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THE STAGE AND THE DRAMA
IN THEIR RELATION TO SOCIETY.

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THE STAGE AND THEATRE

SYLLABUS.

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THE STAGE AND THE DRAMA.

IT is saying all that is necessary to be said in the expression of our admiration of the Drama, to say that, rich as is our English literature in all departments of human interest and inquiry, its finest genius was a *dramatist*, and its grandest product a collection of works specifically *dramatic*. By common consent Shakespeare stands at the head of British literature. He has achieved for himself, without any literary ambition, or even intention, the proud position he occupies; and he has done so because his instinct was strongly dramatic, his imagination finely dramatic, the form of his thought plastically dramatic. The Drama was his inspiration and expression, and on its wings he ascended into the empyrean of his lofty elevation, where he reigns a Jove without any compeer,—a sun around whom all the literary lights of his country revolve as subordinate and dependent planets. The *Drama* gave birth to Shakespeare, and in giving him birth brought forth the most splendid literary genius of the modern world. When literature is questioned about its crowning achievement, its unhesitating answer is—The dramatic works of William Shakespeare, who has earned for himself the first place in the republic of letters, and received the imperishable bays of its one immortal laureate.

The place of Shakespeare in the literary history of England has for ever decided the literary dignity of the Drama as a specific form of literature. The chrism of his genius has consecrated the Drama, and claimed for it the reverence of all civilised people. An inquiry into the birth and development of the dramatic genius, with the object of vindicating its legitimacy and illustrating its historical splendour, need not, therefore, detain us at the present time. Let it suffice to say that the genius of the Drama is the genius of humanity. In the still divided sentiments of British society on the subject of the

Theatre and the Theatrical Profession, it is more to the purpose to show, as it may be very plainly shown, that the Drama implies the Stage,—that the Stage is the proper correlative of the Drama,—and that, until the Drama finds its way to the boards of the theatre, it not only does not have its necessary conditions and natural development, but hardly has any reason for its existence. The Drama and the Stage are inseparable. You cannot compliment the one as serious literature and sneer at the other as trivial amusement. If the Stage is not a legitimate fact, the Drama must be branded with literary bastardy. Shakespeare owes his literary super-eminence wholly to his histrionic genius. The unrivalled splendour of his position is due to the fact that the Stage inspired him, and the theatre claimed and received the fruit of his labours. The glory of Shakespeare is not mere literary glory, it is pre-eminently *theatrical* glory. If the theatre had not existed, Shakespeare had not written. The splendour of Shakespeare is thus the splendour of the Stage fact,—the halo of surpassing brilliancy around the theatric idea. To claim the written Drama for literature, and to dis sever it from the acted Drama, is to perpetrate a larceny on the Stage. The written Drama is not the whole of the Drama—the Stage and the Actors are integral and vital parts of it. Dramatic literature is strictly a theatrical legacy, as literally theatrical property as the dresses and scenery of the theatre. If dramatic literature is admirable and held in high repute, then logically and essentially the Stage, ideally considered, is both admirable and reputable.

I wish to emphasize the fact that the Drama and the Stage are inseparably united. They are correlates: each implies the other. The genuine admirer of dramatic literature is by implication and inevitably an admirer of the Stage. He may not, perhaps, frequent the theatre, but he is essentially theatrical in his sympathy and taste. He cannot detach the Stage from the Drama. He, of necessity, enters the theatre in imagination, and takes his seat before the Stage, whenever he opens his favourite dramatic author. Why does he not visit the theatre? He excuses his habitual absence from it, not on the grounds of objection to the theatre itself, but because the

state of histrionic art does not satisfy his ideal. Like Charles Lamb, he is too ideally histrionic for the condition of the actual theatre. He is, in fact, more intensely theatrical than the extant Stage and the professors of the theatric art. I am entitled to claim all readers and lovers of the literary Drama as virtually admirers and friends of the theatre. I may say, without fear of challenge, that the highest literary culture virtually accepts and honours the theatre. Intelligence, poetic feeling, refined taste, delicacy of intellectual and moral perception, fine spiritual and moral sensibilities, exquisite sense of humour, quick apprehension and appreciation of sterling wit, sensitively responsive sympathy,—all the highest elements of culture and refinement, of genius and sensibility, virtually offer their profoundest homage to the theatre. As the focus of the best culture, the cynosure of taste and refinement, the theatre must have its social ascension with every step forward in the progress of civilization.

