

# THE WEEK.

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## THE MODERN STAGE.

I was induced two nights ago to attend one of the Toronto theatres. The play was described as "Rice's beautiful 'Evangeline,' fresh from its New York and Chicago triumphs." It had "run" for two hundred and fifty-three nights in the former town, and for one hundred and two in the latter.

This "Evangeline" was not a tragedy, nor yet a comedy, nor yet an opera; yet it contained the elements of all three. Perhaps "variety show" would be the best name for it. Its prominent features were literally *variety* and *show*: its constituent parts might be classified under every species of histrionic art, not excluding clog-dancing and somersaulting; and as for *show*, the costumes of the "sixty artistes" led one to believe that to this feature all things else were made subservient—indeed, these "sixty artistes" were doubtless chosen for their respective parts more by the shapeliness of their nether limbs than by their ability to sing or act. The only really good thing in this play was the manipulation of the rat which ran away with the "Lone Fisherman's" loaf.

I am not ridiculing "Evangeline." It has triumphed; it has occupied the stage in two of the largest cities of the New World every night for more than a year; it draws audiences; it is representative of a certain class, and that a large and important class, of modern drama.

These are facts not to be lightly esteemed. They are evidences of the thought and character of the day. They arise from certain causes and lead to certain results. They are symptoms (I use the word advisedly, for I cannot but think they are signs of disease, not of health), they are pathognomonic symptoms, of the degeneration of the moral, intellectual, and æsthetic tone of the larger portion of the population.

The "drama" is a word to which once attached a high and lofty meaning. Drama is a species of the fine art, poetry—the highest species. And art, the poetic art above all, many of us believe has a common origin, if not even a much closer relationship, with religion. "The whole art of poetry," says Strabo, "is the praise of the gods.\* Plato consecrates all music and dancing to religion.† "The direction of the purpose of great arts," says Mr. Ruskin, is "that of enforcing the religion of men.‡ The drama of the Greeks, as every one knows, had its origin in religious ceremonies, so had the drama of the Hindus.§

I refer to these well-known opinions and quote these well-known authorities merely to call attention to the wonderful transmutation of meaning which the word drama has undergone. The *logeion* of Sophokles

is a very different thing from the *logeion* of Aristophanes; both these differ altogether from the stage of Shakespeare; all three have little or nothing in common with the boards upon which such pieces as "Evangeline" are played.

The Greek drama has been compared by Schlegel and by Coleridge to sculpture; the Shakespearian or Romantic drama to painting. To what shall we compare the form of modern drama, of which "Evangeline" is a type? To a caricature?—and a caricature, not in marble or pigments, but in chromo?

What are the causes of this deterioration of modern drama?—that is the question for us. Why is it that here in Toronto, during a whole theatrical season, we may, a remnant of us, congratulate ourselves as being fortunate if a single week or fortnight is devoted to plays of a higher class—to Shakespeare, Lytton, Sheridan, Sheridan Knowles? Why is it that the plays that "draw" are the spectacular farces, the sentimental melodramas, the vulgar burlesques? Who is the most popular playwright of the United States? It is probably Charles Hoyt. And what are his plays? "A Bunch of Keys;" "A Parlour Match;" "A Bottle of Ink;" "A Rag Baby."

The answer generally given to questions such as these is that we have in this age, and especially in this country, neither the time nor the inclination to give up our evenings to tragedies and comedies of a superior order. That this is a "practical" age. That there is no need that our deeper emotions should be stirred; that indeed any such thing would be injurious: we use up so much vital force in earning our daily bread that what we need after the labour of the day is over is not such plays as shall work upon our feelings, shall call up love, pity, admiration, reverence, but only such plays as shall tickle the senses and amuse the intellect; shall give us relaxation; shall make us laugh, or rather titter, not cry. That therefore it is that poor puns take the place of pure humour; racy dialogue and questionable song the place of serious soliloquy; tights and tarlatan that of buskin or "sceptred pall."

There is a great deal of truth in all this; yet I cannot but think that there is another and deeper source to be found for the degeneration of the modern stage. The lower classes have been steadily rising—rising in intelligence, influence, wealth. They are at a higher level now than they were fifty, and at a much higher level than they were a hundred, years ago. What were by them once considered luxuries are now considered necessities: broadcloth takes the place of jean; hob-nailed boots give way to kid and porpoise-hide; "print" is discarded for "stuff"-dresses. Life with them has expanded: it is fuller, larger, completer; it is not confined within the narrow limits of toil and rest; it takes in a larger number and a greater variety of pleasures. And these pleasures naturally differ widely from those to which fifty or a hundred years ago these classes were alone accustomed. Bear-baiting is a thing of the long past; cock-fighting is disappearing; prize-fighting is becoming yearly rarer. The theatre has to a large extent taken the place of these. Scarcely is there a country town of ordinary dimensions but has its "Opera House," and there is no large city in which there is not during the season a nightly representation of at least one play.

At first sight, all this will seem to have little or nothing to do with the deterioration of the modern stage. But what has to be kept in mind is that the taste of these rising classes has not kept pace with their upward movement in intelligence, influence, wealth—or perhaps it will be safer to say that their taste has not yet been sufficiently cultivated to allow of their appreciating anything above the *common*, and (and this is my point) *the theatre has descended to their level*. These rising classes are now the best and chief patrons of the theatre; it is through them that the actors, the stage-managers, the proprietors, and above all the playwrights make their livelihood. The consequence is, the actors, the stage-managers, the proprietors, and the playwrights suit the tastes of the lower classes. It is a matter of money-making. Hence it is that we are treated to pretty faces and good legs instead of acting; "business" instead of accuracy in detail; cramped pits instead of roomy seats.

The same symptoms arising from the same disease may be seen in all other branches of art. In literature they are plainly visible. Strike a general average of excellence from the fiction that now floods the market, and who will say it is high? It is again a matter of money-making. So

\* ἡ ποιητικὴ πᾶσα ὑμνητικὴ. x. p. 468.

† Legg. vii. 799 A.

‡ Lectures on Art. ii. 32.

§ Vide Quarterly Rev. No. 89 p. 89.