

may either do a great injury to his readers or indicate higher aims, according as he approves what is base or strives to elevate the standard of opinion in matters of art. It is not necessary here to enter into the defence of the theatre or the opera, because that would lead us into a discussion beyond our present purpose. The question is usually decided upon non-logical grounds, such as habit, prejudice, or early training in certain traditional opinions. The man who, from childhood, has been in the habit of witnessing at least a Christmas pantomime yearly under the eye of his natural guides, cannot understand the outcry against dramatic performances; and so, *per contra*, he who has been impressed in early life with the belief that the theatre is in itself a sinful amusement, will probably remain steadfast in that belief. In either case, reason has very little to do with the opinion of the individual. That this is actually the case is apparent from the groundless distinctions made between one species of amusement and another. Some people see nothing objectionable in an oratorio or a cantata, but express the greatest abhorrence of the opera. It surely cannot be merely because of the subject, since those who attend performances of the *Messiah* will not scruple to listen to the *Acis* and *Galatea* of the same composer. And if it be the stage accessories of dress, scenery and footlights, is there any rational ground for the prejudice? If there be operas whose moral tone is dubious, there is no reason why we should witness their performance; but to denounce the lyric drama entirely because some of its composers degrade the art, is to deprive oneself of a pleasure which in itself refines and educates the taste and feelings and, under the censorship of a correct public opinion, can never demoralize. There is yet another distinction often made by some between the drama proper and the opera—the former having, in their opinion, something intrinsically bad about it, whilst the latter is, at least, a permissible entertainment. It would perhaps be difficult to understand any tenable ground for this notion. One plea may be urged—that the patrons of the opera go to hear the music, and pay little or no heed to the words, and that as music has an elevating influence on the mind, the entertainment must on the whole be good. But there are good operas and bad operas. The *libretti* are usually weak and often silly, and we can hardly understand the moral status of the man who repudiates *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, and yet sees nothing objectionable in *La Traviata* or the *Grand Duchess of Gerolstein*. It is in fact with the performances of plays and operas as with the reading of books—especially works of fiction. Each must be judged upon its own merits; and it seems unreasonable to reject a very important and effective branch of human intelligence because

it has been sometimes pressed into the service of evil. Moreover, it ought not to escape the notice of those who denounce the theatre, that they are themselves, in a measure, to blame for any deterioration in it, moral or artistic. The people who take pleasure in the rapid jokes of negro serenaders and circus clowns are not the best judges of a play. Their manners and their tastes are coarse, even though their morals may not be actually worse than their neighbours'. If those classes of society whose office it is to give a tone to the art and literature of the time stand aloof and surrender any department of them to those who are inferior in intelligence and discrimination, what is to be expected save the deterioration of that particular department, and perhaps its ministry to the cause of vice? To say that intelligent and thoughtful men and women have forsaken the theatre because of the decay of the drama, is to confound cause with effect, or, in homely phrase, to put the cart before the horse. The golden days of the drama were the days when the intellect and refinement of the nation were its supporters. Its basest period was the result of a divorce between the more elevated and intelligent portion of the people and the theatre, and it extended from the Restoration down into the Georgian era: for Congreve survived the first monarch of the House of Brunswick. "If," says Lord Macaulay, "it be asked why that age encouraged immorality which no other age would have tolerated, we have no hesitation in answering that this great depravation of the national taste was the effect of the prevalence of Puritanism under the Commonwealth." Even before the death of Dryden, however, the tide had turned and purity had re-asserted itself. Congreve, it is true, attempted a reply to Jeremy Collier's attack on the stage; but it was felt to be a failure even by the friends of the dramatist. There is no danger, in our time, of a recurrence to a dramatic literature so degraded and so utterly subversive of the fundamental principles of morality. There is no reason, in our time, when the intelligence of the people is so strongly enlisted on the side not merely of theoretical morality but also of purity in speech and act, why the theatre should not regain much of its lost ground. We have no contemporary Shakspeare it is true, nor even a Fletcher or a Massinger, but there are materials arranging themselves into shape, though now in a solvent and transitional condition, which some day will be at the service of the dramatic poet. When the *sacer vates* makes his appearance we shall hear no more of the decline of the stage. It has indeed been urged that the theatre has been superseded by other instrumentalities; the same, by the way, has been said of the pulpit. But, in fact, there is no single means of reaching the hearts of the people