I do not,—indeed it is not easy to exaggerate the native dignity of the theatre. As the natural home of culture, it is a grand element of civilization, and takes its place among the foremost agencies in elevating and refining human character. The thoughts of the poetical Drama are the loftiest inspirations of the human mind set in forms of speech as ravishingly ethereal as the thoughts themselves,—precious gems of imagination contained in caskets of the costliest materials and workmanship. The high class poetical Drama is a very mine of intellectual treasure. And all this galaxy of intellectual brilliancy,—these rich veins of precious metal,—these gems of dazzling lustre, are the creations, the ornaments, and possessions of the theatre. If intellect in its noblest stature is truly imperial, what a halo of majesty surrounds the theatre as the palatial home of its chosen residence! It is there where intellect lives, and speaks, and lavishes its wealth. It is there where intellect is incarnated, becomes substantive, quickening, communicative, and companionable. It is there where intellect sits on the throne of its empire, and proclaims the universality of its sovereign sway. It is there where the true-bred courtiers of intellect come together in state solemnity, inspired by sentiments of admiration and reverence. The

ideal theatre is this, and commands this; but it is more than this.

If, as the poet says, "the proper study of mankind is man," then the theatre affords unique facilities for this study on a scale largely in excess of the educational expedients and the ordinary individual experiences of life, and with a thoroughness of analysis which the profoundest complexities of human character and action are incapable of defying. It is not merely scholastically, but specifically and substantively, the school of the humanities. The philosophy and logic of human life are here set forth in practical metaphysics and arguments. Its belles-lettres are not abstract, but concrete studies. The rhetoric of the Stage is not a prosaic lesson on its principles and methods, but a practical illustration in its spirit and power. Philology here does not amuse the archæologically curious and the critical, but amazes by the electric shock and force of words. History is not a reminiscence and retrospect, but a resurrection and living reality. The mimetic art of the Stage, to speak a paradox, is nature in its vividest and most substantive realizations. The Stage teaches *par excellence*, because it teaches by the living instance and the actual example. The intrusive thought that you are present at a mimic show fails to disenchant you of the illusion: the scene is so thrilling, the acting is so real, you feel, and you delight to feel, that it is all fact and truth. The show has engaged all your intellectual and emotional powers; it has thrilled your moral being through every nerve; it has touched your conscience to the very quick of its keenest sensitiveness; it has stormed your heart with a very hurricane of passion, or melted it into a yielding fluid of tender and responsive feeling. All human life is mapped out for you, on the Stage, in its broad continents and open seas, in its islands and peninsulas, in its rocks and shoals; and you journey or sail all its world over, seeing its terrible grandeurs and quiet beauties, marking its perilous heights and treacherous shallows, and, like a great traveller of vast and varied experiences, you are conscious of being wiser and better. The theatre has been the Alma Mater in the humanities for multitudes who have had no other opportunity of a liberal education,

and but for which they had never been students of the most interesting and eventful phenomena of their nature, and had never known, except by the agony of personal experiment, how critical are the contingencies, and capricious, and often disastrous, the most coveted fortunes of life. The charm of the instruction within the walls of the theatre has drawn out the faculty of observation, constrained the metaphysical habit of mental analysis, and inspired an enthusiastic inquisitiveness into some of the profoundest problems of psychology and moral philosophy. The theatre, I maintain, is forming the studious habits of a large section of society in reference to the highest subjects of human thought and interest,—a section who would otherwise learn in no other school than in the straitened, and often degraded environments of their own daily life. The enforced associations of a considerable proportion of the lower and lowest strata of the community would be a state of mental and moral perdition, but for the opportunities of escape afforded by the fascinations of the Stage, and the lessons of refinement in mind and heart inculcated in, what I take leave to call, the Stage-ministry. The elevation of their seats has obtained for the occupants of the gallery the humorous epithet of “the gods.” There is probably as much truth as facetiousness in the designation. Not a few of them, perhaps, are never so conscious of the divinity within them, as when occupying their allotted seats in the theatre. Thence they look down on other aspects of human life than those they are unhappily familiar with, and hear another speech than their own too often revolting and defiling tongue. To such as these, beyond all dispute, the theatre is, in no mean degree, a ministry of redemption. Culture, morality, piety—all should have a kind, sympathetic, admiring word for the gallery of a theatre; and, if ever innovation threatens to abolish the theatrical institution of “the gods,” should be the first and the loudest to utter their protest against the wrong. The higher the quality of the theatrical entertainment the greater should be the public interest in the place and the presence of “the gods.”

