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BY THE

REV. S. G. WINCHESTER.  
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## CORRESPONDENCE.

*Oakland College, April 3, 1839.*

REV. S. G. WINCHESTER.

SIR:—We, the undersigned Committee, have been appointed for the purpose of returning to you the warmest thanks of the Belles Lettres Society, and Adelphic Institute, for your eloquent Address delivered before them yesterday, and respectfully request a copy of the same for publication.

Yours very respectfully,

ABIJAH HUNT,

JAMES R. GALTNEY,

*Committee of the Belles Lettres Society.*

SAMUEL R. WALKER,

J. WEEKS,

*Committee of the Adelphic Institute.*

---

MESSRS. ABIJAH HUNT,            }  
      JAMES R. GALTNEY,        } *Of the Belles Lettres Society.*  
      SAMUEL R. WALKER,       }  
      J. WEEKS,                   } *Of the Adelphic Institute.*

GENTLEMEN:—In answer to your polite note of yesterday, requesting for publication a copy of my Address to your Societies, I would say, that as the subject discussed is one of great practical importance, I should prefer, if the address be published at all, that it should go before the public in a more extended form. As, therefore, you have called for it, I will endeavour to prepare it for the press as soon as possible.

With great respect,

I am, Gentlemen,

Your obedient servant,

S. G. WINCHESTER.

*Oakland College, Miss., April 4th, 1839.*



TO  
THE YOUTH  
OF BOTH SEXES,  
IN THE UNITED STATES,  
THIS VOLUME

IS RESPECTFULLY

INSCRIBED BY

THE AUTHOR.



## P R E F A C E.

THE preceding correspondence sufficiently explains the occasion of this publication. Only a small portion of what is contained in these pages, could have been delivered in a single address. The importance of the subject ultimately led to a more extended examination of it, than was originally intended.

The flattering manner in which the address was received, and the acknowledged change of sentiment which some who heard it, kindly and candidly attributed to its instrumentality, have induced the belief that its publication might, in an humble measure, subserve the cause of public virtue and social happiness.

The writer has endeavoured to examine the subject with candour, and to treat those who differ from him, with respect. Whether

he has succeeded in either, the reader must decide for himself. It will be observed, that the principal reliance for authority, is upon those who have written in defence of the stage, except where the authority is *avowedly* against it, as is generally the case in the chapter on "Authorities against the Theatre." The one we regard as *concessions* against the stage, the other as important *testimony* against it.

The appeal is made to the judgment and to the conscience. May it be successful!

S. G. W.

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# THE THEATRE.

## CHAPTER I.

### A STATEMENT OF THE POINT DISCUSSED.

FREEDOM of opinion and of the press, is an invaluable blessing, so long as it is not abused, nor perverted to licentious purposes. It is a privilege enjoyed in this country, to a greater extent than in any other. It is a privilege which has been secured to us by toil and bloodshed, and one which every citizen of this nation should justly appreciate, and firmly preserve.

Men and bodies of men, who ask the patronage and favour of the public, are open to examination, and must expect to be scrutinized. This scrutiny should not obtrude itself upon the privacy of the fireside, nor violate the common courtesies of social life, lest

it should give license to the tongue of scandal.

But the pretensions of men, and of bodies of men, claiming public regard and favour, must be canvassed; and the freedom of opinion and of the press, consists in the privilege of doing so, without incurring the charge of officious intermeddling with the concerns of others. In this land, we have no privileged order of men; and long may it be free from such a curse. We are an inquisitive people, and not disposed to take things for granted without sufficient reason.

The Christian religion has often been upon the *tapis*, and its claims and pretensions have been fully discussed. The respective merits of the different denominations of Christians have again and again been publicly discussed. No one objects to this, though fault has been found, and justly found, with the *manner* in which such discussions are sometimes conducted. Conscious rectitude never shrinks from scrutiny. Men love darkness rather than light, only when their deeds are evil. "For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his

deeds should be reprov'd. But he that doeth truth, cometh to the light." John iii. 20, 21.

The Banking system, the Common-school system, the Railroad system, the Sabbath-mail system, &c., have all been made the subjects of public inquiry and discussion; and why should that system be exempt from this examination, which claims to be a public school of virtue, and a rational and instructive amusement, especially since it is commonly made the subject of municipal regulation and restriction? When the theatre sets itself up to be a public instructor, it is both natural and proper for the public to inquire what kind of lessons it teaches. When it claims to be a public benefit, by amusing while it enlightens the public mind, who should object, if the public desire to know what is the moral tendency of that amusement? For whatever affects the morals of a community, ought surely to be open to its examination, as its peace and order are dependent upon the character of the prevailing morals. Otherwise a public nuisance could not be inquired into and suppressed.

As the theatre exists by municipal toler-

ance, it cannot be independent of public opinion, nor ought it to be beyond the reach of public scrutiny.

Ever since the theatre has existed, it has been the serious opinion of the wisest and best men, in every contemporary age, that it was an evil, and that its tendency was destructive to virtue and good morals.

We, in this age, cannot, and ought not to be indifferent to this accumulating testimony against the theatre. We enter, therefore, upon this examination of the moral tendency of theatrical exhibitions, not with the spirit of captiousness, but we regard it as a sober inquiry, affecting deeply the interests of every community.

It is important in the commencement of this discussion, to ascertain the real question at issue. The argument in favour of the stage, has not, we think, been fairly conducted, and hence those opposed to it have been placed in a disadvantageous position. The true question before us is, whether the stage *as it now is*, and *ever has been*, is an evil, or a benefit to the community?

The advocates of the stage commonly de-

find it *as it ought to be*, and as they think *it might become*, if properly managed. They defend an imaginary perfection of the theatre. This perfect drama never did exist; and judging from the past, and from our knowledge of human nature, as well as from the nature and object of all scenic exhibitions, we believe never will exist. This unfair statement of the argument draws out the opposers of the theatre, against a comparatively unexceptionable state of it. The mind is thus drawn off from the true point of inquiry, and those who attend the theatre are deceived by the manner of defending it, by being led to suppose that the stage *as it is*, is defended. The two questions are entirely distinct, and ought not, in all fairness, to be confounded. The one is a question of fact, the other a question of hypothesis. And to profess to discuss the one, while really discussing the other, is, we think, uncandid and illogical.

Indeed, this mode of defending the theatre, is an implied admission, that as now conducted, it is an evil, and incapable of successful defence.

When a perfect state of the drama shall

exist, it will be time then to inquire into its moral tendency; at present, our object is to examine the character and tendency of the theatre, *as it is now*, and *ever has been*.

Those objectionable traits of the drama, which are frequently pointed out as tending to immorality, are declared by the defenders of the stage to be only its *abuses*. It is an important fact that these *abuses* are admitted to exist: for we would ask, when did the theatre ever exist without them? And we may further ask, when will it exist without them? If all experience has shown, and history testifies to the fact, that the stage never has existed without these abuses; if we may fairly infer from the past, what will be the future character of the drama; and if we may logically argue from the nature and object of the theatre, that it never can be free from the objectionable traits alluded to, then the argument is as good against the theatre, as it is against its abuses. “*Ex abusu non arguitur ad usum*,” is a maxim which we cordially adopt. No argument against the use of a thing, can be fairly drawn from its abuse. But to apply this maxim to the point in hand,

would be to beg the question. It would be taking for granted that the theatre has existed, and may exist, without those traits which its advocates say are its abuses. This we are by no means ready to admit. We believe that the drama has ever been characterized by what are here called its abuses; and this we think will appear from the historical outline of the theatre which we shall presently give. We believe, moreover, that while human nature continues to be what it ever has been since the fall of man, and what it now is, there is no probability, if indeed there be a possibility, that a theatre could be sustained without what are called its abuses. If the theatre itself be not an evil, yet its abuse is an evil necessary to its support. It is the very aliment which feeds and sustains it. It is a well known fact that what is here called the abuse of the stage, is its chief attraction to the great mass of those who patronize it. Remove these abuses, and the stage, thus stript of its main attractions to the lewd and immoral, would soon need no opposition to put it down. The respectable and moral portion of its patrons would be too small to sus-

tain it. The additional number of patrons which such a reformation might secure, would be insignificant compared with the number of those who would forsake it. The new patrons, also, would, in all probability, be of such a character as to demand far more talent to satisfy them, than is commonly found on the boards at the present day. To procure this additional amount of talent, even were it in all cases possible, would be to incur additional expenses, while the income of the theatre, after all, would be greatly diminished.

Add to this, as an item against the probability of sustaining the theatre, even when thus reformed, the increasing prevalence of religious influence. In this country, the Gospel labours under no civil disabilities. Its institutions are multiplying, and its power is beginning to be felt in the higher walks of life.

The force of these remarks will be seen by adverting to this consideration, that the object of the player is to make money, and the object of those who attend the theatre is to be amused. The one is generally in proportion to the other. We may therefore say, that the immediate object of the theatre is, to

amuse those who attend it. In order to afford this amusement, there must be a correspondence or similitude between the taste of the audience, and the character of the exhibition. In order to be sustained, the theatre must cater to the taste of its patrons. Dramatic writers have this in view, in order to ensure success to their productions.

Terence, an ancient comic dramatist, acknowledges this in the following lines :

Poeta cum primum animum ad scribendum appulit,  
 Id sibi negotii credidit solum dari,  
 Populo ut placerent quas fecisset fabulas.\*

which have been thus translated :

Our poet, when he set his mind on writing,  
 Believed he had no more to do, but make  
 Such plays as should be to the people's liking.

The same fact is admitted by the Spanish dramatist, Lopez de Vega. When Cervantes expostulated with him upon the great licentiousness of his plays, he answered "Miguel, it is the people who pay us, and therefore we ought to please them."

If then, we would ascertain the character

\* Terentius, in prologo *Andriæ*.

of dramatic exhibitions, we have only to inquire into the taste of those who attend them. We do not mean to say that all who attend them have the same depraved taste; but we know that a very large proportion of those who attend the theatre are of such a character, that if it were reformed of its abuses, they would cease to attend it, because it would cease to amuse them. We find that the most vicious and licentious uniformly attend, and are pleased. With what are they so much pleased? not with that which affords pleasure to those of delicate refinement, and of correct moral feelings. This would be to confound the moral character of the whole audience, and to place the more refined and virtuous, on a level, in point of taste, with the most vicious, abandoned, and profligate. Why is it, then, that so many of the character last named, are drawn to the theatre, and are gratified and pleased? The answer is, because they see and hear so much that accords with their vulgar and licentious taste. The virtuous and moral, who attend the theatre and are pleased, see and hear something, which, on account of its literary excellence, or the genius and ora-

tory with which it is exhibited, they are willing to applaud, notwithstanding the licentiousness which may accompany it. They doubtless regard themselves as fortified against the effect of vulgar and obscene insinuations; but they should ponder the counsel, "let him that thinketh he standeth, take heed lest he fall."

As long as the great mass of those who attend the theatre continue to be pleased with vulgar and licentious exhibitions, so long will the theatre continue to be what it is. And as the theatre always *follows*, and never *leads* the taste of the audience, it is evident that if any change is effected in the taste of the people, it must be by some agency other than the stage. And yet the influence of any reforming agency is constantly counteracted by the stage, because the more and oftener a bad taste is gratified, the more it is strengthened. The stage, by adapting itself to the taste of the immoral and profligate, is a barrier against all reformation. Hence, the very object of the theatre, namely to gratify the present taste and will of the audience, must for ever hinder any reformation in this respect.

To what agency, then, foreign from the stage, must we look for a reformation of its abuses?

This question may be best answered by adverting to the *cause* of the present vitiated and licentious taste of the mass of the people. Whatever may be the theory of men on this subject, the fact that such is the taste of the mass of the people is undeniable.

We believe that a taste for licentiousness is one of the developments of depraved human nature. This universal defection of our race may show itself in various ways, all dependent in a great degree, upon circumstances; such as, constitutional temperament, the temptations to which we are exposed, the company with which we associate, the relative strength of the different passions, the influence of example, the restraints of education and refinement, &c. Owing to these and similar circumstances, we find that the same depravity of heart is manifested in different ways. The love of sensual pleasure, the love of honour, the love of power, all characterize the same state of heart. Pride, vanity, ambition, lust, revenge, dishonesty, tyranny, &c., are all

streams flowing from the same corrupt fountain; yet they may not all be developed in one man. The proud man may not be a voluptuary. The dishonest man may not be vain, &c. A large class of the community, and that class too, the very one which most generally patronizes the theatre, will always be found exposed to those influences, which call out, and form that vulgar and licentious taste, which, by its reflex influence on the stage, determines the character of theatrical exhibitions.

It is impossible to say to what extent the influence of knowledge and refined society may affect the disposition and taste of man; but we are safe in saying, that as long as he continues a sinful being, and possesses a heart adverse to holiness; and as long as the great mass of our race continue to be surrounded by the circumstances in which they have always, hitherto, been found, so long will a corrupt and licentious taste control and determine the character of the theatre.

To what agency, then, we ask again, shall we look for a reformation of what are called the abuses of the stage? It is impossible to

bring the mass of the people, and particularly a large class of those who attend the theatre, under the direct influence of knowledge and refined society. And even if we could, that influence might prove ineffectual, as it has in many cases. At best, it could but shape the manifestation of the same unholy state of heart which they now have. Knowledge has sometimes only served to polish, without subduing a licentious taste. The influence of refined society might only serve to gild the poison. On the whole, it appears evident that before the theatre becomes what *it ought to be*, man must become what *he ought to be*; and he must become such through some agency other than the theatre.

We believe that genuine religion alone can make men what they should be. But how shall we bring this agency to bear upon the play-going community? They, for the most part, unite with the theatre in opposing religion.

The theatre endeavours to counteract the only influence which can possibly reform it. This opposition to religion is the most prominent development of that depravity of our

nature, which imparts to the theatre all that is objectionable. This opposition to religion is inveterate and bitter. In addition to the natural repugnance of the heart to religion, the actors perceive that their pecuniary interests are at stake. They deprecate the influence of religion, for the same reason that Demetrius, and the workmen of his craft, did. Paul's preaching had been the means of turning many from the worship of Diana, the goddess of the Ephesians. "And the same time there arose no small stir about that way. For a certain man named Demetrius, a silver-smith, which made silver shrines for Diana, brought no small gain unto the craftsmen; whom he called together, with the workmen of like occupation, and said, Sirs, ye know that by this craft we have our wealth; moreover, ye see and hear, that not alone at Ephesus, but almost throughout all Asia, this Paul hath persuaded and turned away much people, saying, that they be no gods which are made with hands. So that not only this our craft is in danger to be set at nought, but also that the temple of the great goddess Diana should be despised, and

her magnificence should be destroyed, whom all Asia, and the world worshippeth. And when they heard these sayings, they were full of wrath, and cried out, saying, Great is Diana of the Ephesians." Acts xix. 23—28.

The lovers of pleasure dread the influence of religion on the theatre, because it would dry up one source of licentious gratification.

The influence of religion tends not merely to correct the gross abuses of the theatre, but as these abuses seem essential to its support, it tends to break up the whole system of theatrical exhibitions. We believe that the theatre must continue to be in the main what it is now, and ever has been, or cease to exist altogether. We see no hope of its ever being radically or permanently reformed, or becoming the friend and patron of virtue.

We are by no means insensible to the attractions of the stage, nor are we unwilling to award to it all the merit it can justly claim. We are not entering upon a ruthless tirade against the theatre, but upon a calm examination of its moral tendency. We admit that historical incident, eloquence,

oratory, and sometimes noble sentiment, are found combined on the stage, with such symmetry and power, as to excite admiration, and even to wake up the sympathies of the audience, until they forget that it is fiction. "When, therefore," to use the language of another, "a youth of uncommon talents, as an actor, appears, we are willing to ascribe the disposition to see him act, not to a *total* insensibility of the corruptions of the theatre, but rather to a want of that degree of hatred to those corruptions which is sufficient to prevail over an extraordinary temptation." "Let it be fairly acknowledged, that the theatre has advantages of a certain kind, when compared with other amusements; that it is less frivolous than some of them, and that it recommends itself in a particular manner to intellectual persons: and then let self-denial be practised with respect to the theatre, on the ground that intellectual enjoyment, in the judgment of the devout Christian, is no adequate compensation for the propagation of moral evil."

Not only should this be the judgment of the devout Christian, but of every lover of

virtue, and of his country. The character of the drama, however, for some time past, has presented but few intellectual attractions. It has so far declined as now to be adapted to the most vulgar taste. This is evident both from the character of the pieces exhibited, and from the character of the large majority of those who attend the theatre at the present day. It requires, therefore, little or no self-denial for the intelligent and virtuous portion of the community to abandon the theatre.

As to the pious portion of the community, it is to be presumed, for their own sake, that the theatre, as at present conducted, has no attractions for them.

It requires a versatility of taste, incompatible with a devout and gracious state of heart, to relish the devotions of the sanctuary and the closet one day, and the amusements of the theatre the next.

## CHAPTER II.

## ORIGIN AND PROGRESS OF THE DRAMA.

THE immoral and injurious tendency of dramatic representations, and the improbability, if not impossibility of the stage ever becoming the patron of virtue and good morals, will appear by adverting to its origin, and progress, and to the fruitless attempts made to reform it. For the origin of the dramatic art, says the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, we always turn our eyes to Greece, the nursery of the arts and sciences. It may indeed have been known among more ancient nations, but no records remain sufficient to support this opinion. The different states of Greece asserted their claims to the honour of having given it birth, but the account of the Athenians is most generally received. It derived its origin from the hymns which were sung in the festivals of Bacchus, in honour of that deity. While these resounded in the ears of the multitude, choruses of Bacchants and Fauns,

ranged round certain obscene images which they carried in triumphal procession, chaunted lascivious songs, and sometimes sacrificed individuals to public ridicule. (See article, Theatre.)

