

to give interest to his scenes or persons. His sins are incidents in his dialogue, as they are in even a good man's life; but the keen sense of moral obligation very rarely deserts Shakespeare—and never for any great length of time.

As the serious drama of the Greeks was chiefly drawn from mythological or heroic times, so that of the English, was mainly drawn from historical materials; from Roman and Italian, Spanish and French, and in Shakespeare's hands especially from English history. The taste for Roman subjects, was set by those founders of the regular drama, whose works have been eclipsed by the noonday blaze of one great name;—and who were almost all Oxford or Cambridge men. A revival of that taste was attempted in Addison's *Cato* as a protest against the Charles II or French school of tragedy; and more recently, in our own day, it has had its triumphs in "Virginius" and "Spartacus." But to the greatest of our dramatists is due our greatest debt, for putting our own history bodily before us on the stage. He gives us both the legendary and the middle age periods of British story in scenes and speeches which can never die. To the legendary period, I assign Cymbeline, Lear and Macbeth; to the historic period,—"the chronicle plays," which extend from king John to king Henry VIII,—but especially, the unbroken series of kingly dramas from Richard II to his next namesake,—a period of a hundred years. No one who has not gone over the originals which Shakespeare so closely copied, can imagine how carefully that great genius, "of imagination all compact" as he was, studied his details. Nothing escapes his observation; he seizes upon Hotspur's limping gait, the second Richard's ruddy complexion, Glendower's belief in ghosts and any other apparent trifle, which can give form and reality to his impersonations. It was but a just tribute paid by our greatest orator to our greatest dramatist, when Lord Chatham confessed to have learned the history of England from the pages of Shakespeare's plays. And in so learning he acquired much more,—he was in the very best possible school for the oratory of our language: for I have long thought that a most excellent text-book of English Oratory could be compiled from these dramas under the title of "Shakespeare's Speeches." The Kings, Courtiers, Chancellors, Conspirators and Demagogues of Shakespeare's mimic world, are studies as worthy of every statesman's leisure, as their speeches are of every orator's careful examination and analysis. It may seem a strange recommendation, to send any one to a Playwright for political wisdom; but I feel that I am quite free from exaggeration when I declare, that I know no English book, which contains so many admirable observations on government and governors, as the serious drama of Shakespeare. I have no desire to exalt the Theatre as it was then, or at any time to an undue place among the teaching and formative influences, of national character: but it is only fair to remember, what that influence apparently was as traced on the cavalier character of England, from Sidney to Falkland. And as the restoration neither restored it, nor gave a sequel to the grand old serious drama of England, the loss in another generation began to tell sensibly on the national character. I think there can be very little doubt on any observer's mind that the English character of the first half of the 17th. century was far nobler in every way than that of the second half of the same century, and the first half of the next one.

The play-houses which the Puritans shut up, by act of Parliament in 1647, "as schools of seduction and chapels of the Devil," remained closed for thirteen years. They were in the interior very primitive concerns; the boxes or galleries only were covered in; the pit was open over head; the shifting scene had not been invented; "the wings" only enabling the persons of the drama to go on or off, and the centre of the stage remaining always open. The performances were all by daylight, and the female parts were performed by boys, so long as their voices preserved the necessary tenor. It was only under Sir William Davenant's patent, after the restoration, that the Italian aids of shifting scenery and characteristic costume were introduced. I believe the union of a regular orchestra with the stage work, dates from the same reign as does the invention of the tin thunderbolt by Tom D'Urfey, whose one tragedy, in which the thunder was to play a part, was damned, while the scarcely more loud-sounding mechanical contrivance of the author was, as he thought, unfairly transferred to the more popular texts of Dryden and Nat. Lee.

Sir Walter Scott with that wise considerateness in the bestowal of praise and blame which distinguishes him, speaks in the introduction to one of the cantos of *Marmion* of the literature of the restoration era with the bitterness it well deserves, as the forced-plant of "a ribald king and court," but of John Dryden's principal share in its production, as a subject for regret and sympathy, rather than for censure. He conceives that Dryden if left to himself would have revived for his own, and for all time, the tender and noble legends of the Arthurian romance—

"And Dryden in prophetic strain
Had raised the Table Round, again,
But that a ribald king and court
Bade him toil on to make them sport."