It is strange that the famous dictum of Shakespeare on the primary uses of the theatre and the true functions of

dramatic and histrionic art should be so familiar, and yet so often practically forgotten in the expression of theatrical judgments and the allowance of theatre-going habits. The highest dramatic authority tells us that the purpose of playing is "to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure."

We take a long stride in the measure of the Stage idea when we pass from the conception of it as simply *diversion* to this elevated Shakespearean notion of the primary and artistic purpose of Stage representations. Our great dramatist magnifies the Stage and its special art to their most imposing proportions when he lifts the idea of true histrionics into the *moral* sphere, and claims for them the highest moral purpose as the champion of virtue and the scourge of vice. That the high-class Drama, in its two divisions of tragedy and comedy, involves *moral* elements, is composed with *moral* sentiments and aims, awakens *moral* sympathies and antipathies, and produces *moral* impressions, neither is, nor can be, with reflecting persons, a question of dispute. No genuine tragedy or comedy can be possibly constructed apart from *moral* ideas in the writer and *moral* tendencies in his work. *Humanity* being its *dramatic theme* and its *histrionic instrument*, a genuine dramatic work must of necessity take a *moral* form and be presented under *moral* conditions. All this is so obvious that it is passing strange any public writers on the Stage and theatrical affairs should have the audacity to say that moral considerations, in a dramatic performance, are the mawkish conceits of sickly sentimentalists, and that the Drama, *qua* Drama, ignores them altogether. The argument with such writers is better maintained, on our own side, by shifting the defence to the dignity and authority of Shakespeare. Let them make good, if they can, the position they have taken in the view of the famous dictum on the purpose of playing.

That genial writer, Charles Lamb, has, indeed, said of the characters in such plays as those of Congreve and Wycherley, "When we are among them we are amongst a chaotic people. We are not to judge them by our

usages." In reply to this, Macaulay says, "In the name of art, as well as in the name of virtue, we protest against the principle that the world of pure comedy is one into which *no moral* enters. If comedy be an imitation, under whatever conventions, of real life, how is it possible that it can have no reference to the great rule which directs life, and to feelings which are called forth by every incident of life? If what Mr. Charles Lamb says were correct, the inference would be that these dramatists did not in the least understand the very first principles of their craft. Pure landscape-painting into which no light or shade enters, pure portrait-painting into which no expression enters, are phrases less at variance with sound criticism than pure comedy into which no moral enters."

Of how much worth this theatric function as a *moral* reflector is, let the poet Wordsworth remind us when he exclaims,

"How much is overlooked
In human nature and her subtle ways,
As studied first in our own hearts, and then
In life among the passions of mankind!"

As a student of human nature he says of himself,—and the actor may adopt his language as descriptive of the aims and spirit of his own art,—that he is

"Compelled
In hardy independence, to stand up
Amid conflicting interests, and the shock
Of various tempers; to endure and note
What was not understood, though known to be;
Among the mysteries of love and hate,
Honour and shame, looking to right and left,
Unchecked by innocence too delicate,
And moral notions too intolerant,
Sympathies too contracted."

The theatric idea is, that the Stage is a reflector of men and manners, a photographic camera to catch and fix, for more careful observation, the actual facts and particular features of human life. This reflecting function demands for the Stage a breadth as wide, and a depth as profound, as humanity itself; and claims for it a liberty of the amplest range consistent with the canons of correct taste and the sentiments of social decorum. The *objects*