The author of the above extract, is evidently a warm friend to the theatre, yet he testifies that it had its origin in obscenity and lasciviousness. Such, indeed, is the testimony of all who have written on the subject.

The word *tragedy*, is derived from the Greek *τραγος* (*tragos*) a goat, and *ωδη* (*ode*) a song. A Bacchanalian ode always accompanied the sacrifice of a goat to Bacchus.\*

\* We find the following account given of the origin of this festival. A rich planter of Attica, finding, one day, a goat devouring his grapes, killed it, and invited the peasantry to come and feast upon it. He gave them abundance of wine to drink, intoxicated with which, they daubed their faces with the lees, ornamented their heads with chaplets made of the vine branches, and then danced, singing songs in chorus to Bacchus all the while, round the animal destined for their banquet. A feast so very agreeable was not likely to go unrepeated; and it was soon reduced to a custom which was pretty generally observed in Attica, during the vintage. On those occasions the peasants, absolved from all reserve by intoxication, gave a loose to their animosities against the opulent, and in token of defiance of their supposed oppressors, went in bodies to their houses, and in set terms of abuse and sarcasm, called aloud for redress of their

So much for the Bacchanalian and obscene origin of the drama. But let us trace its progress. The hymns in honour of Bacchus, while they described his rapid progress and splendid conquests, became imitative; and in the contests of the Pythian games, the players on the flute, who entered into competition, were enjoined by an express law to represent successively the circumstances that had preceded, accompanied and followed the victory of Apollo over Python, among which circumstances were, doubtless, Apollo's love affairs with Daphne, Bolina, Clytie, and Leucothoe.

Some years after this regulation, Susarion

grievances. The novelty of the exhibition drew a multitude round them, who enjoyed it as a new species of entertainment. Far from preventing it, the magistrates authorized the proceeding, in order that it might serve as an admonition to the rich; taking special care, however, that no positive violence should be resorted to, and thus making it a wholesome preventive of public disorder. To this yearly festival, which was called "the feast of the goat," the people of all parts were invited, and as this extraordinary spectacle was performed in a field near the temple of Bacchus, it was gradually introduced into the worship of that god. Hymns to the deity were sung both by priests and people in chorus, while the goat was sacrificing, and to these hymns the name was given of *Tragodia*, (tragedy,) or "the song of the goat."--*Mirror of Taste*, 1 vol. p. 112.

and Thespis appeared, each at the head of a company of actors. The first represented his plays about the year 580 before Christ, and the latter about 536 B. C. The comedies of Susarion were in the same taste with those indecent and satirical farces which were afterwards performed in some of the cities of Greece, according to the statement of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*.

The plays of Thespis were also injurious, as they abounded with fictions and misrepresentations of the ancient traditions. This alarmed the wise lawgiver of Athens, who condemned that species of composition. "If we applaud falsehood in our public exhibitions," said Solon to Thespis, "we shall soon find that it will insinuate itself into our most sacred engagements."

*Æschylus*, *Sophocles*, and *Euripides* next appeared at the head of the drama, and are said to have improved it. This improvement, however, related merely to dresses, scenic illusions, &c., and not to the moral tendency of the stage. *Sophocles* seemed to have aimed at a moral reformation more than the other two. The first is said to have

painted men greater than they can be: not more virtuous and useful, but greater in bodily size and prowess, and greater in physical courage, and such other qualities as constituted greatness, in the estimation of a corrupt and heathenish mind. Sophocles is said to have painted men as they ought to be, and Euripides painted men as they are. The latter has been called the philosopher of the stage. Yet some of his plays tended to instil into the minds of the people, the most vicious and dangerous principles; for example, he inculcates perjury, and then justifies his doing so. In his *Hippolytus*, he introduces this sentiment, "My tongue has sworn, but still my mind is free." And when accused of impiety for so doing, he answered his accuser thus: "That it was a very unreasonable thing to bring a cause into a court of judicature, which belonged only to the cognizance of a theatre, and the liberty of a public festival." Aristotle, who relates this circumstance, does not inform us of the issue of this matter; his subject not requiring it. "If," says Bayle, "Euripides got off by contesting the jurisdiction of the court, and had nothing better to

allege in his defence, it must be confessed his cause was bad enough, and he has found friends and advocates who have pleaded much better for him than he did himself." Art. Euripides.

Although Cicero was a great admirer of Euripides, and is said to have prepared himself for death by reading that poet; yet he does not justify him in introducing the sentiment we are considering, but virtually condemns him.

Bayle, quoting this sentiment of Euripides, says: "This is exactly the sophistry, or rather the treason of mental reservations." After noticing the apologies and explanations which have been given by the admirers of that poet, he says: "But nevertheless, the maxim of Euripides, generally speaking, is a very bad one. There is no sort of perjury but may be excused by it. May not those who use equivocations say that their heart and tongue did not agree; that one swore, but the other did not swear?"

In another play Euripides makes Bellerophontes gravely defend and inculcate covetousness and avarice. This excited the indig-

nation of all the friends of morality and virtue. Although the sequel of the play showed that avarice never escapes punishment, "nevertheless," says Bayle, "it was to be feared that certain examples, and certain discourses, should become infectious."

Euripides, moreover, assailed and did violence to the religious feelings of the people; particularly in his *Menalippus*, where he calls in question the existence of their supreme deity, thus,

"Jupiter, if his name be so,  
For 'tis by hearsay only that I know."

From this circumstance he was thought by many to be an atheist. He was constrained to alter the above lines, so as to exclude the objectionable sentiment. It is no apology for this to say, that theirs were false gods, and that their religion was idolatry and paganism. Man is a religious being, and will have some object of worship. If he be ignorant of the true God, as they were, he will worship false gods. The religious sense, so common to man, is as clearly exhibited by the worship of false gods, as of the true God;

and it was at this religious sense, if I may use the phrase, that the satire of the poet was supposed to be aimed. And unless Euripides is supposed to have been favoured with a knowledge of the true religion, his attack must be regarded as made upon religion as such, and not upon any particular system. This was so understood by the people, and hence they called him an atheist. I have dwelt upon the character of this writer's plays, because he was the most popular of all the tragic writers of his age. Although the palm is claimed by many for his rival, Sophocles; yet the popular taste has awarded it to Euripides. A remarkable proof of this is found in the following circumstance. The Athenian army, commanded by Nicias, suffered all the miseries in Sicily that ill fortune can inflict. The conquerors pushed the advantages they had gained with the utmost cruelty; but how inhumanly soever they treated the Athenian soldiers, they were exceeding kind to all those that could repeat some of the verses of Euripides to them. Many, who after escaping from battle, wandered from place to place, without knowing what to do,

found a resource by singing the verses of that poet. They found means to subsist by it—the people furnishing them with provisions as a reward for their songs. Those who returned in safety made this acknowledgment to Euripides as the means of their deliverance. *Bayle.*

It is unfair to attribute to an author as his own, the sentiments he puts into the mouths of actors; yet the manner of uttering vicious sentiments, and the attendant circumstances, are designed to afford pleasure. Although the sequel of the play may exhibit the condemnation of vice; yet the seductive arts of the drama, and the fascinations of the scene, create an association in the mind between pleasure and vice, which has always been found to be injurious to virtue.

The history of the drama fully shows that even if every play held up vice to the audience, as odious and detestable, and at the same time, accomplished the end of amusement and pleasure, yet such histrionic\* exhibitions would invariably tend to corrupt the morals of the

\* *Histrionic* is from *histrion*, the Etruscan name for actor.

people. There is a hidden but deleterious influence which scenic representations of every kind have always been found to exert over the mass of the people. This seems to be generally known and felt, but the great amusement which the art affords, induces all the lovers of pleasure, to search out arguments in its defence, and apologies for its evils. This will often lead a man to argue against his own convictions. Selfishness is a great barrier to beneficence, and most commonly triumphs over it. Hence, when personal gratification and the public good come in conflict, the former is apt to prevail with most men, except on extraordinary occasions. By the public good, I mean here, their moral or spiritual welfare.

This is seen in nearly all the departments and avocations of human life. It is therefore not an uncommon thing for a man to be satisfied that theatrical exhibitions are pernicious in their tendency and effects, and yet so strong is his desire of amusement and pleasure, and so intent is he on its gratification, that he will patronize the theatre; and in order to relieve his conscience, and to palliate, if not

justify, his conduct, he will endeavour to persuade his own mind that the theatre may do good—that it may become both instructive and amusing. He is free to condemn what he calls its abuses, and warmly contends for a legitimate drama. But all this is self deception. He has never witnessed the drama without its abuses, in some form or other; and thus his arguments for an imagined perfection of the art are suffered to justify his own mind in patronizing it, with all its acknowledged abuses. His arguments for the stage, *as it should be*, satisfy his mind in patronizing it *as it is*. Thus many honest and worthy men deceive themselves.

The influence of the theatre, on the mass of the people, is not only injurious, but it is very great. There can be no doubt but that it has greatly, if not chiefly, helped to keep in vogue that code of false honour which requires a man to permit his foe to murder him. The representation of ancient dramas, or dramas founded on ancient history, exhibiting the sentiments and practices of a barbarous age, would very naturally have this effect.

Aristophanes, the comic poet, alludes to the great influence of the drama, as well as to the popularity of Euripides, when, in his *Thesmophorias*, he introduces a widow who obtained her living by selling holy nosegays; "but," says she, "since Euripides, by his impious verses, has persuaded the people that there are no gods, I sell hardly any thing at all."

Euripides is viewed, by some of the most zealous advocates of the stage, in the same light in which he is here represented. Schlegel, a German critic, and an enthusiast in behalf of the theatre, who lectured at Vienna on dramatic literature, says: We feel it to be an indispensable duty to point out the defects of Euripides, because the present age is subject to the same failings by which the Athenian poet acquired popularity. The modern theatre abounds in plays which, though greatly inferior to those of Euripides, have this striking resemblance to them: that while they enervate the mind by effeminate sentiments, they inspire religious incredulity. It is further said, that with masterly skill he develops the weaknesses of a heart enslaved

by passion, and a prey to the fury of love; but he is shamefully lax in every principle of morality, and readily sacrifices both religion and virtue to a brilliant expression, or a striking situation.\*

Euripides was not alone in his profane attacks upon religion. Æschylus came nigh being stoned to death for the impiety of some of his pieces, and was saved only by the interference of his brother Amynias, who had been maimed at the battle of Salamis, where he signalized himself above all the Athenians. Just as they were on the point of stoning Æschylus, Amynias turned up his sleeve, and showed the people that he had lost a hand in the service of the commonwealth. The judges, in consideration of his valour, and the friendship he expressed for his brother, exercised mercy towards Æschylus. *Bayle.*†

\* See London Quarterly Review, vol. 12, p. 126.

† Æschylus was so incensed at the ingratitude of the mob, and the slight they put upon him, that he retired into Sicily, where he is said to have lost his life by a most singular accident. Having wandered into the fields, an eagle, which had mounted into the air with a tortoise, for the purpose of dropping it upon a rock, in order to break the shell, mistaking the bald head of Æschylus for a stone, let the animal fall upon it, and killed him on the spot.

χ. "The comedy, as conducted by Aristophanes and his contemporaries," says Smith, in his *Festival and Games*, "was infinitely below our modern farces, and indeed hardly upon a par with our ancient mysteries and moralities, abounding as it did in vulgar, indecent reflections, and illiberal satire, and employing, by turns, parody, allegorical images, buffoonery, and travesties, in which the gods and heroes were rendered ridiculous by the contrast between their mean disguise and their real dignity. It appears as if the Athenians were jealous of their deities in proportion to their contemptible character and utter worthlessness; for though they resented, with a fierce intolerance, any real or imaginary affront directed against them in the form of serious argument, they delighted in seeing them lampooned and burlesqued, indulging in immoderate laughter, when the irreverent farces that bore the names of Bacchus and Hercules exposed the excessive poltroonery of the former, and the enormous voracity of the latter. To pander to the taste of the vulgar, the most celebrated authors sometimes furnished their actors

with indecorous dresses and expressions, and sometimes put into their mouths, virulent invectives against individuals, not only mentioning their names, but imitating their features on the actor's mask. Thus were Euripides, Socrates, and others, persecuted by Aristophanes, the same audiences crowning the tragedies of the former, and the farcical burlesques into which they were turned by the latter."

It is said that attempts were made by decrees, to repress the abuses of the stage at this period, but they were found to be ineffectual.

At length, by a new enactment, those who were reviled publicly on the stage, obtained redress in a court of justice. This has been called a reformation of the stage. But what did it amount to? Perhaps the grosser forms of licentiousness, ridicule, and defamation of character, the choruses of birds, and wasps, and the croaking of frogs, were banished from the stage; but no essentially moral reformation was effected. Licentiousness became more refined and seductive in its appearance, and the forbidding aspect of

vice, was exchanged for one less calculated to awaken suspicion or disgust, while the poison of vice still remained.

Menander, who flourished about three hundred years before Christ, was called the prince of the new comedy in Greece, because he excelled in delicacy, regularity, and decorum. He, and his contemporaries, Philemon, Diphilus, Pollodorus, Philippides, and Posidippus, seemed to have decried, with great boldness, the vice and immorality of the age in which they lived.

Menander was held in great estimation while he lived. But it is no equivocal evidence of the extent to which the drama had corrupted the people, that out of eighty plays, (some say more,) which he wrote, he obtained but eight prizes.

Dancing was very early introduced upon the Grecian stage, and was disgraced by a licentiousness so gross, that even Aristophanes made a merit of banishing it from his pieces.

The immoral tendency of the drama is strikingly manifested by the extent to which an actor will go in trampling upon the ten-

derest and most sacred affections of our nature, merely for the purpose of producing effect.

In one of the tragedies of Sophocles, the princess Electra embraces the urn which she imagines to contain the ashes of her brother Orestes. It is related of Polus, the Athenian player, that in acting the part of Electra, (for there were no female performers at that time,) he caused the urn containing the remains of a son whom he had lately lost, to be brought from his tomb, and when it was presented to him upon the stage, he seized it with a trembling hand, and taking it in his arms, pressed it to his heart, uttering accents of such lively grief, so moving and so fearfully expressive, that the whole theatre resounded with exclamations; and the spectators shed torrents of tears in commiseration of the unhappy fate of the son, and the wretched condition of the father. *Smith.*

What generous and honourable heart is not shocked at such a recital! What an expedient to gain popular applause! What a comment upon the dangerous tendency of the stage!

Such violence to natural affection, however, was not peculiar to the ancient dramatists. So late as 1779, we find an instance, and we presume it is not an isolated one, where the most sacred of all the social feelings are outraged, and that too by a woman, from whose sex we naturally expect better things. That a woman could so far forget and disregard even that outward respect to her own feelings, which the decencies of life require her to manifest, is abundant proof of the debasing and demoralizing tendency of the stage. The instance we allude to is this. On the 6th of June, 1779, Mr. Inchbald, a player, died suddenly at Leeds, (England,) and on the 21st of June, 1779, only two weeks after, we find Mrs. Inchbald throwing aside her weeds, and playing the part of Hector's lovely widow, for the benefit of Mr. Kemble. It is an aggravating circumstance, that she should have performed a part which would inevitably open afresh the wounds, (if there were any,) which her recent loss had made.

Go, ask the mourning widow, as she weeps with her more than orphan children, if she

can appreciate the cold indifference, the deadened sensibilities, which the above fact discloses? Ask her if she will send her orphans to the theatre to be refined and elevated, in point of moral feeling?

When the performances were concluded, it was customary for different bodies of magistrates to ascend the stage and make libations on an altar consecrated to Bacchus. This was done professedly for the purpose of elevating the character of theatrical entertainments, by impressing upon them that of sanctity. This reminds one of the expedient resorted to in modern times, to uphold the character of the theatre, by calling it the school of virtue and good morals. This attempt, however, to associate the obscenities and profanity of the stage, with purity and virtue, is both ludicrous and vain.

With this notice of the Bacchanalian termination of the Grecian drama, we will turn to the examination of the Roman, which was chiefly borrowed from the former. It was introduced at Rome in the year of the city 391. Their theatrical entertainments originally consisted of but little more than dances

to the sound of a flute, without either singing or acting. No attempt to represent a regular play was made till the year of the city 572. The drama, we may suppose, still retained its essential characteristics, and tendencies to evil; for a law was soon enacted, declaring the profession of an actor to be infamous, and depriving those who practised it, of the rights of citizens.

The story of the unfortunate Laberius exhibits, in a strong point of view, the odium which was attached to the profession of an actor among the Romans. Compelled by Cæsar, at an advanced age, to appear on the stage to recite some of his own works, he felt his character, as a Roman citizen, insulted and disgraced; and in some affecting verses, spoken on the occasion, he incensed the audience against the tyrant, by whose command he was obliged to appear before them. "After having lived," said he, "sixty years with honour, I left my house this morning a Roman knight, but shall return to it this evening an *infamous stage-player*. Alas! I have lived a day too long."