I hope it will not seem an unpardonable presumption on my part if I say, that I cannot subscribe to this judgment of Dryden's relation to our Dramatic poetry, and our literature generally. Every allowance made for the wild unbridled reaction, which had set in against the Puritan regime, it does not seem to me, that Dryden was inevitably compelled "to toil on," for the Philistines of the court of Charles II. Well-born, well connected, and well educated, he was not yet thirty, when the Restoration took place, and eight years later he became "a Laureat bold."

"With his but of sherry
To make him merry
Who would not be a Laureat bold!"

During the thirty-five years he wrote, willingly enough, for the stage, he produced twenty-seven Dramas, wholly or in most part his own; and twenty-seven worse works never perhaps disgraced any literature. In all, tragic or comic, there are constant gleams of genius; without which he could not write; but in the subjects themselves, he seems to have been as a living critic truly says, in search of "whatever is unholy, unlovely, or of bad report." He lays his scenes, in Pagan and outlandish climes and times, where such things may seem more congruous: he is fond of Moorish and Indian subjects and spectacles; his nearest land in Europe is generally Spain. It is usual to say of a rejected play, that it is "damned," and certainly of Dryden's twenty-seven, it would be hard to find one, that deserved to be saved. Fortunately no one now, thinks of him as a Dramatist; as the ring-leader of the unclean group—Wycherley, Vanbrugh, Congreve, and I am sorry to add Otway and Farquhar, who departed more and more, from the reign of Charles II. to that of George II., from the heroic standards of the older Drama, while they exaggerated the worst abuses of the genius of Ben Jonson and Fletcher.

While this deluge of corruption was sweeping over the minds and homes, and daily lives, of the men and women of England, two reformers arose, who accomplished a literary revolution, almost coincident in time, with the political one, of 1688. In the second last year of the century, after the Caroline drama had had nearly forty year's undisputed possession of the English people, appeared "A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage," by Jeremy Collier. This was the celebrated polemic all whose hardihood as a controvertist was called for, to carry him through the battle he thus provoked with all the wits and wittings of his day. This "short view" led to a long war: Dennis and Drake and Settle and their tribe swarmed out of Grub street, to the assault of the stout Nonjuror; Congreve and Vanbrugh, were obliged to attempt their own defence; Dryden fallen into the sear, was at first silent, and afterwards, candidly cried *peccavi*. In the midst of the Collier crusade unexpected auxiliaries arrived in the persons of an ex-ensign of the guards, and an actual commissioner of appeals—Richard Steele and Joseph Addison. Not only the whole tone of criticism in the *Tatler* and *Spectator* was on Collier's side, (not avowedly, but substantially), but as an illustration of the possibility of redeeming the stage, instead of utterly destroying it, "Cato" appeared in 1713, and for thirty-five nights was hailed with acclamations such as never had been conferred on Congreve, or even on Dryden, in their days of supreme Dramatic success. The period of our dramatic literature of which Lord Macaulay says that it is "never to be mentioned without a blush," might be almost said to have closed with the success of "Cato": a weak conspiracy however having been attempted by Colley Cibber and others, on behalf of the fallen dynasty of bad taste and worse morality. But even "Comedy became more modest"—to use an expression of Johnson's, and the glory of completing this reformation was reserved for an illustrious succession of Irish wits and humorists Macklin, or McLaughlin, Oliver Goldsmith, Arthur Murphy and Richard Brinsley Sheridan. I have, as I said, no desire to exaggerate the place of the stage in the mental economy of our own, or past age; and the dream of seeing the theatre become a school of morality has never been, and never may be, realized: but men and women, too, need amusement, and one has only to pass a week in any great city, such as London, Paris, or New York, to estimate how powerful an influence for good or evil, this institution still exercises. Our modern dramatic literature has returned, in a great degree, to the standards and style of the old English Drama; but it differs both from the works of that epoch, and those of the Dryden-Cibber dynasty, in being written rather for readers than hearers—for the closet more than for the stage. The dramas of Joanna Bailey, of Byron, Milman, and Talfourd are of this class: those of Sheridan Knowles, Banim, Lord Lytton, Douglass