of its reflecting function being *human*, the Stage, necessarily, does more than simply reflect concrete facts and forms; it reflects also abstractions and accidents, principles and essences, motives and feelings, qualities and textures. It possesses, in its dramatic art, the faculties of abstraction and analysis, and uses them with the utmost freedom, delicacy of discrimination and manipulation, in order that individuals and societies may understand their real composition, and be made acquainted with all the inward contents of their personalities. It has thus a metaphysical and moral, a microscopic and magnifying power, and throws on its broad disc the results of its minutest and subtlest observations. Without this metaphysical subtlety and analytical delicacy, the reflecting function of the Stage would be incapable of the human demands on it. "Virtue" reveals her own feature only to the art that can raise with delicate hand the veil which hides it; and the naked image of "Scorn" is only to be discovered by the closely scanning art which penetrates all its disguises, and is only exposed to view by the morally courageous art which tears away all the thick folds of its concealment. Humour, refined and robust, pathetic and quaint, tragic and comic, grave and gay, has to be delved for out of the profound human depths and brought to the surface, that its diversified moods may be incarnated in faithful impersonations, and reproduced in the verisimilitude of fact and truth. When we contemplate the reflecting function of the Stage as involving the finding of its own objects, and that these objects are only to be sought and found by the delicate feeling, and consummate art, of the genius of humanity, what an aureola of intellectual and moral lustre encircles the theatre as the temple of an unique art, and how broadly apart from, and immeasurably high it stands in character and position, in occupation and aim above all the vulgar resorts of mere amusement! Its proper elevation is on the Olympian height among the academies and porticoes of philosophy and fine art. Its rank is that of Royal Societies and Royal Academies, universities and high schools of liberal culture; and the professors of its particular art are graduates of honourable distinction, deserving of high social repute, and worthy of the

conventional compliments and rewards of a discriminat-
ing and reverential public favour.

What museums of antiquities do for the past, the Stage, by its reflecting function, does for the present,—it collects and exhibits contemporaneous facts. To “catch the manners living as they rise,” is one of its mirror functions. It is thus the chronicle of the hour and the collector of the materials of what hereafter will be history. History cannot be satisfactorily written without resort to dramatic literature which the Stage creates in the fulfilment of its reflective function. This function of reflecting living feelings and manners has a present as well as a future value,—a living as well as a posthumous interest. Portraits are not wholly for posterities, they are valued by their originals as showing them what manner of men and women they are. The Stage has its uses to place before people their “counterfeit presentment,” to let them see themselves objectively, to invite them to meet and spend an hour in company with their own duplicates. A man, we are told by a sacred writer, will look sometimes at himself in a glass and straightway forget what manner of man he is: but it is hardly possible to meet his flesh and blood counterpart on the Stage without being instinctively sensible of the resemblance, and retentively mindful of him after the parting. The incident has been so unexpected and startling, the likeness so unmistakable and minutely correspondent, the effrontery so familiarly bold, that, whether the presentment has been serious or ludicrous, it has been felt to be irresistible and will ever be memorable. There is no other way than by the camera of the Stage that we can obtain a fac-simile likeness of our own inner personalities. The photographs of the Stage show us the *inside*, as well as the outside of ourselves. The Stage keeps no secrets, and it is a marvellous searcher out of secret things. Whatever we are in the privacy of our life, out we come with all our lights and shades duly distributed according to fact and truth. The Stage knows us well, knows all our stops, can pluck out the heart of our mystery, sound us from our lowest note to the top of our compass. Many a man has left the theatre amazed at himself, struck dumb with wonder at the discovery of the kind of person he

really is, astounded that all through his long life he never saw himself in the same light, a good deal concerned now what people must think of him if they shall happen to know him as well as he now knows himself.

As dramatic art is concerned not only with what is actual, but also with what is *ideal*, so the reflecting function of the Stage embraces the whole scope of possible and conceivable, as well as actual human existence. When histrionic art crosses the boundary of the actual and visible into the region of the ideal, it ceases to be mimetic and becomes creative,—it ascends from the servility of imitation to the sovereignty of pure art. At this point the Stage joins the fraternity of the highest artistic and moral estates, not excluding that of the ministry of religion. It has its ethereal ideas, its prophetic inspiration, its pulpit sanctity. The Stage is, here, a revealer of invisible things, a quickener of spiritual sensibilities, a preacher of high and divine truths, a path-finder through the dark ways into the dawn of the true light. It holds the mirror up to Nature in her *ideality*, reflects the spirituality and essential beauty of nature,—nature in her purest truth and holiest forms, and demonstrates the unity, or rather the identity, of ideal moral nature with divine religion. Here the Stage is as reverential as the Church, for it glorifies and worships the true holiness, the holiness of nature's God, the holiness of pure nature. Its work is here coincident with that of the Church, for it takes of the things of God in the holy temple of nature and lifts them up for the admiration and desire of all people. I may say, without fear of contradiction, that the Stage, in the discharge of its highest, its idealistic reflecting function, is often the teacher of as pure and undefiled religion as the Church; often a purer religion, because it is the teacher of a religiousness which never conflicts with the voices of nature, a religiousness which is essentially spirit and life. Here the Drama is, verily, a holy scripture, and the theatre a temple of divine worship.