The dramatic productions of the Augus-

tan age have wholly perished, and we cannot, therefore, determine positively their moral character. The Roman comedy was, at first, wholly borrowed from the Greeks, and it was long before the Latin stage could boast of an original composition. The Roman stage greatly degenerated soon after the fall of the republic, which catastrophe has been attributed to the corrupting influence of the stage itself. In the reign of Tiberius, the players were banished from Italy altogether, for they engendered so many brawls and riots, not unfrequently terminating in bloodshed, that they became a public nuisance. From this blow, says Smith in his *Festivals and Games*, the regular drama never recovered; but the dancers and buffoons gradually returned to, and usurped the stage, of which they thenceforward kept undisputed possession.

As to the tragedy of the Romans, Schlegel says, it is almost certain that no original tragedy was ever composed in the Latin language.

After the play, says Smith, amateurs performed a farce, termed an *Atellane* comedy, wherein the actors composed an extempora-

neous dialogue, which often degenerated into gross ribaldry. Between the acts were generally introduced interludes of tumbling, rope-dancing, and pantomimical representations, which, as the public taste became more and more corrupt by theatrical representations, superseded what is termed the regular drama. The Emperor Galba is said to have had an elephant which walked upon a rope stretched across the theatre, and similar exhibitions doubtless formed a part of the entertainments of the occasion. If this was a sign of the decline of what is called the regular drama among the Romans, we are justified in inferring that it is also on the wane with us.

Dancing formed a part then, as it does now, of theatrical amusements. Professed dancers, says Smith, used castanets, playing them in unison with the music, as still practised in many parts of the continent. It appears that the chief female dancers, continues Smith, were Spaniards, of the province of Andalusia, and that their mode of exhibition was then as remarkable as now for its voluptuousness. Hence it has been conjectured that the same fandango and bolero

which charm the present audiences of Madrid, once delighted the inhabitants of ancient Rome.\*

We would here pause, and ask the advocates of the theatre, whether or not, they will make the Greek and Roman stage, the standard by which to determine the "legitimate drama?" It seems incredible that any one can look upon the classical drama, even in its best estate, and gravely pronounce it the school of virtue, and the patron of sound morality. The most zealous defenders of the theatre in modern times, have not hesitated to condemn it. The London Quarterly Review, (vol. 12. p. 127,) says, "we content ourselves with proclaiming our total disapprobation of the licentiousness which polluted the Grecian comedies, as well as of the custom which prevailed, of exposing the most respectable characters in the state, to the scoffs and derision of the populace." It is true, that the Review attributes these defects to the age and to the system; yet all we are now seeking for, is the fact that the Grecian

\* Festivals, Games, &c., by Horatio Smith, Esq., pp. 51, 52.

drama was licentious; and here is the admission of it by a friend of the theatre; we are not seeking apologies, and if we were, these would confirm, rather than disprove the fact.

Before quoting this Review any further on this point, and for the purpose of allaying any suspicion that it is unfriendly to the theatre, we give a note on page 134 of vol. 12. "We live in an age of pedantic affectation, and exaggerated sensibility. A spirit of purification is gone abroad, which would interdict the most innocent pleasures, and substitute the amusement of sighing and groaning, for the elegant and rational entertainments of the theatre." By this back-handed blow at pure religion, and this bold advocacy of the theatre, the reader may be prepared to receive all that this Review has to say *against* the theatre, without even one grain of allowance. On pages 252, 253 of vol. 17, this Review says; "The basis of ancient tragedy is mythology—and that mythology, long exploded, can now scarcely afford a striking illustration to the theme of a school-boy, much less a popular subject for tragedy; what, according to Gibbon, was viewed by

contemporary philosophers with cold and jealous scepticism, is viewed by modern readers with incredulous disdain. This mythology, always offensive to reason, cannot be considered entitled to much respect for its morality. The gods who (always visibly present) constitute the whole *materiel* of the drama, are beings whom, as mortal, we should feel disposed to execrate, and whom their rank of deity only makes us view with greater horror. They are all malignant, vindictive, and meanly jealous of their prescriptive privilege of sacrifice and worship; in passion they are below mortals, in power they are fatally superior to them. In this system, religion and morality are completely disjoined;—the deities frequently impel to the commission of the most atrocious crimes, and *their anger is never excited by the breach of moral duties.* “The gods of the Greek drama are so intently occupied in aggravating the miseries of human existence, that they seem never to have time or inclination to afford their victims, or their favourites, a hope of expiation or relief from futurity. This, it may be said, was their national

creed—granted; but does not the concession aggravate the difficulty, by proving a total want of the sensibility, not only of poetical justice, but of moral feeling, in both the author and the audience? All around the personages of their tragedies is suffering—all beyond them is darkness. In a word, the Greek drama presents an actual moral desert, without one fertile spot to cheer the traveller; not even a *mirage* to allure him by its seductive brilliancy.”

We presume that the ancient drama may now be dismissed as confessedly corrupt in its morality, and corrupting in its influence. We apprehend that a similar verdict may with justice be pronounced against the modern. This will appear by noticing still further the progress of the art.

“The Arabians and Persians,” says Schlegel, in his lectures on dramatic literature, “though possessed of a rich poetical literature, are unacquainted with any sort of drama. It was the same with Europe in the middle ages. On the introduction of Christianity, the plays handed down among the Greeks and Romans were abolished, partly

from their reference to heathen ideas, and partly because they had degenerated into the most impudent and indecent immorality; and they were not again revived till after the lapse of nearly a thousand years." "We are by no means entitled to assume, that the invention of the drama has only once taken place in the world; or that it has always been borrowed by one people from another." Schlegel then goes on to show, that several nations have each an original drama.

We shall not discuss the question: When did the drama first appear in modern Europe? This is foreign from our purpose. The English and Spanish drama is original, and wholly unlike that of the ancient Grecian. It has been called the romantic drama, in contradistinction to the classical, which the Italians first, and after them the French, have made the model of their drama. We do not profess to give a complete history of the art, but only such an outline of it as will be sufficient to show its moral tendency, and its effects upon the habits and characters of men.

An historical notice of the English stage

will serve to show, that although its literary character and style are different from the ancient classical drama, yet its moral character and tendency are the same. Injury to the morals of the people seems to be the invariable, if not necessary, effect of all scenic representations.

## CHAPTER III.

## ORIGIN AND PROGRESS OF THE DRAMA CONTINUED.

It is impossible to date the origin of the drama in England. It certainly existed nearly as far back as the conquest. It is mentioned by William Fitz-Stephen, a monk of Canterbury, in his "*Descriptio nobilissimæ Civitatis Londoniæ*," written soon after the year 1170. "London, instead of common interludes belonging to the theatres, has plays of a more holy subject: representations of those miracles which the holy confessors wrought, or of the sufferings, wherein the glorious constancy of the martyrs did appear." The first play of this kind is supposed to be that called *St. Catherine*, written by Geoffrey, a Norman, about the year 1110, and performed in the Abbey at Dunstable. These led the way to Scripture plays, in which God the Father, the blessed Saviour, the Virgin Mary, the twelve Apostles, &c., were the leading charac-

ters.\* These mysteries, as they are called, are of very ancient date. Gregory of Nazianzen, who flourished towards the close of the fourth century, is said to have persuaded the people

\* It is a remarkable fact that both the ancient and modern drama originated in religion. But it is still more remarkable that in both instances, the subjects of the drama were substantially the same, and in both instances, the plays were called "Mysteries." Dr. McCulloh, in his *Philosophical and Antiquarian researches, &c.*, p. 486, says "The mysteries of Isis, of Eleusis, &c., at a comparatively modern time, were imported into Greece; and when this people began to habble publicly concerning their secret assemblies, they had not only appropriated the mysterious practices or doctrines to their own motley system of theology, but they had also perverted the mysterious meeting into a convenience for debauchery and licentiousness."

After quoting Warburton, Bryant, and Faber, in regard to the purport of these mysteries, the Doctor proceeds:

I am inclined, therefore, after benefitting by the observations of these great writers, to consider myself justified in stating, that they have each proved but parts of the system. I consider the mysteries, originally, to have been entirely religious in the institution, and that the doctrines taught in them were for the most part represented scenically. If they commenced with teaching the origin of religious obligations, they would begin with the generation of mankind, with the history of the fall, the general corruption of our race, the deluge of Noah, and the consequent regeneration of our species. Such doctrinal truths are essentially connected with the history of individuals prominent in the ancient history of the world. Together with these facts, they communicated all the abstract matters of their credence, and such moral sentiments as would make men wiser and better. The next stage would be to show the consequence of a virtuous or vicious life,

of Byzantium to represent on their theatre, some chosen stories of the Old and New Testament, and to banish from their stage the profane compositions of Sophocles and Euripides

which we feel justified to assert positively, was done by scenical representations of Hades, Tartarus, and the Elysian fields. In the introduction of such matters, an almost boundless field was given to men of genius and intellectual apprehensions.

When the "mysteries" were the only dramatic performances in England, representations of hell were a part of them. The stage then, as is still the custom at Peking, consisted of three distinct platforms raised one above another; on the uppermost sat the *Pater Cælestis*, surrounded with his angels; on the second appeared the glorified saints; and the lowest was occupied by mere men, who had not yet quitted "the smoke and stir of this dim spot." On one side of this lowest platform was the resemblance of a dark and pitchy cavern, whence issued the appearance of fire and flames; and, when necessary, the audience were stunned by hideous yellings, imitative of the howlings of wretched souls, tormented by relentless demons, who frequently ascended through the mouth of the cavern, to delight the spectators with their buffooneries, and to instruct them, by their remorseless cruelty to the condemned, carefully to shun the commission of such crimes, as might plunge themselves into a similar predicament. In an improved state of the theatre, when regular plays were introduced, the cavern, with its concomitant, though heterogeneous mixture of horror and mummery, was abolished; the uppermost platform, and its celestial *personæ* also disappeared, two platforms only remaining, which continued in use a considerable time; the upper one serving for galleries, ramparts, or any other elevated situation, from which some of the actors might discourse with others, standing on the lower one, now called *the stage*.—*Pock. Enc., art. Dram.*

In a note appended to the above extract from Dr. M'Culloh's

pides. The Jews, themselves, had the stories of the Old Testament exhibited in the dramatic form; part of a Jewish piece on the subject of Exodus is preserved in Greek iambs, written by one Ezekiel, who styles himself the poet of the Hebrews.\*

Religious plays were introduced into France as early as the time of Charlemagne. It appears that some time in the seventh century,

learned work, he adds, "I am persuaded from an examination of the institutions of antiquity, that tragedy and the drama arose from the scenical representations exhibited in the mysteries. The Greeks, indeed, attributed their origin to the *rural celebrations* of the sacrifices of Dionysius or Bacchus. This I am not disposed to deny may have been the exciting cause of popular dramatic representations; because the subjects exhibited in the mysteries were religious, and were forbidden to be revealed to the uninitiated. But the obvious machinery by which the religious scenical exhibitions were executed, was the cause that an application was made of the same instrumentalities in representing popular and familiar subjects."

"Theatres were supposed to be under the protection of Dionysius, and were from him called *Διονυσιακα* (dionusiaka). (Potter's Greek Antiq. I. 41.) And we are further informed by Diod. Sic. Lib. 4. chap. I., that Dionysius or Bacchus invented plays and erected theatres.

This information is in exact accordance with what is observed above; for the mysteries of Dionysius were among the most renowned celebrations of the Greeks."

\* Hawkins's Origin of English Drama, p. 5.

France began to imitate the Roman drama, in the same rude form that the Romans had before imitated that of the Greeks. The gross licentiousness of their performances, however, alarmed Charlemagne, and he issued an order to suppress them.

Although Charlemagne could silence the players, yet as an advocate of the stage remarks, he could not extinguish the passion they had inspired, nor divert the people from their beloved dramatic amusements: being deprived of them on account of religion, they resolved to resort to religion for a substitute; the priests, alive to their own interests, readily consented, and like the priests of Bacchus at Attica, suffered their churches to be converted into theatres. The priests themselves, not unfrequently joined in the performance as actors, and sometimes as actresses, sinking the sanctity of their office in the dissipation of histrionic revelry. Yet disgusting to taste and feeling, subversive of religion and morality, and disgraceful to all who were concerned in them, as these spectacles were, they continued to be the favourite entertainment of that people for four

hundred years. In the twelfth century, Sulli, bishop of Paris, formally anathematized them; but so inveterately were the people infected with a passion for them, and so effectually had the sense of religion been obliterated by that foul union of ludicrousness and obscenity with things most solemn and sacred, that the people slighted the thunders of the very altar itself, and persevered, though in a mitigated degree, in the enjoyment of their sacred farees. A new era in the drama then arose: crusading, pilgrimage, and holy warfare now supplied subjects for their plays.\*

These mysteries were introduced into France by the pilgrims from the Holy Land. Menestrier in his *Ancient and Modern Musical Representations*, says, these pilgrims “composed songs on their travels, mixing with them a recital of the life and death of the Son of God, or of the last judgment, after a gross manner, but which the singing and simplicity of the times seem to render pathetic: they sung the miracles of saints, their martyrdom, and certain fables, to which the cre-

\* *Mirror of Taste*, 2 vol. pp. 402, 403.

dulity of the people gave the name of visions and apparitions. These pilgrims, who went in companies, and who took their stands in streets and public places, where they sung with their staves in their hands, and their hats and mantles covered with shells and painted images of divers colours, formed a kind of spectacle which pleased, and which excited some citizens of Paris to raise a fund for purchasing a proper place to erect a theatre, on which to represent these mysteries on holy days, as well for the instruction of the people as their diversion." These mysteries did not cease to be represented in France till prohibited by the parliament of Paris in 1548. This religious drama became common throughout all Christendom, particularly in those places where religious pilgrimages were patronized. The French at length judged these mysteries to be too serious, and some time before the reign of Francis the First, scenes were introduced from profane and burlesque subjects, which gave great amusement. These went by the general name of "fooleries," and were usually performed by the children of Sans Souci, the

name of a dramatic company, the chief of whom was called the "prince of fools."

The Acts of the Apostles were dramatized, and acted at Paris in 1541. The author very often brings devils on the stage, which, says Bayle, instead of inspiring horror, is more fit to excite laughter. This, continues Bayle, will suffice to inform us, that at the same time that the people were forbidden to see the sacred stories in the Book, which contains them faithfully and in purity, they were allowed to see them on the stage, sullied with a thousand gross inventions, most part of which were expressed after a low manner, and in the style of a farce-player.\* No other species of drama was known at Rome and Florence in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. But to return to the English stage. A play was performed at Skinner's Well, near Smithfield, in the reign of Henry IV. which lasted eight days, beginning with the creation of the world, and containing the greater part of the history of the Old and New Testament. A play entitled

\* Bayle, art. Chocquet.

“Corpus Christi,” or “Ludus Coventriæ,” (transcripts of which, made nearly coeval with the time when it was performed, are yet preserved,) begins with the creation, and ends with the last judgment.

These mysteries were performed in the churches on Sunday, and the actors were chiefly, if not wholly, the clergy. In the year 1378, the masters and scholars of St. Paul's school, presented a petition to Richard II. praying him “to prohibit some unexpert people from presenting the history of the Old Testament, to the great prejudice of the said clergy, who have been at great expense in order to represent it publicly at Christmas.” “Notwithstanding the seriousness of the subjects selected for these performances,” says Smith, in his *Festivals and Games*, “and the sacred character of the building in which they were usually displayed, it seems clear that they were not exhibited without a portion of pantomimical fun, to make them palatable to the vulgar taste; and indeed the length and dullness of the speeches required some such assistance to enliven them, though they were in general much shorter than the modern plays.

Beelzebub was the principal comic actor, assisted by his merry troop of under-devils, who with a variety of voices, strange gestures, and contortions of the body, excited the laughter of the populace. 'It was a pretty part in the old church-plays,' says Harsenet in his Declaration of Popish Impostures, 1603, 'When the nimble *Vice* would skip up like a jackanapes into the devil's neck, and ride the devil a course; and belabour him with his wooden dagger till he made him roar; whereat the people would laugh to see the devil so vice-haunted.' "

Cibber, who was a player, in his Apology for his Life, says "these pieces were exhibited in a manner so ridiculous as to favour libertinism and infidelity. The London Quarterly Review (vol. 17., p. 249. n.) says, "they taught little but licentiousness and impiety, and the sacred names which they use, instead of consecrating, aggravate the profanation."

The religious drama continued in England till after the Reformation, and became highly controversial in its character. "At the Reformation," says the London Quarterly Review, (vol. 17, p. 249,) "the teachers of the

new religion, though professing and generally maintaining a greater strictness of demeanour, attempted to wrest this powerful engine from the hands of their adversaries, and to turn it against them; and controversy, after deluging every other department of literature, forced its way even into the indirect and impracticable channel of the drama. The comedies of Bale exhibited the most awful mysteries of religion clothed in the dark drapery of Calvinistic theology, and the audience, with edifying patience, sat out dramas, which extended from Adam to the commencement of the Gospel dispensation, and of which the characters were those whom it would now be justly deemed impiety to allude to on the stage, and irreverence even to name on ordinary occasions."

Thomas Naogeorgus composed several tragedies of this controversial character. Such is that which he entitled, "Pammachius," which he dedicated to Archbishop Cranmer: the prologue of which begins thus,

Quid adferamus si vacat cognoscere  
Spectatores, paucis exponam singula:  
Pammachium, qui Romanus est Episcopus,  
Evangelicæ doctrinæ cepit tædium.

Which has been translated thus :

Of our intended feast, Sirs, by your leave,  
We beg you'll first a bill of fare receive.  
Pammachius, bishop of Rome's pampered see,  
Is surfeited with Christianity.

