again, the best means of giving expression to a glorious national spirit was found to be the drama, and to the drama, therefore, men of genius and learning turned their attention. The playwrights who ushered in the new dramatic era were, almost without exception, men who styled themselves scholars, and boasted of academical degrees.

Though fresh from college they saw what marvellous dramatic wealth was latent in the incongruous materials that the popular plays of the day handled in crude, inartistic fashion. Having to live by their wits, they devoted themselves to the main amusement of the people, bringing to bear upon the native drama not only rich poetical gifts, but also a knowledge of artistic technique. It is the combination, at a time of intense national enthusiasm, of popular materials, poetic genius and intelligent scholarship that produced the English Romantic drama.

Marlowe, the greatest of Shakespeare's predecessors, deliberately set himself the task of winning the stage to literature and art, and it was his *Tamburlaine* with its passionate power and sublimity that decided once for all the path English tragedy was to follow.

The fundamental law which the drama, as an imitation of life must observe, is the law of unity of action. This implies singleness of impression, which may be attained either by simplicity of action, as in the Greek drama, or by multiplicity, where the main stream of action has a number of tributary feeders in the form of subordinate actions. It is in the harmonious blending of these that the unity of the Shakespearian dramas mainly consists.

Unity of action is often accompanied by unity of time and place. But these unities, though insisted on by the French dramatists and early English critics, like Sir Philip Sidney, are mere accidents, and were occasionally neglected even by the great Greek masters, though the peculiarities of the Attic theatre, and the limitations imposed by the presence of the chorus and the narrow range of subjects made their observance customary.

Owing to the peculiarities of its history the Greek drama sharply distinguished tragedy and comedy, assigning them to different spheres and seldom allowing one to overlap the other. But in the romantic drama tragedies commonly admit the ludicrous, while comedies contain those serious elements which move our pity and terror. But even this blending of tones, which in Shakespeare is one of the mightiest engines of his consummate art, is to some extent foreshadowed in Greek tragedy. The heralds, messengers, watchmen in ancient plays not unfrequently display an amusing naïveté, a sense of self-importance and pompous bombast which must have been intended to excite mirth and relieve the overwrought feelings of the audience. The tragedies of Euripides often end happily,