Some persons may be quite disposed to concede this high spiritual idealism to the Drama as literature, but not to the theatre as the place of the acted Drama. Charles Lamb, for instance, says, "What we see upon a

Stage is body and bodily action; what we are conscious of in reading is almost exclusively the mind and its movements; and this, I think, may sufficiently account for the very different sort of delight with which the same play so often affects us in the reading and the seeing." Surely this criticism is but a partial and a very imperfect statement of the fact of what we see in the impersonations of the actor. The criticism would be questionable even of the rudest pantomimic exhibitions on the Stage; but to say of all acting that, what we see is merely "body and bodily action," is a very inadequate account of the art and achievements of the actor. I need not repeat what I have said on the impossibility of divorcing the Drama from the Stage. I may add, to what has been already said, that the idealism of the Drama is *largely dependent on the histrionic art of the Stage* for its adequate realistic expressions. All art, and, therefore, histrionic art, graduates in its upward ascent in the degree of its power to realize the ideal. The action, often much more than the words, is suggestive and representative of the ideal. Permit me a few observations on the term *art* as applied to the Drama and the Stage.

We are accustomed to speak of dramatic art, of histrionic or theatric art. Now, let us keep distinctly in view that the Drama and the Stage are indivisible; and therefore it is not competent for any one to say, that the Drama, as a specific difference of high class literature, is a noble art, but the Stage, as the platform of the player, and a place of mere public amusement, exemplifies a vulgar and inferior art. The Drama and the Stage are one indivisible unity—they stand and fall together. The dignity of the Drama is the dignity of the Stage; the degradation of the Stage is the degradation of the Drama. The honour of the Drama cannot be saved at the expense of the Stage. So inveterate has been the prejudice against the Stage for several centuries in England, so unwilling has been the social disposition to think of its art as of any more noble quality than that of the rank of a public amusement, and of its professors as anything more than players, that its low estimation has been, in no small degree, reflected on the dramatist; and a writer for the Stage,—unless some accidents of his social position and

literary fame interfere to save him,—has been contemptuously dubbed a “play-wright,” and considered a wandering and fallen star from the heaven of literary repute. Surely, the time is come for the adjustment of the question, whether Stage association is artistic or essentially and irredeemably vulgar. If what I have said be true about the theatric idea and function, then it follows, that the theatre is the place of a distinct art, as much so as the Royal Academy is the place of a distinct art or arts; and that its art is as far removed from meanness and vulgarity as that of the Royal Academicians in painting and sculpture. Let us look at their honourable and honoured arts, and see wherein they so essentially differ from the art of acting as to entitle them to this precedence and exclusive reputation.

Both painting and sculpture are distinctly and essentially *imitative* arts,—they imitate the actual and the ideal. Painters and sculptors are professional mimics and poetical creators. Wherein do they differ from the actor? Does he not do precisely the same things; is he not both these characters? One paints his imitations on canvas with a brush, the other carves his imitations in stone with a chisel, the actor personates his imitations by means of the mental, moral, and emotional resources of his humanity. What should make two of these arts, and the third, no art,—two of these imitative arts, honourable, and the third, contemptible? Is the secret of the difference in the comparative merits of the instrumentalities—the painting brush, the chisel, the living man; and we are to conclude that the living man, as a medium, or instrumentality of art, is inferior to a painting brush or a chisel? Is the secret in the cunning of the skill, and the completeness of the imitation? Let the poet Campbell reply;

“For ill can Poetry express
 Full many a tone of thought sublime;
 And Painting, mute and motionless,
 Steals but a glance of time:
 But by the mighty Actor brought,
 Illusion's perfect triumphs come;
 Verse ceases to be airy thought,
 And Sculpture, to be dumb.”