It became so common, in the early days of the Reformation, for the partizans of the Roman Catholic, and of the Protestant Church also, to defend and illustrate their tenets by dramatic representations, that in an act of parliament made 24th of Henry VIII., for the promoting of true religion, we find a clause restraining all rimors or players from singing in songs, or playing in interludes, any thing that should contradict the established doctrines.

In the reign of Edward VI. the pulpits of England being, by proclamation, shut against controversies, the stage soon became the arena of theological contention. To remedy this evil, a proclamation was issued against the theatre, of which Fuller, in his history of the Church, gives the following account:

“The pulpit, thus shut and silent by proclamation, the stage was more open and vocal for the same; the popish priests (which

though unseen) stood behind the hanging, or lurking in the tiring-house, removed their invectives from sermons to plays, and a more proper place indeed for the venting thereof. Here it made old sport, to see the new religion, as they term it, made ridiculous, with the prime patrons thereof, which caused the ensuing proclamation for the prohibition:

“A proclamation for the Inhibition of Players, *anno tertio-Edvardi sexti, Augusti 6.*

“Forasmuch as a great number of those that be common players of interludes and plays, as well within the city of London, or elsewhere, within the realm, do for the most part play such interludes as contain matter tending to sedition, and contemning of sundry good orders and laws; whereupon are grown upon, and daily are like to grow and ensue, much disquiet, division, tumults, and uproars in this realm; the King’s majesty, by the advice and consent of his dearest uncle, Edward duke of Somerset, governor of his person, and protector of his realms, dominions, and subjects, and the rest of his Highness’ privy council, straitly chargeth and commandeth all and every his Majesty’s sub-

jects, of whatsoever state, order, or degree they be, that from the ninth day of this present month of August, until the Feast of All Saints next coming, they, nor any of them, openly, or secretly, play in the English tongue any kind of interlude, play, dialogue, or other matter, set forth in form of play, in any place, public or private, within this realm, upon pain that whosoever shall play in English any such play, interlude, dialogue, or other matter, shall suffer imprisonment, and further punishment, at the pleasure of his Majesty.”\*

As an improvement on the mysteries, another species of the drama was introduced called Moralities, in which were some rude traces of a fable and a moral, and some of poetry also; virtues, vices, and other affections, being often personified. These plays were allegorical in their character, and consisted of moral reasoning in praise of virtue, and condemnation of vice.

The characters were such as “Good Doctrine,” “Charity,” “Faith,” “Prudence,” “Discretion,” “Death,” and the like.

\* Fuller’s Ch. Hist. Lib. VII. 3 Edward VI.

The province of making merriment for the spectators, says Smith, descended from the devil in the mysteries, to the Vice or Iniquity in the moralities, who usually personified some bad quality; and even when the regular tragedies and comedies were introduced, we may trace the descendants of this facetious personage in the clowns and fools by which they were so frequently disgraced.

That this motley fool, continues Smith, should be admitted into the finest tragedies of Shakespeare, only proves how indispensable it had been rendered by the false taste of the age.

Every apologist of the theatre is disposed to attribute those evils of the drama, which he is constrained to acknowledge as such, to the bad taste of the age, rather than to the nature of all scenic exhibitions. In every age and condition of its existence, even the advocates of the drama have had occasion to find fault with it; yet the *age*, has had thrown upon its broad shoulders, all the blame. The dramatic system, abstractly considered, is always acquitted. This looks very much like upholding a system, in spite of every valid objection

against it. A system invariably found to work evil, agreeably to the admissions of its advocates, must be radically unsound and ruinous. Such we believe to be the case with regard to all dramatic exhibitions. It is not merely with this particular play, or that specified performance, that we find fault. We go against the whole system, as such. We condemn it as corrupting to the morals, and injurious to the well-being of the community. We freely admit that, to the lovers of pleasure, it has very many and great attractions. But this increases the danger of evil, in proportion to its charms. We admit also, that some are less injured by frequenting the theatre, than others. We admit, too, that some estimable and moral characters occasionally attend the theatre. But this does not weigh a feather against the mass of evidence furnished by friends and foes, that its tendency is to licentiousness and immorality. The *arguments* against the stage outweigh all the *examples* in favour of it. But, to return from this digression.

These moralities, though chiefly written on moral subjects, were not unfrequently devoted

to religious purposes, which was then the paramount object of attention.

The London Quarterly Review, (vol. 17. p. 249,) calls the connexion of the drama with religious purposes, an “*extraordinary coalescence*, into which the tragic muse seems to have entered somewhat ungracefully.” In connexion with this, are the following just remarks: “The very means which her reverend teachers took to break her to their purpose, tended, (as might have been foreseen,) to defeat it. To accommodate the drama to popular conception, they had to mingle the narratives of Scripture, with the incidents of ordinary life; and the language of inspiration, with the refuse of colloquial abuse, and depraved idiom—hence their representations were without dignity, and their morality without effect.” Here is an important concession furnished by a zealous defender of the drama, that in order “to accommodate it to popular conception,” it must have mingled with its loftier style, “the refuse of colloquial abuse, and depraved idiom.” If this be *necessary*, in order to accommodate it to popular conception, then the stage, in order to be popular

and successful, must *necessarily* be licentious and immoral.

This seems, indeed, to have always been the case. Even the moralities, being intended to divert, as well as to instruct the populace, contained a good portion of drollery and humour, with some rude attempts at wit, which naturally led the way for comedy. The prevailing turn for drollery, says Smith, was so strong, that in order to gratify it, even in the more serious and solemn scenes, it was still necessary to retain the vice, or buffoon; who like his contemporary, the privileged fool, was to enter the most august presence, and vent his humour without restraint.

The Encyclopædia Britannica says, “the graver sort of moralities appear to have given birth to our modern tragedy; as our comedy evidently took its rise from the lighter interludes of that kind.”

After these moralities, came what are termed interludes, which made some approaches to wit and humour. “Even at the time,” says Smith, “when these mysteries and moralities were in vogue, there were secular plays and interludes, acted by strolling

companies, composed of minstrels, jugglers, tumblers, dancers, jesters, and similar performers, whose exhibitions were much relished, not only by the vulgar, but by the gentry and nobility. The courts of the kings of England, and the castles of the barons, were crowded with these itinerants, who were well received and handsomely rewarded, to the great annoyance of their clerical rivals, who endeavoured to bring them into disgrace, by inveighing against the filthiness and immorality of their performances, reproaches which seem to have been but too well merited." A friend to the drama, here endorses the charge of filthiness and immorality, made against those interludes which pleased the vulgar, and charmed the nobility. The decided preference given to these filthy interludes, by the high and the low, clearly discovers the taste of the populace; which taste gives law to the drama, and stamps upon it, its own image. The theatre will always be, in point of morality, what the people are. The people will always be in this respect, just what they have ever been, and now are, until the influence of genuine religion is sufficiently strong to effect

a general and thorough reformation; and then its influence will put an end to theatrical exhibitions, as it did when the Puritans of England were in power. They will then be suppressed, however, not so much by arbitrary laws, as by the force of public opinion, and a regard for the public welfare.

As religious plays were the origin of the English drama, they were performed on Sundays and other holidays, and chiefly by the clergy. A custom being thus established, the secular players very naturally fell into it. Hence we find that when Goffen wrote his "school of Abuse," in 1579, dramatic entertainments were usually exhibited on Sundays only. Afterwards, however, they were performed on that and other days indiscriminately. Easter has ever been considered by the Roman Catholic church, as a season of great festivity, and was formerly signalized by extraordinary dramatic worship, with appropriate scenery, machinery, dresses, and decorations; the theatrical representations taking place in the churches, and the monks being the actors.

There is extant a license dated 1572, per-

mitting one John Swinton Powlter, “to use playes and games on nine severall Sundaies; and because great resort of people is like to come thereunto, he is to have proper persons to keep peace and quiet during the continuance of such playes and games.” And yet, says Smith, only eight years afterward, and in the same queen’s reign, the magistrates of London procured an edict to be issued, “that all heathenish playes and interludes should be banished upon Sabbath-days.” But this is understood as only applying to the jurisdiction of the Lord Mayor; for three years afterward a prodigious concourse of people being assembled on a Sunday afternoon, at the Paris Gardens in Southwark, to see plays and a bearbaiting, the theatre fell with their weight, when many were killed and more wounded. The successor of Elizabeth, on the other hand, thinking that the restrictions on the public sports, were too generally and too strictly applied, especially in the public places, published the following declaration:

“Whereas we did justly, in our progress through Lancashire, rebuke some puritanes and precise people, in prohibiting and unlaw-

fully punishing of our good people, for using their lawful recreations and honest exercises on Sundayes, and other holy days, after the afternoon sermon or service: It is our will, that after the end of divine service, our good people be not disturbed, letted, or discouraged from any lawful recreation, such as dauncing, either for men or women; archery for men, leaping, vaulting, or any other such harmless recreation; nor for having of May-games, Whitson-ales, and morris daunces, and the setting up of May-poles, and other sports therewith used; so as the same to be had in due and convenient time, without impediment or neglect of divine service. But withall, we do still account here, as prohibited, all unlawful games to be used on Sundays onely, as beare and bull-baitings, interludes, and at all times, in the meaner sort of people by law prohibited, bowling.”\* It seems from this, that the theatre was still considered more profane and unsuited to the Sabbath, than the other entertainments mentioned in the above royal order. This is no slight proof of the opinion

\* Smith's Games and Festivals.

entertained at that time, of the immoral character and tendency of the stage. And it is with regret and mortification that we state, that in the largest of our southern cities, and in this age of boasted light and improved morals, the Sabbath is desecrated by theatrical performances. We trust that ere long, the growing intelligence and piety of that community, will abolish a custom so much at variance with the principles of morality and good order, and so fraught with evil to the social system.

In the reign of Henry VIII., the number of dramatic writers was increased: but the more popular plays were debased with an intermixture of low gross humour, which long continued under the name of tragi-comedy. Authors, aiming no higher than at present pleasure and profit, were content to pander to the taste of rude and ignorant audiences. Such was the popularity of the drama, that from the year 1570 to 1629, no fewer than seventeen new theatres were erected in London. Queen Elizabeth patronized the stage, by establishing on handsome salaries, twelve of the principal players at that time, who went

under the name of "Her Majesty's Comedians and Servants." Many noblemen, also had their companies of actors, who performed not only privately in their Lord's houses, but publicly under their license and protection. "Abuse," says Smith, "soon flowed from this universal and unrestricted indulgence in the pleasures of the stage. The great inns being converted into temporary theatres, became the scenes of much scandalous ribaldry and shameless dissipation; of which Stow has left a record in his 'Survey of London.' Speaking of the stage, he says, 'This which was once a recreation, and used therefore, now and then occasionally, afterward, by abuse, became a trade and calling, and so remains to this day. In those former days, ingenious tradesmen and gentlemen's servants would sometimes gather a company of themselves, and learn interludes, to expose vice, or to represent the noble actions of our ancestors. These they played at festivals, in private houses, at weddings and other entertainments; but in process of time, it became an occupation: and these plays being commonly acted on Sundays or festivals, the churches were

forsaken, and the play-houses thronged. Great inns were used for this purpose, which had secret chambers and places, as well as open stages and galleries. Here maids and good citizens' children were inveigled and allured to private and unmeet contracts; here were publicly uttered popular and seditious matters, unchaste, uncomely, and shameful speeches, and many other enormities. The consideration of these things occasioned in 1574, Sir James Hawes being mayor, an act of common council, in which it was ordained, that no play should be openly acted within the liberty of the city, wherein should be uttered any words, examples, or doings of any unchastity, sedition, or such-like unfit and uncomely matter, under the penalty of five pounds, and fourteen days imprisonment: that no play should be acted till first permitted and allowed by the Lord Mayor and court of Aldermen; with many other restrictions. But these orders were not so well observed as they should be; the lewd matters of plays increased, and they were thought dangerous to religion, the state, honesty, and manners, and also for infection in the time of sickness.

Wherefore they were afterwards for some time totally suppressed; but upon application to the Queen and council, they were again tolerated under the following restrictions: that no plays be acted on Sundays at all, nor on any holy day till after evening prayer: that no playing be in the dark, nor continue any such time but as any of the auditors may return to their dwellings before sunset, or at least before it be dark, &c. But all these proscriptions were not sufficient to keep them within due bounds; but their plays, so abusive oftentimes of virtue, or particular persons, gave great offence, and occasioned many disturbances, when they were now and then stopped and prohibited.”

In the reign of Queen Elizabeth, 1580, the whole city of London petitioned, successfully, against the theatre, and occasioned those legislative restrictions to which we have alluded. An account of this is given by Rawlidge in his “Monster lately found out.” “Many godly citizens, and other well disposed gentlemen of London,” observes this writer, “considering that play-houses were traps for young gentlemen and others, and

perceiving the many inconveniences and great damage that would ensue upon the long suffering of the same, not only to particular persons, but to the whole city, and that would also be a great disparagement to the governors, and a dishonour to the government of this honourable city, if they should any longer continue, acquainted some pious magistrates therewith, desiring them to take some course for the suppression of common play-houses within the city of London and liberties thereof: who thereupon made humble suit to the Queen and her privy council, and obtained leave of her Majesty to thrust the players out of the city, and to pull down all play-houses within their liberties; which according was effected. And the play-houses Grace-church-street, &c., were quite put down and suppressed."

Shakspeare flourished in the reign of Queen Elizabeth, and is regarded as the greatest genius known among the dramatic poets. From his time to the introduction into England of the style of the French drama, the theatre is considered as having attained to its highest distinction. The emi-

nence of those early dramatic writers in England, is attributed not merely to their superior mental powers, but also to the circumstances under which those powers were exercised, to the state of society and literature under which they existed, to the prevalent habits of thinking at that period, and to the influence which these causes produced on their writings. Still there is much grossness and obscenity in Shakspeare's plays. The intellect of the audience is often feasted at the expense of the heart. "I am as sensible as any man," says a modern writer, quoted in a London magazine, "of the wonderful talents of that poet, Shakspeare: for force of language, for exhaustless invention, for an insight into human nature, for a power to touch and rend the heart, he is unequalled, and stands among dramatists as a diamond among pearls; but while I know his intellectual capacities, I must deeply lament their miserable abuse. So far from having a moral end before him, he has frequently its opposite, and seems indifferent to moral results. His licentious witticisms, his corrupt allusions, many times repeated, render many

parts of his works, in a *moral* light, the objects of indignation and disgust."

Entertaining similar views with those above expressed, the editor of "The Family Shakspeare," attempted to expurgate the works of that great poet, in order to render them suitable for the domestic library, by freeing them from all objectionable passages and allusions. Whatever may have been the success of this attempt, the design was certainly praiseworthy, and ought to have exempted it from the caustic notice of the London Quarterly Review, contained in a note on page 134, of vol. 12. "Among the most extraordinary attempts at moral improvement, none, perhaps, is better calculated to excite a sarcastic smile, than the publication of a 'Family Shakspeare,' from which all objectionable passages are expunged. This is Jack tearing off the lace from Lord Peter's coat, with a vengeance!"

Those indefatigable publishers, the Messrs. Harper, of New York, have adopted a similar plan of publishing, in their "Dramatic Series," the works of those eminent dramatists who flourished in and about the time of Shakspeare; "omitting," as they say in their ad-

vertisement, "all such scenes and passages as are inconsistent with the delicacy, and refinement of modern taste and manners." We regard all this, as so much testimony against the drama, going to show the general licentiousness and immorality of the stage.

## CHAPTER IV.

## ORIGIN AND PROGRESS OF THE DRAMA CONTINUED.

A VERY general eagerness for theatrical amusements continued throughout the whole reign of James I., and a great part of that of Charles I. But as is usual in times of public calamity, so at the breaking out of the civil war, all public diversions and recreations were laid aside. By an ordinance of September 2, 1642, it was declared, that “Whereas public sports do not agree with public calamities, nor public stage-plays with the seasons of humiliation; this being an exercise of sad and pious solemnity; the other being spectacles of pleasure, too commonly expressing lascivious mirth and levity; it is therefore ordained, that while the sad causes, and set times of humiliation continue, public stage-plays shall cease, and be forborne; instead of which are recommended to the people of this land, the profitable duties of

repentance, and making their peace with God." This is an important document, as it shows, what every man must feel in his own bosom, that theatrical amusements are wholly inconsistent with the present conditions of human life, exposed as it is to the trials and vicissitudes of this world. When these trials overtake us, we are ready to acknowledge the unsuitableness of such vain and trifling amusements. The pressure of afflictive circumstances will often extort from men their candid opinions and honest convictions, in regard to the vanities of this life. Here is a whole nation bearing testimony to the truth of these remarks, in their application to theatrical amusements.

