

it is spoken. That sphere includes in Europe, the United Kingdom; in India, the official and commercial classes, at least; in America about all north of the Isthmus of Panama; in Australia, the entire civilized population; and in Africa, many cities and settlements, chiefly situated on the coasts. In point of mere geographical extent ours is the most widely diffused language of ancient or of modern times; and the mental wealth of which it is at once the storehouse and the vehicle—the wit, the wisdom, and the knowledge,—are a reserve, to borrow an illustration from the Banks, equal in value to the vastness of its circulation. These are truisms, Ladies and Gentlemen, familiar to you all; and I repeat them only by way of preface to certain illustrations I am to night to offer you, as to some of the literary revolutions, wrought and recorded in that language.

We all, I think, must have observed that there are fashions in literature—in the making and using of books,—as there are fashions in dress and furniture. But it is not merely of such ephemeral fashions of the month I wish to speak; that would be a task too minute for this place, and the time at our disposal: my subject indicates only a reference to those greater revolutions, which changed the mental character of our predecessors in speech—which supplanted the former established principles of taste to a national extent, for a period of time not less than one generation: those definite periods of time when the leading spirits of the period carried particular styles of composition to their highest perfection in the maintenance or gratification of particular principles. It will be best, perhaps, to say at once, that of these literary revolutions in our language I propose to night,—I am compelled indeed by the amount of material at hand,—to confine myself to two,—our theatrical and our periodical literature,—the revolutions of the theatre, and those of the periodical press,—now so marvellously advanced and developed, especially in our language.

You will perceive at once how large are the omissions I must make as to other revolutions, regard being had to our literary history as a whole: it seems fatal to the subject to omit Bacon in the 17th century, Newton and Locke in another, and Swift and Pope in a third; but I must leave untouched (perhaps for some future lectures) (2) our philosophical and political literature; I must pass by all the formidable brotherhood of satirists from Andrew Marvel to Peter Pindar; and all our metaphysical writers; our grave historians, and our novelists from Daniel DeFoe to Charles Dickens. These are dynasties deserving separate lectures, and we are warned by Æsop not to grasp at too much, lest we should be obliged, as a punishment for our greed, to go away altogether empty.

The century which began with the accession of Queen Elizabeth and extended to the restoration of King Charles II. (1558-1660), may be called, in the history of our literature, the century of the elder Drama. It was an age of action and activity by sea and land; the age of the Armada, and the civil war; of Drake's voyage round the world; of the first settlements in America; of Spenser and Bacon and Milton; of the tragedies in real life of Essex, of Raleigh and of Buckingham; of King Charles and his ministers; the age of the union of the three crowns; of Cromwell's rise to power, and the recall of the exiled fugitive who flying before his enemies had found shelter in the royal oak. Even the most recluse observer must have felt the heaving of the tides which in those days ebbed and flowed so actively for England. The marvellous extremes of personal fortune exhibited before their eyes must have made all thoughtful spectators of their times moralize on the endless drama of man's existence, and must have of itself suggested the prevailing dramatic cast of thought and reflection. There were indeed, in that century, but two great vehicles of popular communication—the pulpit and the theatre. The Parliaments were held at long and uncertain intervals; their debates were privileged against publicity; and the only sketches of them which have come to light, have been from the note-books of private members, like Sir Simon Dewes, whose curious journal is familiar to parliamentary students. The periodical press as yet was an unreachèd discovery, and the pulpit and the stage were the whole world, the eastern and western hemisphere of English public opinion in that most dramatic century. So prevailing was the cast of thought, that poets of a high order, but not eminently dramatic, threw their conceptions perforce into acts and scenes, and conducted their themes, dialogue-wise, under no less penalty than that of being unheard by their own generation. The age of "the general reader" did not come till later: when the excellent custom of printing the text of stage plays was created by the Puritan prohibition of their performance on the boards. In 1647, when the theatres were closed by statute, Shirley in the preface to his edition of Beaumont and Fletcher, congratulates the reader that now "the theatre hath been so much outacted," they have "the liberty to read these inimitable plays."

(2) *Man proposes but God disposes.*

During the Commonwealth while stage-plays were forbidden as godless and profane amusements, the press began first to supply the daily craving of the people, for amusement and information, in the shape of ballads and broadsheets and pamphlets, the precursors of the newspaper and magazine of after times.