We have only to bring the theatric art side by side

with its sister arts to discover, at once, how thoroughly it is of the art kindred; and that, so far from occupying a lowly place in the art family, it is one of its most distinguished members. Lowly, forsooth! is there not something really imperial in the art of acting? Does it not ask for the highest mental culture, the greatest delicacy of mental and moral perception, the keenest insight into the mysteries of mind and heart, and a most versatile faculty of expressing all the subtle workings of thought and feeling, of portraying all the lights and shadows of character and conduct? Does it not, like a skilled musician, command all the notes of our being, from the deepest base to the highest treble;—know how to combine them in all their concords and discords, and to bring out, in full sonorous swell, the grand diapason of our humanity? Does it not command the services of all the other arts,—even as the Church does,—poetry, painting, sculpture, music, whose choicest productions and finest masterpieces are loyally laid at its feet? When the art is in perfection, is not the Stage universally acknowledged as the professorial chair of the vernacular tongue, the place to be instructed in its purity and proprieties, and to be charmed with the graces of its elocution? Whenever the Stage stands forth in its native grandeur, in the regal consciousness of its own majesty, is it not the place towards which instantly and reverently turn all the culture and refinement, all the intellect and art-feeling, all the moral nobility of the land? May it not, then, in the sublimity of its elevation, justly smile at, and pity the littleness of a carping prejudice,—contemptuously put aside with its foot the snarling and snapping of the little curs at its heels, and claim with confidence the homage of all enlightened and free souls who seek after the true, the beautiful, and the good? Yes, verily, the theatre is a temple of art, in its highest, widest, and grandest significance, for there all the arts gather together to do honour to the art of which it is the consecrated home.

And what, let me ask, is the distinctive character of this special art of the theatre that it should deserve the courtesy of all other arts, and receive from them their willing, yea, their loving and best service? It is the art

which, above all the arts, makes Humanity both its theme and its instrument. It is the most human of all arts; humanity is its end and its means. It thus comes as close as possible to the objects and methods of pure religion. If art may ever be pronounced sacred because of its subject, then with how much greater reason may histrionic art claim this hallowed quality? It is the art of depicting by living portraiture the intellectual and moral, the spiritual and emotional contents of humanity; it is the art of reflecting human nature in its loftiest conceptions and noblest possibilities. It thus answers the true definition of art, and exhausts its whole meaning as an imitative and creative faculty. High art is this, and no more than this; and since theatric art has the widest range for the exercise of this twofold faculty, and possesses capabilities greatly in excess of every other art, for the fulfilment of its imitative and creative functions, it virtually claims, and ought to be considered, to be in the van of all the arts—the art of arts—and deservedly entitled to the highest seat of honour in the truly grand assembly of art nobility.

It is, surely, important for all who are interested in the reputation and fortunes of the theatre to bear in mind the fact that it is the *Humanity* on the Stage that gives the theatre its true dignity and its honourable hold on the public mind. This fact cannot be practically lost sight of in any individual instance of theatrical perversion, but at the penalty of destroying the theatrical idea and service. Only let the mere *amusement* idea come too prominently to the front, and the theatrical idea vanishes out of sight. The theatre is the place, not primarily and objectively for *amusement*, but for *humanity*, both behind and before the footlights. Humanity is its distinctive property and function; humanity is its supreme concern and sole appeal. The Stage is nothing if not human. The perfection of the correlated dramatical and theatrical idea is the perception and enthusiasm of humanity.

I am confident that I cannot urge too pointedly and persuasively this conception of the essential idea and purpose of the theatre. I am personally constrained to advocate and commend the Stage for this paramount reason. The most serious fact of theatrical declension, and that which

is the most prolific parent of whatever declension there may be in the extant Stage itself, seems to me to be this : *the declension of thought in the public mind* about the theatre and its uses. "A change seems coming over the state of the Stage," writes Mr. George Henry Lewes, "and there are signs of a revival of the once-splendid art of the actor. To effect this revival there must be not only accomplished artists and an eager public; there must be a *more enlightened* public. The critical pit, filled with playgoers who were familiar with fine acting and had trained judgments, has disappeared; in its place there is a mass of *amusement-seekers*, not without a nucleus of intelligent spectators, but of this nucleus only a small minority has very accurate ideas of what constitutes good art." The too prevalent idea of the theatre, as a place of mere amusement, is derogatory to the theatre itself, and a disgrace to the intelligence of the age; it is as false as it is mischievous, and needs to be exposed and rebuked. Sought only as a sensuous entertainment and for the consumption of vacant hours at the fag-end of each day's life, the theatre is not only gravely misunderstood, but is insulted and abused. It does not stand to the serious occupations of life as a playground to the counting-house and the workshop, or as light literature to more important studies; it is in itself a serious occupation and a severe study to both artists and audiences, whether its subject be grave or gay. Its proper dignity and place is among the noblest institutions, and the rarest opportunities of our culture. We may say of it, in the words of Wordsworth, what we say of all the means of our best education :

"So build we up the Being that we are;
Thus, deeply drinking-in the soul of things,
We shall be wise perforce.