The public calamities of this period, doubtless, had the effect of leading the more pious of the land to seek direction and assistance from the Hearer of prayer. "There were giants in those days" in the theological world. Although loaded with odium, and branded with opprobrious epithets, by those who subsequently wielded the controlling influence over the land, yet their influence twice saved the nation from all the horrors of a spiritual

despotism, and firmly kept at bay the strong arm of unlimited monarchy. To the unyielding maintenance of the principles which distinguished them, England owes all the liberty she now enjoys. They were not wholly free from the false political maxims of the age in which they lived, and being men of like passions with ourselves, they were subject to the common infirmities of human nature. Yet they boldly withstood the torrent of vice and licentiousness which threatened to engulf all Europe, and nobly resisted the encroachments of arbitrary power. It was for censuring, with commendable fidelity, and steadily opposing with honest zeal, the wickedness which was enthroned in high places, that they received the name of Puritans;—a name which, though bestowed with sarcastic bitterness, yet carries with it the testimony of foes to the *purity* of their lives, and reflects severely, though unwittingly, upon the licentiousness of those who bestowed it;—a name which, though originally designed as the stigma of reproach, yet has become dear to the lovers of civil liberty and practical godliness. It is a name indelibly engraven upon

the rock of Plymouth, and which, particularly in a large section of our country, is identified with our civil polity—a polity which, we trust, is a political *asbestos*, inconsumable by the fires of zealous contention, which now blaze around it. But why this eulogy of the Puritans? Because they have been branded with moroseness and bigotry for attempting the suppression of theatrical amusements. The charge has been handed down from one writer to another, till it has assumed the character of an admitted fact, that bigotry and sanctimoniousness, and not the spirit of genuine religion, seek the suppression of theatrical exhibitions. We contend that genuine religion, whether under the name of puritanism or not, is a foe to the stage, just as it is a foe to every other form of vice. It ought, however, to be understood, that religion is not accountable for the particular mode which good, but injudicious men may adopt in carrying forward that opposition which it inspires. A good thing may be badly done. A good cause may be improperly managed; and some of my readers may perhaps regard this performance as a fit illustration of the sentiment.

The ordinance which has been attributed to the influence of the Puritans, was that passed on the 11th of February, 1647, by which "all stage-players were declared to be rogues, punishable by the acts of the 39th of Queen Elizabeth, and 7th of King James, notwithstanding any license they might have from the King, or any other person. All stage galleries, seats, and boxes, are ordered to be pulled down by warrant of two justices of peace; all actors in plays for time to come, being convicted, shall be publicly whipped, and find sureties for their not offending in like manner for the future; and all spectators of plays, for every offence, are to pay five shillings." Now, while we by no means justify the harsh provisions of this ordinance, but condemn them as unwise and unjust; yet the object aimed at, namely, the suppression of theatrical exhibitions, is a commendable one, and one which the pious of this land, of all denominations, are labouring to accomplish; not, however, by such means, but merely by the moral force of public sentiment.

The actors we regard as generally beyond

the reach of religious influence. Our hope is in prevailing upon the people not to patronize them. It is a fair contest between moral principle and the love of pleasure. A contest in which the stage has the advantage of having human nature, with its passions and propensities, in its favour. But our reliance is upon the power of Him "who maketh wise the simple."

After a few ineffectual attempts to revive the art, we hear no more of theatrical exhibitions for some time, unless the entertainments of Sir William Davenant, which consisted in declamation and music, may be regarded as such. It appears that he exhibited these entertainments without molestation, till the eve of the Restoration.

The Restoration may be regarded as an important epoch in the history of the drama, as it was undoubtedly an event highly favourable to the players. The lovers of pleasure returned to their amusements with increased avidity, and the stage once more began to replenish the pockets of the performers. It received, however, a temporary check from the breaking out of the plague in London, in

1665, and again from the great fire which occurred the year after.

An advocate of the drama, bears witness that these awful visitations of divine providence were soon forgotten by the frequenters of the theatre. "After a discontinuance," says Smith, "of eighteen months, both (play) houses were again opened at Christmas, 1666, when the miseries occasioned by the plague and the fire were both forgotten, and public diversions were pursued with as much eagerness as ever." This fact, so candidly stated by a friend to the stage, is a striking commentary upon the tendency of such exhibitions. Who could envy that state of morals which characterized the frequenters of the theatre, when it would allow those who had been so recently rescued from the jaws of the pestilence, and from the devouring flame, to plunge into the vortex of pleasure and folly, even while the groans of the dying still lingered on the ear, and while the tears of unsheltered widows and orphans had not yet ceased to flow? A thousand objects of commiseration and charity must have daily met these lovers of pleasure in the streets of the mourning city. Many

whom the plague had left widows and orphans, the fire left destitute and needy. If benevolence had triumphed over self gratification, the money thrown away upon the corrupters of the public morals, for the indulgence of pleasure, might have comforted and supplied the wants of the bereaved and suffering poor. Well may the writer above quoted, say, that the miseries of the plague and fire, "were both forgotten." It is an important concession from a friend to the drama, to say, that visiting the theatre, at such a time, was evidence that these miseries were forgotten. If the theatre were a school of virtue and morals, there could be no such unfitness in frequenting it at such a time, as he seems to intimate. This writer implies, and very justly too, that had the people duly pondered these visitations of God, and permitted them to have their proper effect upon their hearts, they could not have given themselves up to the indulgence of licentious pleasure.

This trait in the morals of the play-going community, soon exerted its influence on the drama itself, by gradually moulding it to suit a more licentious taste. That such was the

character of the stage, in the time of Charles II., is generally admitted. The dissolute manners of the people, from the king down through all ranks, are thus noticed by Russell, in his History of Modern Europe. "Charles himself was a man of a social temper, of an easy address, and a lively and animated conversation. His courtiers partook much of the character of their prince: they were chiefly men of the world, and many of them distinguished by their wit, gallantry, and spirit. But having all experienced the insolence of pious tyranny, or been exposed to the neglect of poverty, they had imbibed, under the pressure of adversity, the most libertine opinions, both in regard to religion and morals; and in greedily enjoying their good fortune, after the restoration, in retaliating selfishness, and contrasting the language and the manners of hypocrisy, they shamefully violated the laws of decency and decorum. Elated at the return of their sovereign, the whole royal party dissolved in thoughtless jollity; and even many of the republicans, but especially the younger sort and the women, were glad to be released from the gloomy austerity of

the commonwealth. A general relaxation of manners took place. Pleasure became the universal object, and love, the prevailing taste. But that love was rather an appetite than a passion; and though the ladies sacrificed freely to it, they were not able to inspire their paramours either with sentiment or delicacy.

“The same want of delicacy is observable in the literary productions of this reign. Even those intended for the stage, with very few exceptions, are shockingly licentious and indecent, as well as disfigured by extravagance and folly.”\*

On the principle that the people give law to the drama, and impress upon it the character of their own taste and manners, we are at no loss to find out the tendency of theatrical exhibitions at this period. It was now that women first appeared as performers on the English stage. Previous to the restoration, the female characters were acted by boys, or young men of an effeminate aspect. The honour of first disgracing her sex, in this manner, seems to belong to a Mrs.

\* Russell's *Modern Europe*, vol. 2. p. 295.

Hughes; though some writers claim priority for Mrs. Sanderson, afterwards Mrs. Betterton.

The London Quarterly Review (vol. 12, p. 133,) after speaking of the age that preceded the unhappy disputes between Charles I. and his parliaments, says: "Under the licentious and contemptible government of his son, the nation became entirely French, and to the utter disgrace of the public taste, bombast and indecency usurped the place of genius and nature."

It was in this reign, and during the prevalence of these corrupt manners, and of this depraved taste, that operas were first introduced on the English stage. The language of these musical dramas was always English, until the latter end of the seventeenth century, when vocal and instrumental performers from Italy were introduced upon the English stage. These operas were not known in Italy before the beginning of the seventeenth century. Charles II. encouraged the introduction of French operas. The general licentiousness of opera dancing is too proverbial to need particular notice here. Surely the opera

does not claim to be “a school of virtue.”

The stage retained that licentious and immoral character which distinguished it in this reign, for a considerable time, till it was attacked with great ability, on account of its indecency and profanity, by the celebrated Jeremy Collier, who, in 1697, says Smith, “published a bitter invective against plays, performers, and dramatic writers, and, having some truth and justice on his side, won much of the public opinion in his favour, and imposed no small difficulty on those defenders of the stage who attempted to answer his charges. Among those champions were enlisted Congrevé, Vanbrugh, Dryden, Dennis, and others, who opposed their assailant with sufficient wit and humour, but without confuting the objections he had started, either against themselves individually, or against the stage in general. Dryden found himself so hard pressed that, as Dr. Johnson notices in his life of him, “like other hunted animals, he stood at bay, and when he could not disown the grossness of one of his plays, he declared that he knew not any law that prescribed

morality to a comic poet.' 'The controversy,' says Cibber, 'had a very wholesome effect upon those who wrote after this time. They were now a great deal more upon their guard; indecencies were no longer wit; and by degrees the fair sex came again to fill the boxes on the first day of a new comedy, without fear or censure.' To forward the reformation of the stage, prosecutions were commenced against some of the performers, for repeating profane and indecent words. Several were found guilty; and Betterton and Mrs. Bracegirdle were actually fined."

It is not uncommon for English writers to charge the French stage with levity, bad taste, and licentiousness, and to have the same charge retorted. It is very well that both can see the immoral tendency of each others' plays, though often unwilling to acknowledge the same of their own. A man with a beam in his own eye, thinks he can see a mote in his brother's. All this, however, is valid testimony against the theatre. But that testimony is still stronger when it comes from either, against their own drama. Racine, in a speech made to the French

Academy in the beginning of 1685, represents the miserable state in which the French theatre then was—that it was “without order, decency, sense, or taste.”

The “Tartuffe” of Moliere was, on account of the ridicule which it cast on the ecclesiastical order, suppressed through the interest of that body, after it had been acted only a few nights, while at the same time a most profane farce was permitted to have a long run. When Louis XIV. expressed to the Prince of Conde his wonder at the different fates of these two pieces, and asked the reason of it, the Prince answered, “in the farce religion only is ridiculed; but Moliere, in the Tartuffe, has attacked even the priests.”\*

Early in the last century, we find that pantomimes were performed on the English stage, which, says Smith, have always been considered contemptible, and to the disgrace of the public taste, they were encouraged.

Dr. Blair, after remarking upon the great licentiousness which prevailed upon the comic stage in Great Britain, not only during the reign of Charles II., but throughout the

\* Percy Anecdotes.

reigns of King William and Queen Anne, and down to the days of George II., adds that "he is happy, however, to have it in his power to observe, that of late years, a *sensible* reformation had *begun* to take place." Whatever reformation took place at this time, it certainly was not extensive, nor of long continuance, for we find that towards the close of the last and the beginning of the present century, the popular plays were of such a character as to inculcate infidelity and irreligion. Smith, whom we have frequently quoted, is a very late writer, and a defender of the drama. His testimony relative to the present character of the English stage, is as follows:

"Never was the English drama at so low, so deplorable an ebb, as it is at the present moment. Almost may it be said that we have no native modern drama; for the stage presents us little of novelty, but successive adaptations from the French. It is no longer a public mirror, which, by reflecting to us correct images of ourselves, and of the times in which we live, may assist us to amend the defects of both; but a magic lantern, offering

to our view an unmeaning jumble of foreign frivolities, grotesque monsters, and fantastic fooleries.”\*

We have already quoted the opinion of the London Quarterly Review, relative to the obscenity and licentiousness of the ancient classical drama. It is a striking fact, and one worthy of observation, that this Review, though a warm and zealous defender of the drama, yet represents it, in every age of its existence, as unfriendly to virtue and good morals.

This seems to be intentionally done, except in reference to one age of the drama, namely, from the commencement of Queen Elizabeth's reign, down to that of Charles I. But even then, according to the showing of the Review, it must have been injurious to the morals of the people. This will appear, however, as we proceed in our quotations from that work.

“The history of the English stage,” says this Review, (vol. 17. p. 251, &c.) “presents us with two striking periods. The one, when dramatic composition, free from all external

\* Smith's Festivals and Games.

influence, formed a distinct and separate school of its own. The other, when the introduction of French rules, both in criticism and composition gradually changed its aspect, and brought along with it a taste for the principles and structure of the Greek tragedy, on which the French is founded, and which, indeed, it very closely resembles. There are, in truth, some points of obvious difference, but it may be observed, in general, that the agreement is essential, and the difference merely accidental." "The points of dissimilitude are few and unimportant, and, as we before remarked, arise rather from the difference of manners, necessarily modified by the lapse of ages, than from any inherent discrepancy, either in the conception of the authors, or the taste of the audience." The Review then proceeds to describe the obscene, foolish, and profane character of the ancient Greek drama, which description we have already quoted at the close of our notice of the Grecian and Roman stage, and which it will be well, for the sake of connexion, if the reader will peruse again. I am aware that this Review is concerned chiefly, if not wholly, with

the literature, and not with the moral tendency of the drama, still it makes us acquainted indirectly with the latter.

After noticing the circumstances under which the early dramatic writers in England, brought the stage to its greatest perfection, the Review proceeds: "Every variety of passion, however unfit to be exposed, and every modification of character, however difficult to be traced, enter into their representations, which include the whole of human existence. Many incidents in life are mean and trivial, yet they stoop to record them; many passions are foul and loathsome, yet they do not shrink from painting them." "The moral sensibility of the times, though sufficiently acute to sympathize in natural feelings, was by no means refined: provided moral justice was generally preserved, they little regarded poetical consistency or even decorous representations: they could endure the sight of every crime, provided it was finally punished: and sustain the view of every passion, provided it was checked by conscience amid its triumph, and punished by remorse in its defeat. The writers knew what the audience

could bear, and all they could bear was certainly laid on them—the last struggles of human feeling, in its most direful extremities, the ravages of blasphemy, the impieties of atheism, the presence and actual agency of benevolent or malignant spirits, the whole energies of mortality, and the ‘powers of the world to come,’ were brought in aid of the effect of their drama, and the effect certainly did not disappoint them.”

Here let the reader pause, and ask himself, whether the above writer is speaking in praise or in condemnation of the drama which he describes. He says that it painted passions that were “foul and loathsome;” that it little regarded “even decorous representations;” that “the ravages of blasphemy” and “the impieties of atheism,” were brought in aid of its effect. Can it then be other than a licentious, indecent, and profane drama? Yet this was the golden age of the English theatre. The drama was now at its highest point of distinction. Since then it has continued to decline in every respect, as the Review proceeds to show. If then the drama, in its best estate, was what its warm advocate

here represents it to have been, we think that the seal of reprobation may justly be put upon the whole system as unfriendly to virtue, morality, and religion.

The Review proceeds to describe the character of the drama in its declining state, thus:

“The return of Charles produced a revival of the theatre, which had been suppressed by the rigour of the Puritans, and the age became fertile in dramatic poets. But they had lost the independence of character, the liberty of thought, the poetic *παρρησία* (*parresia*) that distinguished their predecessors. The writer was no longer a man who enjoyed the unforced and gratuitous effusions of his genius, and committed his cause, with fearless confidence to posterity; he was become a venal scribbler, grasping at ephemeral notoriety, flattering wickedness in high places, and bartering his birthright of fame for a paltry pittance, often withheld by caprice, or embittered by insult.

In the writings of these men, there is a strange mixture of licentiousness and poetry, of genius and depravity. The French Court

had taught them gallantry, but not refinement; they eagerly imbibed all of evil which their teachers could communicate, without the palliations which those teachers are so dexterous in administering; their gay, easy wit; their apparent heedlessness of the mischief they do; their art in withdrawing our attention from their *object*, and fixing it on their *manner*, and their power of giving to the result of deep and painful reflection the air of a superficial remark, or an extemporaneous sally. By these writers, *love* is painted only in its physical raptures, beauty its sole incitement, and fruition its only reward; *virtue* (or as they write it, *vertue*) is employed to signify neither moral excellence in the abstract, nor one of its modes separately exercised, but merely the assemblage of qualities, good and bad, that exist in the character to which the term is applied; and honour is represented in a whimsical suit of ill-assorted and incongruous appointments, like a preux chevalier of the feudal age, accoutred in the flowing wig, the lace cravat, and the shoe-roses of a gallant in the Court of Louis Quatorze, turbulent, warlike and fero-

cious like the one; full of quaint terms, florid courtesy, and amatory compliments like the other.

“The loose opinions of the age, with regard to religion, are easily discoverable; the usual topics employed, even by dramatic writers, of a dependence on the wisdom of the Deity for the ultimate solution of the difficulties of life, of support under its inflictions here, and a confidence of remuneration for its sufferings hereafter, those general palliatives of human wretchedness which the good are anxious to minister, and the miserable are willing to receive, are utterly banished from their pages. In lieu of these, we find perpetually occurring the names of fate, destiny, and chance—mysterious words—by whose assistance, men, under every dispensation, have helped themselves to believe that their crimes and sufferings might be ascribed to any agency but their own; with these is mingled a frequent reference to the influence of *the stars*; the belief of which was strongly operative even in that age of irreligion; so closely united are the extremes of superstition and infidelity.”

Had the above strictures come from the pen of an avowed enemy of the stage, they might have passed as the honest and just convictions of a sensible writer; but coming as they do from a warm partisan in behalf of the drama, and from so respectable and influential a source as the London Quarterly Review, they must carry great weight to every candid and impartial mind. Besides condemning pointedly the French drama, as without taste, and immoral in its tendency, the Review involves in the same condemnation, either directly, or by fair inference, the English drama, from its earliest history, down to the time when the article was written. Candour requires us again to observe, that the chief object aimed at in these strictures is a *literary one*; but what reader of these remarks does not perceive that the writer bears, perhaps unintentionally, a most decided testimony against the tendency of the stage? The testimony thus casually furnished, is the more important and decisive in its character, because it is afforded at a time, when the mind of the writer is free from that bias and excitement, which a discussion of the direct

question of the moral tendency of the theatre, might create.