The quantity of theatrical writing in the century of the old Drama was enormous. Every theatre was obliged to provide its own stock of plays, and there were no less than seventeen of these theatres in full blast in London alone, during the reign of James I. Not to speak of the utterly rejected, and the unnumbered anonymous multitude, there are given in Charles Lamb, specimens of some thirty famous dramatic writers, from Shakespeare to Shirley, and of these, besides Shakespeare himself, Ben Jonson, and Beaumont and Fletcher, there are certainly six or seven of enduring merit: such as Marlowe, Massinger, Heywood, Tourneur, Webster, and Ford. Of Massinger's thirty-eight works, but eight are known to us; as assets of the literary partnership of Beaumont and Fletcher, or by Fletcher alone, we have remaining fifty-two plays; Ben Jonson's dramas and masques fill seven volumes; Thomas Heywood tells us there were no less than two hundred and twenty plays, "in which he had an entire hand or at least a main finger." Shakespeare's editors have agreed to recognize thirty-seven plays as undoubtedly his, in whole, or in the greater part. Of new plays of merit, no national stage now averages more than one in a season, even if so much; but in that Dramatic Century, there must have appeared three, four, and five original dramas from such powerful writers as we have mentioned—in one and the same season. The public opinion and the public spirit of England were, almost as intimately influenced and reflected then by the stage, as now by the press; and this brings us to inquire into the qualities which characterized this vast body of theatrical literature.

Of the whole body, we may make three parts—Ist. the serious drama or tragedy; the comedy; and the masque. The masque, a lyric performance, reached its highest excellence in Milton's "Comus," where it is made to glorify the virtue of maiden modesty; but Ben Jonson, one generation earlier may be supposed to have naturalized it in English. The "Faithful Shepherdess" of Fletcher is a work of genius scarce inferior to Milton's; but it wants the crowning glory of moral purity which hallows "Comus." In "the Midsummer Night's Dream," Shakespeare engrafts a masque upon a comedy, and we can there see that if he had chosen that walk, and attached himself to the private theatricals of the great, instead of serving directly the public, as actor and author, and joint-lessee of the "Globe," he might have as easily attained the first place in that walk, as he did in the legitimate drama. As to Ben Jonson's masques, I quite subscribe to Miss Mitford's judgment, that the exquisite lyrics which burst out from many of his scenes, are worth all the high-piled comedy and tragedy that "Rare Ben" ever wrote to be spouted in the usual fashion, on the private or public stage; but at the same time, we must add Sir Walter's judgment, that the text of those masques is a revolting mass of grossness and sensuality.

The old Comedy of England like most modern comedy everywhere, turns generally on the passion of love. A marriage, a divorce, or a reconciliation of separated spouses or lovers, is the usual *denouement*. Of the fifty-two plays which go by the names of Beaumont and Fletcher, the staple of every one is this apparently inexhaustible passion. Ben Jonson's comedy illustrates rather particular follies and vices, as Volpone, Avarice, and the Alchemist credulity; a remark which is true in a higher degree of Shakespeare. Shakespeare's Comedy like his Tragedy is mostly of the kind Schlegel calls "Mixed;" the former having serious, pathetic, and even terrible scenes; while the tragedy is relieved not infrequently by the grotesque use of humour, as in the well-known scene with the grave-diggers in Hamlet. The mixed Comedy of Shakespeare is as often a moral play, taken in its totality as his Tragedy. Thus the Tempest and Merchant of Venice, teach the doctrine of retributive justice, and bring it home to the popular comprehension with a force that even the Puritan pulpit might have admired; while Cymbeline glorifies the constancy of Imogen; as "the Winter's Tale" illustrates still more wonderfully the sadder story of Queen Hermione, with the self same moral!

In Shakespeare's Comedy love is always an element; sometimes the critical element; but it is not, by any means, the invariable staple of the Poet's resources. As to the freedom of the dialogue in our old comedies, it is to be admitted and deplored, that they are smutched in many places with a coarseness of expression, which renders them unfit for the perusal of this generation. The satyr-like beastliness of Ben Jonson and Fletcher, like indecent statuary in a fair garden, disenchant the loneliest scene, and revolts the most deeply engaged imagination. Even the great Archimandrite from Avon's shore, is not free from such passages—the more's the pity. Of him, however, it may with truth be said, that seldomer than any other of his contemporaries does he depend on the instrumentality of beastly appetite