* * * * *

Whate'er we see

Or feel, shall tend to quicken and refine;
Shall fix in calmer seats of moral strength
Earthly desires; and raise, to loftier heights
Of divine love, our intellectual soul."

And now to conclude. The theatre is an institution of very high antiquity, and is found in almost all nationalities, and under the most diversified forms of

civilization. It has always been especially honoured, and has always more especially flourished, in the midst of intellectual, moral, and æsthetical conditions. Culture has always inaugurated the theatre, passionately cherished it, lavishly enriched it, and encircled it with sentiments of respect and affection. Its fascination has been universal, and its influence has always been acknowledged by the philosopher and the moralist, the priest and the philanthropist, the politician and the statesman. It has been a too general fact, too spontaneous, too tenacious of root and germinant, too vital and enduring, that its rise should be attributed to a capricious whim or humour, or the chance of mere accident, or local tastes and peculiarities. It must be credited with owing its existence to nature and reason, to instinct and feeling, to social exigence and human necessity. I say, it must be so credited, and the dogmatism is justified by the fact of its universal presence in civilized society, and its inextinguishable vitality even in its most degraded and corrupt condition of existence. It has had its seasons of sickness—of even loathsome and mortal disease—but has found healing and health; it has been crushed under the weight of hostile public opinion and State despotism, and has risen up elastically against both and conquered both; it has been trodden under the feet of social repudiation and odium, been defiled in the mire of indignant moral censure, been cursed by the anathemas of a scornful and irreconcilable Church, and, notwithstanding, at this hour it is standing self-reliantly erect, claiming the social recognition, challenging the severest moral sentiments, and commanding the testimony and defence of the ministers of religion. Plainly, there is vitality in the theatre; and there must be reason, intrinsic worth, and virtue, too, or its corruption would have been its dissolution, and it could have found no place for repentance, and no opportunity of self-assertion and restoration.

The claim of the theatre to the general social recognition will have to be conceded, and when it is conceded, it will be under far more reasonable and favourable conditions of theatrical development and repute than the theatre has hitherto enjoyed, even in the best period of its history in this country. Natural instinct, culture,

taste, pure moral feeling, religious sentiment, are all enlisted on its side, and will sooner or later assert themselves in the brave vindication of an institution so richly endowed with high educational forces as the Stage—the place of the acted Drama. Wherever the purely artificial pressure of what I do not call religious, but *ecclesiastical* prejudice is intelligently and religiously resisted these influences immediately assert themselves in behalf of the theatre and its legitimate performances. Nothing but an ecclesiastical artificiality of sentiment stops the way, and the intelligence and earnestness of modern society will eventually sweep this last lingering obstruction altogether out of the way. English society, I am confident, as it grows in intelligence, will never submit to be the docile sheep of a tradition-bound and narrow-minded ecclesiasticism of any church, whether Established or non-established. All weak social prejudices of every kind will be driven to the wall in the steady onward march of enlightenment and manly independence. The Stage is still one of the victims of such prejudice, and it will conquer this prejudice as it has conquered the deadlier assaults of its own historical corruption. Assert the Stage both in your sentiments and allowances. Be very exacting in your demands on the Stage, and thus you will best declare your jealousy of it, and your profound respect for it and its profession, and at the same time make it the obligation and interest of all theatrical managers to purge the Stage of incompetence and vulgarity, and raise it higher and higher towards its own native ideal. Possessing, as we do, the greatest dramatist of any country, we, surely, ought to possess a purely British Stage for the encouragement of British dramatic art and British histrionic genius. The time must come when the theatrical profession will form a guild of artistic culture, and occupy its honourable place among the art faculties. Your theatrical patriotism and severity of theatrical exaction will inevitably bring this about. Complain not of the Stage,—do not whine over the decline of the Drama,—indulge in no invidious comparisons of theatres and their respective management; think rather of yourselves, for the Stage is always what the people who frequent or neglect it make it. Let us

ask ourselves how far we ourselves have graduated towards the dramatic and theatrical ideal,—how far we have encouraged or discouraged the elevation of the Stage. The theatre is a bequest—the Stage is a social inheritance; and we are all, in one way or other, responsible for what it is now, and we cannot, and ought not if we could, evade our responsibility for what it is in our own generation, and what it shall be when we bequeath it to the generation which is to follow.

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