To conclude this historical sketch, let us hear the testimony of Schlegel, the admirer of the drama, and the eloquent lecturer on its literature. In summing up the defects of the English stage, he says, "the last and not the least defect of the English comedies, is their offensiveness. I may sum up the whole, by saying, that after all we know of the licentiousness of manners under Charles the Second, we are still lost in astonishment at the audacious ribaldry of Wycherley and Congreve. Decency is not merely violated in the grossest manner in single speeches, and frequently in the whole plot, but in the character of the rake, the fashionable debauchee, a moral scepticism is directly preached up, and marriage is the constant subject of their ridicule. Beaumont and Fletcher portrayed an irregular but vigorous nature: nothing, however, can be more repulsive than rude depravity coupled with claims to higher refinement. Under Queen Anne, manners became again more decorous, and this may easily be traced in the comedies, in the series

of English comic poets, Wycherley, Congreve, Farquhar, Vanbrugh, Steele, Cibber, &c., we may perceive something like a gradation from the most unblushing indecency to a tolerable degree of modesty. However, the example of the predecessors has had more than a due influence on the successors.”\*

\* Schlegel's Dramatic Literature, p. 400.

## CHAPTER V.

## FRUITLESS ATTEMPTS TO REFORM THE THEATRE.

WE come now to notice some of the attempts to reform the stage, and to make it subservient to the cause of virtue and good morals.

In treating of this subject, we must carefully distinguish between a literary and a moral reformation. Most writers, in alluding to this subject, are to be understood as meaning the former. Thus when Aristotle says, that at Athens the theatre was brought to great perfection, we are to understand him, as he explains himself to mean, that the writers of plays vied with each other in the elegance of their compositions; and not that the moral sentiment of the play was improved, nor that the moral tendency of the stage was at all changed; for at Athens it was soon abolished by public authority. Even literary reformations have been but partial, and of short du-

ration. The customs and manners of different countries and ages have also had their effect in producing a temporary modification of its moral character, by purifying it from some of its grosser obscenities, and indecent language. At other times again, as in the reign of Charles II., the stage has relapsed into its wonted licentiousness. The tendency of the stage, through all its modifications, has uniformly been immoral.

The causes which operate against a literary reformation are similar to those which have rendered abortive all attempts at a moral reformation, yet their influence is not so extensive. Among the great mass of those who attend the theatre, there are, comparatively speaking, but few of a highly cultivated literary taste. And as the stage must always accord with the taste of those who patronize and support it, it follows that the stage will never be permanently reformed, even in a literary point of view.

The stage must have its attractions for the mass of the people, otherwise it cannot be supported. Hence dramatic writers aim to accomplish two opposite, and consequently

difficult ends, namely, to please a literary taste and the vulgar taste at the same time. This is sometimes done by conveying the most licentious sentiments through the medium of a very polished style, and an ingenious, interesting, and striking plot. Undisguised obscenity is no more in keeping with good taste, than it is with good morals, and may, therefore, be displeasing even to a vicious man on the one account, though not on the other. This will serve to explain what is sometimes called a reformation of the stage, a legitimate drama, and a purified theatre. A play of great genius, and powerful effect, superior theatrical talent, and an outward show of decency, constitutes what is sometimes called the perfection of the art.

These attempts to reform and perfect the drama are not such as we shall notice, as they have little or no reference to its moral tendency. If any such reference is had, it is commonly only so far as to make morality subservient to literature and genius, or to the popularity and acceptability of the play.

But few attempts to reform the stage have ever been made, which aim directly to make

it the patron of virtue, good morals, and religion.

The majority of those who attend the theatre prefer it as it is; and it continues to be what it is, because they prefer it. The theatre, on this account, is regarded by the wisest and best of men as incorrigible. We think that all the attempts to reform the morality of the theatre, and yet to preserve its attractions, betray a want of acquaintance with human nature, and with the main object of the drama. The object of the drama is to fill the pockets of the actors, by adapting it to the taste of depraved human nature. Dramatists know that they have nothing to hope for in the way of patronage, from the devout and pious, who, of all others, are most concerned for the morals of the people. It would, therefore, be useless to sacrifice the patronage of the majority of those who attend the theatre, in order to reform the morals of the drama; for when thus reformed, the most zealous advocates of virtue and religion would not patronize it. This reformation would drive away fifty old patrons, where it would draw in one new one. This is one

reason why there have been so few attempts to reform the drama.

Again: the professed point of dramatic excellence, namely, to represent human nature as it is, has deterred others from attempting this reformation. As human nature is depraved, and as a great portion of human actions are wicked, it follows that vice, in all its forms, comes in for a large share of notoriety and representation. The vices of men must be pourtrayed as well as their virtues, else it is a misrepresentation of human nature.

The interest and point of the play commonly turn upon the exhibition of some wicked and vicious action or trait of character. This representation of vice must be so conducted as to afford pleasure and amusement, otherwise it will not be patronized. But if the representation of vice is made to afford pleasure, it will commonly fail to excite a hatred of vice itself. The agreeable sensation produced by the faithful exhibition of vice, is apt to become associated in the mind with vice itself. The pleasure derived from a faithful representation of the seductive arts of the libertine, will, in

most minds, greatly diminish the aversion with which such characters should be viewed. The pleasure which a youth derives from the narration of obscene stories, greatly lessens his disgust for obscenity. The school-boy, who has heard a profane man eloquently curse and swear, soon begins to associate manliness with profanity. When oaths are made to give zest to wit and humour, they soon begin to be regarded as comparatively harmless. When the Sabbath is desecrated by sport and amusement, its sacredness is less and less esteemed. The principle here illustrated, will apply to theatrical exhibitions. It is the pleasure that the representation of vice is made to afford, that works the evil. Pleasure, and romance, and splendour, all become associated in the popular mind, with vice, and it consequently appears less heinous than it really is. This being the case, those who delight in the drama, and yet desire to see it become the patron of virtue and piety, are discouraged from all attempts to make it such. This is another reason why there have been so few attempts to reform the moral tendency of the stage.

But such a reformation has not been left untried. Enough has been done to show the improbability of its ever being accomplished. Notwithstanding these attempts, the moral tendency of the theatre remains now what it ever has been. And this fact we regard as a very strong argument against the stage.

The immoral tendency of the art was detected soon after its invention. Solon, the wise lawgiver of Athens, while he, in common with his countrymen, participated in the amusements of the theatre, was not ignorant of the evil which their great influence might accomplish, if not properly regulated. He was aware of the fascinations of the stage, and of the devotion of the people to that species of entertainment.

When the plays of Thespis appeared, abounding as they did with fictions and misrepresentations, he at once saw their tendency to corrupt the morals of the people; and actuated by a regard to the public welfare, and not wishing to deprive the people of their favorite diversion, he condemned, not the drama as an art, but such plays as he considered immoral, and corrupting in sentiment.

“If we applaud falsehood in our public exhibitions,” said he to Thespis, “we shall soon find that it will insinuate itself into our most sacred engagements.” Such was the sagacious foresight of Solon, and he attempted to obviate the evil he apprehended. But what was his success? A friend to the drama testifies that “the excessive approbation and delight with which both the city and country received the pieces of Thespis and Susarion, at once justified and rendered useless the suspicious foresight of Solon.” *Ency. Brit.*

Here it is admitted that there was just ground for the suspicion entertained by Solon, in regard to the moral tendency of these plays. It is also admitted that his attempt to reform the drama was “useless.” The cause of the failure of this attempt is also intimated; the plays were adapted to the depraved taste of the people, and on this account, they were received both in the city and in the country, with “excessive approbation and delight.” Here is the secret cause of the failure which attended all subsequent attempts to reform the stage. The reformation must begin with

the people, before it can ever reach effectually their diversions.

The next attempt at reformation which we shall notice, occurred under the Christian dispensation. Gregory of Nazianzen, who died A. D. 389, who was both a poet and a father of the church, persuaded the people of Byzantium to represent on their theatre, some chosen stories of the Old and New Testament, and to banish from their stage, the profane compositions of Sophocles and Euripides.

The motive by which the father was actuated, was doubtless a good one. He saw the tendency of a profane and licentious drama, and supposed that the evil might be corrected, by enlisting the theatre in the cause of religion. But this "extraordinary coalescence," as it is justly denominated by the London Quarterly Review, was found to be ineffectual. For in order to make it at all acceptable to the people, as an amusement, it was found necessary to introduce low wit and buffoonery, which, by its admixture with sacred truth, rendered the theatre, if possible, more licentious and immoral than before.

These scripture plays have always been found to foster infidelity, and a contempt for sacred things.

If the theatre should become the ally of the pulpit, and be made the vehicle of the same sober and pious sentiments, it must become as grave and solemn as the pulpit. In this case, it would cease to be an amusement. It would only be another mode of preaching and enforcing the same gospel truths. He that goes to church for the sake of amusement, cannot expect to be profited. The truths of the Bible were never intended, nor are they calculated to afford merriment. They were not inspired for this object, but rather to induce a godly sorrow for sin, and an humble reliance on Christ for salvation. To pervert them to purposes of sport and amusement is a gross sacrilege. And unless they be thus perverted, they cannot answer the ends of the drama, and the theatre in which they are exhibited will be forsaken by all the lovers of pleasure, and must fail of support.

A similar attempt to dramatize the Bible was subsequently made in France and Eng-

land, but with no better success. We have already stated that religious plays were very early introduced on the English stage. In these exhibitions, the clergy were the principal performers.

Dr. Adams, in his *Elements of Moral Philosophy*, remarks that "it must have been the impression that dramatic representations, if under good regulation, might be turned to a good purpose, that the events, transactions, and characters of the Bible, and even the most sublime mysteries of the Christian faith, were at one time dramatized by the clergy, and represented in public. How extensive those representations were in Italy, France, and England, and other Christian countries, in the thirteenth and succeeding centuries, is well known to every one who is familiar with the history of literature. The scenes, events, characters, and doctrines of Scripture were not only adapted to dramatic representations by the clergy, but this was conducted under their direction. The churches were used as theatres, in which to exhibit these "sacred or spiritual dramas," as they were called, and the actors were often, if not generally, the

clergy themselves. In fitting up and patronizing such representations, the clergy, we may presume, acted from the best possible motives; to wit, the desire to communicate religious knowledge, and to impress the great scenes, transactions, and doctrines of revelation on the minds of the people, by availing themselves of the powerful aid of dramatic representation to effect this object, and by thus bringing this most perfect of the imitative arts into the service of religion. Still with such motives, and under the direction of the hierarchy, powerful as it was in those days, the inherent vices of all representations of this kind were found to cling to them, and they were gradually relinquished, from the conviction that they were worse than useless. Architecture, music, poetry, painting, and statuary, have all been brought into the service of religion, and have greatly contributed to its hold on the respect and affections of mankind; but it has been proved, after a fair actual experiment, that neither religion nor morals have any good to expect from any kind of dramatic representation. (See Bouterwek's *History of Spanish and Portuguese*

Literature, Vol. I. pp. 501-521; Vol. II. pp. 89-99; Sismondi, *La Litterature du Midi de l'Europe*, Vol. I. pp. 337-349; *Edinburgh Encyclopædia*, art. Drama.)

This religious theatre is acknowledged on all hands to have soon become corrupt and licentious. This fact further appears from the complaint of the chaunters of St. Paul's Cathedral, in 1378, that Scripture plays had fallen into low hands, to the great discredit of religion. Certain "inexpert people," as they say in their petition to Richard the Second, had rendered the representations of the Old Testament so ridiculous, as both to favour libertinism and infidelity, and to do no small prejudice to the complainants, "who had been at great expense to represent the same publicly at Christmas." Thus early did the British stage afford proof that all attempts to reform it were ineffectual.

The manner in which those "inexpert people," against whom the complaint was made, represented these religious plays, was more in accordance with the prevailing taste, and hence their performances were more popular, and more numerous patronized,

“to the no small prejudice of the complainants.”

Although their performances “favoured libertinism and infidelity,” yet they were more relished by the multitude, drew crowds, filled the pockets of the actors, and, in a word, answered all the practical ends of the drama.

Very soon after the introduction of the *mysterics* into Spain, the drama became a disgusting compound of low provincial farce, and of gross and gloomy superstition. “In order,” says one who writes in defence of the stage, “to convey a tolerable idea of the extent to which the prodigious absurdity, as well as blasphemy of those pieces was carried, it will be sufficient to relate the scheme of one of those called ‘The Creation.’ Adam enters on one side, and the Creator on the other, Chaos stands in the middle, and Adam entreats the Creator to destroy Chaos, and to create man. To this moment, it is said, the Spanish drama is in some degree infected with these abominable, blasphemous absurdities.”

When the grossness of the Spanish drama

became apparent to the more intelligent of the nation, great talents were employed in active efforts to redeem it from what were called its abuses.

To accomplish this, they composed dialogues which they called comedies. "The excellent intention of these authors," says the writer just quoted, "merited a better fate than the pieces experienced, for they were little attended to; and being utterly incompetent to the purpose they were designed to produce, they made no impression, effected no amendment in the public taste, manners, or morals, and left the people in the same state of gross libertinism in which they found them. Failing of effect in the shape in which they were originally composed, recourse was had to alteration: by slow and gradual interpolations they were changed, till they became saturated with that very licentiousness they were first intended to explode."\* It is contended, however, by this and other writers on the subject, that a reformation of the Spanish drama was effected. But how? By translation. Some of the Greek and Latin plays

\* *Mirror of Taste*, vol. iii. p. 163.

were turned into Castilian prose. Whether this change can be regarded as deserving the name of a reformation, let those judge who are acquainted with the moral character of the ancient classical drama.

In later times, we find further attempts to reform the stage. Mrs. Hannah More's sacred dramas were written with that view, yet it was a failure; and she, more than twenty years after, expressed the want of hope that the stage would ever be reformed. Her failure in the work of reform, was not owing to a lack of dramatic talent; for "Dr. Johnson and Mr. Garrick, no mean authorities on such a question, are said to have spoken of her talents in dramatic writing, in very sanguine terms; terms which the applause bestowed upon "Percy," prove to have been well merited." If Mrs. More, who possessed such peculiar talents for this department of labour, gave up the matter in despair, it certainly is no slight proof of the impracticability of reforming and purifying the drama. Her deliberate conviction, after many years of reflection and observation on the subject, was, that the theatre is "an amusement incom-

patible with the character of a sincere Christian.”

The difficulty in purifying the drama, arises not so much from the want of dramatic genius and talent, as from the nature of the achievement. In order to be attractive to the play-going community, it must contain much that is impure and unchristian. The virtues and graces of religion are too insipid to the lovers of the drama. Ambition, jealousy, rage, revenge, and all the licentious passions, seem essential to a popular play. Without these it is destitute of zest, and cannot long interest the mind or sympathies of such an audience as is usually found in the theatre.

We have, however, a still more recent labourer in the work of dramatic reformation, in the person of the Rev. James Plumptre, formerly of Cambridge, England. It appears that this gentleman was not formerly aware of the unchristian spirit of the theatre, and that he was indebted to Mrs. Hannah More for having his eyes opened on the subject, as he acknowledges in the dedication of one of his works. As soon as he became aware of

the fact, he set himself to reform the stage of this "unchristian spirit." He declares his object thus: "I have judged it right, with my altered sentiments, to do what lies in my power—however little that may be—to purify it (the theatre) from its corruption, and render it more worthy the attention of a Christian." In his dedication to Mrs. More, he thus addresses her: "I make no doubt, that had you thought proper to have written plays conformable to your present impressions of Christianity, you might have begun a good work, which, though perhaps slow in its progress at first, might have spread, and increased, and strengthened, till it had effected the reformation which you consider as at once so desirable and so hopeless." Mr. Plumptre was undoubtedly a firm believer in the feasibility of the enterprise on which he had entered. But if he was unable to detect the "unchristian spirit" of the theatre, until it was pointed out to him by Mrs. More, we ought not to be surprised that he should have so readily adopted the visionary plans which he attempted to execute, in the purification of the drama. We commend his benevolent

motives, but must regard his scheme as wild and utopian.

Mr. Plumptre, however, in the prosecution of his design, published, in 1810, four discourses on the stage, preached before the Cambridge University. In 1812, he published "The English Drama Purified, being a specimen of plays in which all the passages which have appeared to the editor objectionable, in point of morality, are omitted, or altered." And in 1818, he published his "Original Dramas," which are certainly free from all immoral sentiment.

Mr. Plumptre thinks that the theatre ought not to be put down, but purified, and turned to good account, by making it the means of improving the morals of the people, and of inculcating the loftiest sentiments of piety and virtue. He admits that the stage, as it is now, and ever has been conducted, is decidedly unfriendly to public morals. But his attempt to reform it, though well intended, yet like those of others before him, has proved to be a Quixotic expedition; and has made about as much impression on the theatre, as did the lance of the redoubtable knight of La

Mancha, upon the windmill, which he courageously encountered.

An able writer, alluding to this subject, remarks thus: "We have waived the point, whether genius of a very superior order, under the influence of Christian principles, might or might not be able to produce compositions of a highly moral and religious kind, which should rival in the public taste, the present run of theatrical compositions. Even were this to be effected, the preference, after all, would not be given to the moral, but to the intellectual qualifications of the writer: and it is not saying too much for the stage to suppose that although it would make a sacrifice, the sacrifice was not to religion, but to genius; and that had the genius been produced without the religion, it would have been equally or even more acceptable, while the religion, except under the protecting ægis of genius, would have been scouted as an unwelcome intruder. It goes far to decide the point, that religious persons in general, have thought it necessary rather to abandon the stage altogether, than to attempt its purification."

The learned Dr. Milner, in his history of

the church, has the following just observations on the evil tendency of the stage, and the impossibility of reforming it. "To say," remarks the historian, "that there are noble sentiments to be found in some dramas, answers not the purpose of those, who would vindicate the entertainments of the stage. The support of them requires a SYSTEM in its own nature corrupt; a system which must gratify the voluptuous and the libidinous, or it can have no durable existence. Hence, in every age, complaints have been made of the licentiousness of the stage; and the necessity of keeping it under proper restraints and regulations, has been admitted by its greatest admirers. But it is, I think, a great mistake to suppose that the stage may remain a favourite amusement, and at the same time, be so regulated as not to offend the modest eyes and ears of an humble Christian. The gravest advocates for the theatre expect pleasure from it rather than instruction. If, therefore, you believe that human nature is corrupt and impure, only ask yourself what sort of dramatic exhibitions and conversations will be most likely to meet with the applause of the peo-

ple;—and you will soon be led to conclude, that the play-house is, and must be a school of impurity.

The first Christians felt the force of this obvious argument, and they rejected the stage entirely. A Christian, renouncing the pomps and vanity of this wicked world, and yet frequenting the play-house, was with them a solecism. The EFFUSION of the Holy Spirit, which, during three centuries we are now reviewing, never admitted these amusements at all. The profession of the dramatic art, and the profession of Christianity, were held to be absolutely inconsistent with each other.” “What would Cyprian have said, had he seen large assemblies of Christians, so called, devoted to these impurities, and supporting them with all their might, and deriving from them the highest delight? Such persons must, certainly, be strangers to the joy of the Holy Ghost; and I cannot but wonder why they choose to retain the name of Christians. Then, if he had examined their stage entertainments, and compared them with those that were in vogue in his own day, would he not have seen the same

confusion of sexes, the same encouragement of unchaste desires, and the same sensuality, with the same contemptuous ridicule of Christianity?—if, indeed, in his time, the Gospel was ever burlesqued on the stage, as it has frequently been in ours. In some points of lesser consequence, the ancient drama might differ from the modern; but, on the whole, the spirit and tendency was the same.”\*

If such a reformation of the stage as would make it consistent for Christians to patronize it, be at all possible, it must evidently commence with the people, and not with the stage. Now, to what influence shall we look for a radical reformation of the taste and morals of the people? We put this question to the friends and advocates of the drama. Many of them see, and acknowledge its evil tendency, as at present conducted, and they desire to witness a reformed or legitimate drama. It is true they patronize it as it is, with all its abuses, rather than forego the amusement altogether. But they desire to see it rid of its abuses, and made subservient

\* Milner's Church History, Vol. I. pp. 206, 207.

to the cause of virtue. They see and admit, moreover, that the stage is, and always will be, just what its patrons make it. To what source of influence, then, shall we turn our eyes, for the purification of the tastes and morals of the people. Philosophers and moralists, legislators and dramatists, have all exerted their efforts, for ages past, to reform, refine, and purify the people, but in vain.

There is one instrumentality, which is admitted, even by those who hate and reject it, to be efficient, but perhaps it is the last to which a reformer of the stage would think of looking for aid. We mean the pure religion of the Gospel of Christ.

This is acknowledged, even by infidels, to be the purest system of morals extant. Its efficacy in reforming the dispositions, tastes, and habits of mankind, has long been tested, and is perhaps undoubted. Let the friends of the drama, who sincerely wish to see it reformed of its abuses, encourage and sustain the institutions of religion: and if theatrical representations, under any circumstances, be consistent with humble piety, they will more likely be reformed and patronized by Chris-

tians, than if subjected to any other process of purification. Candour requires us however, to state what we firmly believe—that the remedy would destroy the patient. We believe that the tendency of religious influence is to discourage this species of amusement. And wherever, and whenever, it becomes predominant, the theatre will be shut up. This opinion is corroborated by the following observations, extracted from a late London paper.

“Theatricals have long been in a languid and declining state in this country, arising from the increased prevalence of simpler and purer tastes. The wider diffusion of true religion, on the one hand, and the multiplied establishment of Mechanics’ Institutes and similar societies, on the other, have been attended by a corresponding diminution in the numbers of those who consume away their leisure hours, in such pernicious excitement as that of the acted drama.

“This charge has not, of course, passed unperceived by the members of the dramatic profession, whether actors or authors. Certain recent movements of theirs, evince

that they are quite sensible of it. Judging by those movements, however, they would seem to have underrated the causes which have led to the desertion of their exhibitions. They appear to think, that by paying a somewhat more plausible regard to external decorum, in the administration of the theatre, and by substituting what they call legitimate drama, for the ridiculous strings of low and profane jests which are the basis and superstructure of the modern "farce," they shall recover their lost ground, and bring back to their empty benches, the more respectable classes, by whom those benches used to be occupied. If this is the nature of their calculation, though it is not our business to warn them, they are in danger of falling between the two stools. Some from rational, and some from religious conviction, many who formerly patronized the theatre, have now turned their backs upon it; and, though it might be difficult to decide with which they were most disgusted—the looseness of the lobby, or the swearing on the stage, yet we are persuaded that the growing unpopularity of theatrical representations amongst the

middle class, is to be traced chiefly to the persuasion, that the excitement they produce is unwholesome and pernicious; and calculated, like all factitious stimuli, to blunt the sensibilities.”

The truly pious abandon the theatre, not only because it is pernicious in its influence, but also because they regard it as incurable. As a system, it is adverse to the public good. It has proved to millions of youth the sure road to destruction, and has undermined the peace of families, and the prosperity of empires.

## CHAPTER VI.

## AUTHORITIES AGAINST THE THEATRE.

THE testimony which is on record against the stage, comes from such a variety of sources, and from men so different in other respects, in their characters and views, that it cannot be liable to the charge of gloomy sanctimoniousness, nor illiberal fanaticism. In citing these witnesses, we scarcely know where to begin. The following summary is given in the language of another:

“Plato, Livy, Xenophon, Cicero, Solon, Cato, Seneca, Tacitus, the most venerable men of antiquity; the brightest constellation of virtue and talents which ever appeared upon the hemisphere of philosophy, have all denounced the theatre as a most abundant source of moral pollution; and assure us that both Greece and Rome had their ruin accelerated by a fatal passion for these corrupting entertainments.

“William Prynne, a satirical and pungent writer, who suffered many cruelties for his admirable productions in the time of Charles I., has made a catalogue of authorities against the stage, which contains every name of eminence in the heathen and Christian worlds. It comprehends the united testimony of the Jewish and Christian Churches. The deliberate acts of fifty-four ancient and modern, general, national, and provincial councils and synods, both of the Western and Eastern Churches: the condemnatory sentence of seventy-one ancient fathers, and one hundred and fifty modern Popish and Protestant authors; the hostile endeavours of philosophers and poets, with the legislative enactments of a great number of pagan and Christian states, nations, magistrates, emperors, and princes.

“The American Congress, soon after the declaration of independence, passed the following motion: ‘Whereas, true religion and good morals are the only solid foundation of public liberty and happiness, Resolved that it be, and hereby is, earnestly recommended to the several States, to take the most effectual measures for the encouragement thereof, and

for the suppressing of *theatrical entertainments*, horse-racing, gaming, and such other diversions as are productive of idleness, dissipation, and a general depravity of principles and manners.'

"Now must not this be regarded in the light of very strong presumptive evidence of the immoral tendency of the stage? Does it not approach, as near as can be, to the general opinion of the whole moral world?"

The Spartans differed in opinion from their neighbours, with regard to the moral tendency of the stage. During a reign of thirty-six years, Agesilaus, who held the drama in contempt, discouraged and kept the actors in depression.

The opinion that the theatre induced effeminacy, and cherished corrupt morals, prevailed among all ranks of the Lacedæmonian people. It is related that once when Callipedes, a celebrated tragedian, offered his homage to Agesilaus, and for some time received no notice in return; he said to the king, "Do you not know me, Sir?" To which the king replied, "You are Callipedes the actor," and turned from him with contempt.

This feeling of contempt for the stage, extended even to the slaves of the Spartans, some of whom, being taken prisoners of war by the Thebans, and ordered to sing the odes of Terpander for their captors, peremptorily refused to comply, because it was forbidden them by their old masters.

In all Greece, the Spartans stood alone in their opposition to the theatre. But the Spartans knew how to stand alone in the pass of Thermopylæ.

Tacitus says that the German ladies were defended from danger, and preserved their honour, by having no play-house among them.

In allusion to this remark of Tacitus, a modern English writer observes that, "the case is altered now, and the seducing dramas of Germany are imported into our country for the improvement of the British ladies."

Francis I., who is called the "Father of Letters," cannot be charged with unfriendliness, or even indifference to the cause of literature, yet he twice suppressed the theatre in his kingdom.

As the drama in France had passed from

mysteries to moralities, and from moralities to farces, the government took the depraved condition of the stage into consideration, deprived the players of the theatre, and restored it to the purposes of its original institution; converting it back again into an hospital of the Holy Trinity.

Francis I., in order to make another trial of the tendency of the stage, restored the players to the privileges they enjoyed in the fourteenth century. They continued to act for four years, at the end of which time the King was satisfied that the tendency of the stage was immoral and corrupting, and ordered the theatre to be demolished.

In 1580 a petition was presented to Queen Elizabeth, to suppress all play-houses in the city of London, which was accordingly effected; and we believe that they have never since been suffered within the jurisdiction of the corporation.

The following account of this petition is taken from "Rawlidge's Monster lately found out."

"Many godly citizens, and other well-disposed gentlemen of London, considering that

play-houses were traps for young gentlemen and others, and perceiving the many inconveniences and great damage that would ensue upon the long suffering of the same, not only to particular persons but to the whole city; and that it would also be a great disparagement to the governors, and a dishonour to the government of this honourable city, if they should any longer continue; acquainted some pious magistrates therewith, desiring them to take some course for the suppression of common play-houses within the city of London and liberties thereof; who thereupon made humble suit to the Queen and her Privy Council, and obtained leave of her Majesty to thrust the players out of the city, and to pull down all play-houses within their liberties; which accordingly was effected. And the play-houses in Grace-church Street, &c. were quite put down and suppressed."

Without affirming that *all* who attend the theatre are immoral in their lives, which is not the fact, we suppose it cannot be denied, that the most polluted and polluting characters of the town are sure to be there. The attractions of the theatre are of such a nature

as to draw into it, and around it, the lowest characters of both sexes. Brothels, gambling-houses, and tippling-houses, seem to be the almost invariable concomitants of a theatre, and thereby render it a nuisance to any neighbourhood in which it may be situated. Thus the theatre leads the way to, and becomes the patron of every other form of iniquity. This gave rise to the petition for their suppression in London in 1580. And Sir John Hawkins, in his life of Johnson, remarks that, “although it is said of plays that they teach morality, and of the stage, it is the mirror of human life; these assertions have no foundation in truth, but are mere declamation: on the contrary, a play-house, and the region about it, are the hot-beds of vice. How else comes it to pass, that no sooner is a theatre opened in any part of the kingdom, than it becomes surrounded by houses of ill-fame? Of this truth, the neighbourhood of the place I am now speaking of, (Goodman’s Fields Theatre,) has had experience; one parish alone, adjacent thereunto, having, to my knowledge, expended the sum of £1300 in prosecutions, for the purpose of removing

those inhabitants, whom for instruction in the science of human life, the play-house had drawn thither.”

To go back for a moment in the quotation of authorities, we find that Tertullian, in his book on public diversions, reminds Christians that the nature of their faith, no less than reason and the discipline of the Church, had shut them out from the entertainments of the town; they had nothing to do with the phrensies of the race-ground, the licentiousness of the theatre, or the cruelties of the bear-garden. “Will you not then,” he adds, “avoid this seat of infection? The very air suffers by their impurities. What though the performance may in some measure entertain? What though innocence, yea, and virtue too, shine through some part of it? It is the custom to prepare poison palatably.”

The following extracts from an epistle of Cyprian, contain his testimony against the stage.

“Cyprian to Eueratius his brother. Health: Your love and esteem have induced you, dearest brother, to consult me as to what I think of the case of a player among you, who

still continues to instruct others in that infamous and miserable art, which he himself hath learnt. You ask whether he should be allowed the continuance of Christian communion? I think it very inconsistent with the majesty of God, and the rules of the Gospel, that the modesty and honour of the Church should be defiled by so base and infamous a contagion." "By these means boys will not be improved in any thing that is good, but absolutely ruined in their morals."

Bradwardin, Archbishop of Canterbury, wrote against the stage in 1345. He was followed by Wickliff, the morning star of the Reformation, who wrote against the theatre in 1380.

In later times we find the testimony of Sir Matthew Hale contained in the following anecdote.

"Sir Matthew Hale was an extraordinary proficient at school, and for some time at Oxford; but the stage players coming thither, he was so much corrupted by seeing plays that he almost wholly forsook his studies. By this he not only lost much time, but found that his head was thereby filled with vain

images of things; and afterwards sensible of the mischief of this, he resolved, upon his coming to London, never to see a play again, to which resolution he constantly adhered."

Archbishop Tillotson's testimony is as follows: "But as the stage now is, they, (plays,) are intolerable, and not fit to be permitted in a civilized, much less in a Christian nation.

"They do most notoriously minister both to infidelity and vice. By the profaneness of them, they are apt to instil bad principles into the minds of men, and to lessen the awe and reverence which all men ought to have for God and religion; and by their lewdness they teach vice, and are apt to infect the minds of men, and dispose them to lewd and dissolute practices.

"And therefore I do not see how any person pretending to sobriety and virtue, and especially to the pure and holy religion of our blessed Saviour, can, without great guilt and open contradiction to his holy profession, be present at such lewd and immodest plays, much less frequent them, as too many do, who yet would take it very ill to be shut out of the communion of Christians, as they

would most certainly have been in the first and purest ages of Christianity.”

Mr. Wilberforce, in his “Practical View,” speaking of plays says; “there has been much argument concerning the lawfulness of theatrical amusements; let it be sufficient to remark, that the controversy ought to be short indeed, if the question were to be tried by this criterion of love to the Supreme Being. If there were any thing of that sensibility for the honour of God, and that zeal in his service which we show in behalf of our earthly friends, or of our political connexions, should we seek our pleasure in that place which the debauchee, inflamed with wine, or bent on the gratification of other licentious appetites, finds *most congenial to his state and temper of mind?* In that place, from the neighbourhood of which, (how justly termed a school of morals might hence alone be inferred,) decorum, modesty, and regularity retire, while riot and lewdness are invited to the spot, and invariably select it for their chosen residence! Where the sacred name of God is often profaned! Where sentiments are often heard with delight, and motions and

gestures often applauded, which would not be tolerated in private company, but which may far exceed the utmost license allowed in the social circle, without at all transgressing the large bounds of *theatrical* decorum! Where, when moral principles are inculcated, they are not such as a Christian ought to cherish in his bosom, but such as it must be his daily endeavour to extirpate; not those which Scripture warrants, but which it condemns as false and spurious, being founded on pride and ambition, and the over valuation of human favour."

The testimony against the stage, furnished by Roman Catholic writers, is very strong and decided.

It appears from Butler's Life of Bossuet, that the stage was "always viewed, even by *the state*, with a considerable jealousy; that a capitulary of Charlemagne ranks theatrical performers amongst discreditable persons; that Philip Augustus banished actors from his court; that St. Louis would never admit them to it; that Louis XIII. subjected the theatre to severe regulations, and that these regulations were adopted, and others pro-

vided, by a legislative enactment, addressed by Louis XIV. to the Lieutenant General de Police." So much for the testimony of the French nation. That of the French Church is not less decided. The same writer says that, "a multitude of French provincial councils speak harshly of them, (theatres:) numerous passages against the stage are cited from the ritual of particular churches; and among the inveighers against it, its adversaries are proud to mention, of the royal blood of France, Francis Louis, Prince of Conti."

Even under all the restrictions which the Legislature of France imposed on theatrical exhibitions, the venerable bishop of Meaux does not hesitate to describe them as replete with compositions, "in which the virtues and piety of a Christian are generally held out to ridicule; in which, what the Gospel pronounces to be criminal, is generally defended and made agreeable; in which virgin purity is often blurred by impudent acts and words. And can you assert," continues the Bishop, "that such compositions are free from crime?"

The Fathers of the Church bore a similar

testimony to the immoral character and tendency of the stage. But it has been asserted, that "when the early Fathers of the Church disapproved of the attendance at the theatre, there were many reasons to induce them, which can have no influence now. Christianity was then but in its infancy, the stage was pre-occupied by the pagan, and the drama was often made the vehicle of invocation to the gods, of praise to heathenism, and of ridicule of the religion of Jesus, which might have been detrimental to the steadiness of the Neophyte." To this assertion Bossuet replies in the following language: "But you must have read the Fathers very carelessly, if you find that in the theatrical exhibitions of their times, the Fathers condemned nothing more than their idolatrous representations, or their scandalous and open impurities. They equally condemn the idleness, the enormous dissipation of spirit, the violent emotions so little becoming a Christian, whose heart should be the sanctuary of the peace of God, the desire of seeing and being seen, the criminal occurrence of looks, the being engrossed with vanity, those bursts of

laughter which banish from the heart all recollection of God, of his holy presence, of his awful judgments.

“In the midst of all this pomp and agitation, who, they ask, can raise his heart to God? Who would be bold enough to address himself to the Deity, and say to him, ‘O my God, I am here, because it is thy will?’”

The eloquent Massillon, in his sermon on “the small number of the saved,” thus addresses his audience: “You continually demand of us, if theatres and other places of amusement be innocent recreations for Christians? In return, I have only one question to ask you; are they the works of Satan, or of Jesus Christ? for there can be no medium in Religion. I mean not to say but what many recreations and amusements may be termed innocent: but the most innocent pleasures religion allows, and which the weakness of nature renders even necessary, belong in one sense to Jesus Christ, by the facility with which they ought to enable us to apply ourselves to more holy and more serious duties. Every thing we do, every thing we rejoice or weep at, ought to be connected with Jesus

Christ, and done for his glory. Now, upon this principle, the most incontestible, and most universally allowed in Christian morality, you have only to decide whether you can unite the glory of Jesus Christ with the pleasures of a theatre. Can our Saviour take any part in such a species of recreation? And before you enter a theatre, can you with confidence declare to him, that in so doing, you only propose his glory, and the satisfaction of pleasing him? What! are the theatres, such as they are at present, still more criminal by the public licentiousness of those unfortunate creatures who appear in them, than by the impure and passionate scenes they represent—are the theatres the works of Jesus Christ? Would Jesus Christ animate a mouth, from which are to proceed sounds lascivious, and calculated to corrupt the heart? But these blasphemies strike me with horror! Would Jesus Christ preside in assemblies of sin, where every thing we hear, weakens his doctrines; where the poison enters the soul by all the senses; where every art is employed to inspire, awaken, and justify the passions he condemns? Now,

says Tertullian, if they are not the works of Jesus Christ, they must be the works of Satan. Every Christian ought therefore to abstain from them: when he partakes of them, he violates the vows of baptism. However innocent he may flatter himself to be, in bringing from these places an untainted heart, it is sullied by being there; since by his presence alone, he has participated in the works of Satan, which he had renounced at baptism, and violated the most sacred promises he had made to Jesus Christ and his Church."

The learned Dr. Milner, a Roman Catholic divine, makes the following declaration: "It is my full and deliberate persuasion, that the extreme profligacy and irreligion of the present age, are more to be ascribed to the prevalence and credit of theatrical amusements, than to any other cause whatever."

To these authorities, we may add a paragraph quoted by the London Roman Catholic Miscellany, from an unpublished letter of the late prelate of Midland district. "In confirmation of this opinion, I might quote, not now the fathers of the church, but the most celebrated pagan legislators, philosophers,

and even poets of ancient and modern times; a Plato, a Cicero, a Plutarch, an Ovid, and even a Jean Jacques Rousseau. But you will say, is not the stage much reformed? Is not indecency banished? To this I answer, that indecent expressions, indeed, are not quite so common in the plays of this age, as they were in those of the last two centuries. But the lessons they contain are as bad or even worse than of those in question. A bad word, however sinful, produces but a momentary effect, and in a virtuous mind, causes horror: but a bad lesson, or a dangerous passion, that is insensibly instilled into the breast, and fixed there by all those powerful engines I have described, is calculated to undermine, and lay in ruins the whole fabric of morality."

Infidels and deists have not been backward in recording their testimony against the stage. It is well known that Rousseau strongly protested against the introduction of theatrical amusements at Geneva, on the ground of their tendency to corrupt the people. .

"It is impossible," he says, "that an establishment so contrary to our ancient manners, can be generally applauded. How

many generous citizens will see with indignation this monument of luxury and effeminacy raise itself upon the ruins of our ancient simplicity, and menace public liberty! Do you think they will authorize this innovation by their presence, after having loudly disapproved it? Be assured that many go without scruple to the theatre at Paris, who will never enter that of Geneva, because the good of their country is dearer to them than their amusement. Where would be the imprudent mother who would dare to carry her daughter to this dangerous school; and how many respectable women would think they dishonoured themselves in going there?"

Let those parents who profess to regard and believe in the Christian religion, but who nevertheless, encourage their children to attend the theatre, sit at the feet of an infidel, and learn on this subject, the lessons of wisdom and virtue. Let them blush to receive so just a rebuke from one who does not even profess to derive his principles of morality from the Gospel, but from the light of nature. Here is testimony which no one can call "religious prejudice and fanaticism." Let

those who boast of morality, those who profess a regard for the public welfare, and yet patronize and encourage the theatre, take heed to it, and pause.

This philosopher, in other places, treats at large, of the immoral character of players. We quote the following as a specimen, and as a part of his argument against the stage. "I observe in general," he remarks, "that the situation of an actor is a state of licentiousness and bad morals." "In all countries, their profession is dishonourable; those who exercise it are every where contemned. Even at Paris, where they are treated with more consideration, and where their conduct is better than in any other place, a sober citizen (*un bourgeois*) would fear to be upon terms of intimacy with the same actors who may be seen every day at the tables of the great. A further observation, of no less importance, is that this contempt is strongest, wherever the manners are the most pure, and that there are countries of innocence and simplicity, where the trade of an actor is held almost in horror. These are incontestible facts. You will say that they result only

from prejudices.—I agree to it. But these prejudices being universal, we must seek for an universal cause; and I do not see where we can find it, except in the profession itself.”

“I might impute these prejudices to the declamations of priests, if I did not find them established among the Romans before the birth of Christianity; and not only vaguely scattered in the mind of the people, but authorized by express laws, which declared actors infamous, and took from them the title and rights of Roman citizens.” “The pagan priests and devotees, who were favourable to theatrical exhibitions, inasmuch as they made part of the public games in honour of religion, had no interest in decrying them.”

Mr. Moralt, in his letters upon the French and English nations, ascribes the corruption of manners in London, to comedy, as its chief cause. “Their comedy,” says he, “is like that of no other country; it is the school in which the youth of both sexes familiarize themselves with vice, which is never represented there as vice, but as mere gaiety.”

“As for comedies,” says Diderot, in his Observations upon Dramatic Poetry, “the Eng-

lish have none; they have in their place satires, full indeed of gaiety and force, but without morals and without taste, sans mœurs, et sans gout."

The Legislature of Massachusetts, until near the close of the last century, continued to bear a most decided and praiseworthy testimony against the stage, by declaring all theatrical performances unlawful and immoral. The players, however, at length evaded the statute by announcing, for example, that "on Monday evening will be delivered at the exhibition room, in Broad Alley, a *Moral Lecture*, enforced by the affecting history of JANE SHORE, which will be alternately recited by Messrs. Harper, Powell, &c.; the evening's exercises to conclude with an *Amusing Lecture* in the facetious narrative of CHRONHOTONTHOLOGOS."

The theatre thus conducted by evasion, and in contempt of the law of the land, produced its legitimate effect. The tide of immorality rushed through this inlet, and so generally spread itself among the people, that the offensive statute was repealed, and the theatre legalized.

Mr. James, in his "Christian Father's Present," relates, on the best authority, the following anecdote of Shuter, the comedian, whose facetious powers convulsed whole audiences with laughter. "Shuter had heard Mr. Whitefield, and trembled with apprehension of a judgment to come; he had also frequently heard Mr. Kinsman, and sometimes called on him in London. One day accidentally meeting him in Plymouth, after some years of separation, he embraced him with rapture, and inquired if that was the place of his residence; Mr. Kinsman replied, 'yes, but I am just returned from London, where I have preached so often, and to such large auditories, and have been so indisposed, that Dr. Fothergill advised my immediate return to the country for change of air.' 'And I,' said Shuter, 'have been acting Sir John Falstaff so often, that I thought I should have died, and the physicians advised me to come into the country for the benefit of the air. Had *you* died, it would have been in serving the best of masters; but had *I*, it would have been in the service of the devil. Oh, Sir, do you think I shall ever be called again? I cer-

tainly was once; and if Mr. Whitefield had let me come to the Lord's table with him, I should never have gone back again. But the caresses of the great are exceedingly ensnaring.

““ My Lord E. sent for me to-day, and I was glad I could not go. Poor things! they are unhappy, and they want Shuter to make them laugh. But oh, Sir! such a life as yours! As soon as I leave you, I shall be King Richard. This is what they call a good play, as good as some sermons. I acknowledge there are some striking and moral things in it; but after it, I shall come again with my farce of ‘A Dish of all sorts,’ and knock all that on the head. Fine reformers are we.’

“Poor Shuter! once more thou wilt be an object of sport to the frivolous and the gay, who will now laugh at thee, not for thy drollery, but for thy seriousness; and this story, probably, will be urged against thee as the weakness of a noble mind; weakness let it be called, but in spite of himself, man must be serious at last. And when a player awakes to sober reflection, what agony must seize upon his soul. Let those auditories,

which the comic performer has convulsed with laughter, witness a scene in which the actor retires, and the man appears; let them behold him in the agonies of death, looking back with horror on a life of guilt, while despair is mingled with forebodings of the future. Players have no leisure to learn to die; and if a serious thought wander into the mind, the painful sigh which it excites is suppressed, and with an awful desperation, the wretched creature rushes into company, to be delivered from himself."

## CHAPTER VII.

## IS THE THEATRE A MIRROR OF NATURE ?

So strong and so decided is the testimony which establishes the immoral tendency of the stage, that many of its advocates find it necessary to claim for it something more than simply an innocent recreation. They suppose, and perhaps correctly, that if they claim nothing more for it, others will not award to it so much. As an offset to the charge of immorality, imposing characteristics are attributed to the theatre. It is called the mirror of nature, the school of virtue, &c. The inappropriateness of these high sounding titles, has tended to weaken, rather than strengthen the plea for the stage. That it does not reform the morals of the people, will generally be more readily admitted, than that it corrupts them. Many are willing to regard it as a harmless amusement, who can not defend it as a school of virtue.

Let us examine the pretension of the theatre to be the mirror of nature. The amount of it is, that the exhibitions of the stage are in strict accordance with human nature as it is, including the vices, follies, and virtues of mankind, and that these exhibitions are faithful; so that in this mirror we may see ourselves as we really are, and as we are seen by others. It is thought that by being thus led to look upon our faults, we may be induced to correct them. For several hundred years, human nature has been thus professedly held up to public view, and yet no reformation of heart or life can be traced to the stage. The lewd and profligate of both sexes, who have so long and so frequently looked upon this mirror, remain such still. Indeed, if this mirror be faithful, we may infer that the worst of mankind *love* to look upon their faults, as it is notorious that such most frequently attend the theatre. The sensation they experience, when witnessing the exhibitions of their vices, is pleasure, not pain. Whereas the contemplation of one's faults and misdeeds, should be accompanied by sorrow and repentance, if we are to hope for

any amendment. When such a contemplation affords merriment and pleasure, we can not expect reformation. In defence of the stage it is said, that to see vice punished, tends to deter men from the practice of it. Such too, it has been supposed, would naturally be the tendency of public executions. But after a fair experiment, the reverse has been found to be the case. On such occasions the worst characters are commonly assembled; and even while the culprit is suffering the penalty of the law, the law itself is often violated by some of the crowd, in purloining the property of bystanders. And it has been found that the frequency of public executions, tends to diminish even the little good which they are supposed to effect. Hence, the practice is beginning to be abandoned. And we believe that ere long it will be universally exchanged for a mode of execution more private.

The practice was founded in a misapprehension of some of the traits of human nature. Too much reliance was placed upon our susceptibility of being beneficially impressed by the exhibition of penal suffering.

The argument in favour of the stage is founded on the same misapprehension of human nature. On minds of a peculiar structure, salutary impressions may be made by the representation of vice and its reward. But such minds are not common; and least likely of all others, either to need such impressions, or to be found in a theatre to receive them.

It is, moreover, reversing the order of things, to teach wholesome lessons by bad examples. Examples of vice will corrupt the mind, and for this reason we are anxious that our children may avoid them. Examples of virtue and piety are held up before them for imitation.

It is altogether a mistake to suppose that because examples of virtue may lead us to practise it, therefore examples of vice will lead us to shun it. That very principle of our nature which renders a good example beneficial to us, will render a bad example pernicious to us, namely the *imitative principle*. The benefit of a good example is always attributed to this principle, and so also is the injury of a bad example. Now,

to make the argument for the theatre a good one; it must be shown that this imitative principle will lead us to *avoid* vice, when it acts upon an example of vice, and to *practise* virtue when it acts upon an example of virtue. But to avoid vice by imitating it, is a contradiction, and therefore, an absurdity.

Our propensity to imitate examples, will lead us to *imitate*, not to *shun* vice, when we witness examples, or exhibitions of it.

If, then, the theatre be a mirror of nature, in which are to be seen the vices and follies of mankind, with here and there a virtue; it is an argument against the stage, rather than in favour of it. And this argument accumulates strength by the following considerations.

1. As the vices of mankind are far more numerous than their virtues, and as the vicious passions of our nature are more exciting, and therefore better adapted to dramatic purposes, than the mild and placid virtues of the heart, we may naturally expect to witness in a theatre, the exhibition of the former, much more frequently than of the latter.
2. As the heart is naturally and strongly inclined to evil, rather than good, this bias will

lead us to imitate more readily and fully the examples of vice, than those of virtue. It is much more easy, on this account, to corrupt by bad example, than to reform by good example. 3. These exhibitions of vice are accompanied with so much pageantry and splendour, and made so attractive and fascinating, as to produce in the mind of the spectator, pleasure rather than aversion. This circumstance destroys all the good effect, which, otherwise, might possibly be produced by the exhibition of vice in all its naked deformity; and thus defeats the very end which is professedly sought.

This mirror of nature is supposed to hold up to the view of the audience, their faults and vices, so that, by seeing them exhibited, they may be induced to correct them.

This theory is also founded on a mistaken view of human nature. Mankind are not so ready either to recognize or acknowledge their faults, as this theory supposes. It is a general truth, that "all the ways of a man are clean in his own eyes." We are prone "to think more highly of ourselves than we ought to think." Each one is more disposed

to apply reproof to his neighbour than to himself. He can see a mote in his brother's eye, while he may have a beam in his own. The most faithful and striking delineation of a vicious life may be heard either in a theatre, or from the pulpit, yet how very few, to whom it is applicable, will either recognize it, or admit it to be their own?

In addition to this, we may observe, as a general fact, that even when men become in any degree sensible of their faults, they are disposed to palliate, excuse, or justify them. It is no easy matter to bring mankind to the acknowledgment and forsaking of their vices. The pulpit has long been engaged in this arduous task, and although its efforts are accompanied with the promised blessing of God, yet how few, comparatively, are persuaded to turn from the error of their ways! How few cease to do evil, and learn to do well!

There is one circumstance to which we have more than once alluded, connected with all scenic representations, which will always hinder the exposure of vice from having a beneficial effect upon the audience. That

circumstance is the merriment and pleasure which the exhibition is designed and adapted to afford. If the pulpit should adopt the same method of exposing vice, who does not see that the very end of its institution would be defeated? And yet mankind are the same, whether found in the theatre or the church. And if the exposure of vice from the pulpit, when made in a merry and ludicrous manner, would inculcate, rather than discourage it, we may not hope for a different result from a similar exposure of it on the stage.

Even if the claim of the theatre to be the mirror of nature were well founded, it would not prove that it was a school of virtue and of good morals. The character of the world, and the conduct of mankind in general, afford examples which the youthful mind, inexperienced and sanguine, with its passions and propensities, cannot safely witness. The exhibitions of vice in real life, exert a baneful influence over the most of those who are familiar with them. We apprehend that the fictitious representation of vice, however faithful, will not counteract, but rather strengthen

that influence. Many pernicious examples, which some might not be called to witness, in real life, are thus brought to view, and exert their injurious influence, in proportion to the fidelity of the representation. If the imitative principle be so strong in man, as we know it to be, the cause of virtue would be promoted, by withholding from the young and inexperienced, the scenes of folly and wickedness, with which the world abounds. If, on the other hand, the mere representation of these scenes in the play-house, subserves the cause of good morals, and exerts so happy an influence over the youthful heart, much more the reality. Hence, instead of counselling our children to avoid evil company, and shun the society of the vicious, we should send them to the gambling house, the brothel, and to all the haunts of profligacy and crime, and duly initiate them into the arts of the seducer, and into all the wiles and intrigues of wicked and designing men. Thus versed in all the accomplishments of the courtesan and the knave, think ye, that our sons and daughters would become more virtuous, attractive, and useful? If so, then the theatre is a school of

virtue. For it claims to be the mirror of nature. And what do we behold in that mirror? A portion of the audience may recognize in it their own character; but will the virtuous, the moral, the meek, the forgiving, the useful portion of the audience recognize theirs? Let any one read the plays that are most popular, and consequently, most frequently acted, and he will see that vice and immorality, under some form or other, run throughout them, and give zest to the performance. This boasted mirror reflects back upon the audience, the characters of the vicious and profane. For this reason, we say, why not go to the original at once, and learn the lessons of virtue it has to give?

Shocked as you may be at this suggestion, it is nevertheless true, that the representation of vice at the theatre, is far more injurious to the virtuous and moral, than would be the exhibition of it in real life. Because, there it appears in disguise; here, in all its naked deformity. The grossness of the reality would shock the virtuous sensibilities of the beholder, and fill him with disgust and pain. But the colouring of the representation is so

artfully and treacherously arranged, the garb of virtue is so adroitly adjusted, that the mind of the spectator may be disarmed even of suspicion. And should the real character of the sentiment represented, be detected through its borrowed covering, still its grossness is so chastened by the blending of higher and more commendable qualities, that the mind admits to its contemplation, the decorated monster, more perhaps on the credit of its accompanying qualities, than its own; and the sensation experienced is that of pleasure.

The artifice has succeeded. A mind, once keenly alive to the odiousness of undisguised vice, is thus made to derive pleasure from the exhibition of it, in connexion with hypocrisy and falsehood. The spectator may perceive the cheat, but he is pleased with the illusion. The romance of crime triumphs over its enormity; for his love of pleasure is stronger than his hatred of vice. Once, his mind cherished the association of pain with vice, but now the theatre has broken up that association, and by enabling him to derive pleasure from the representation of vice, an opposite association is formed, which is

strengthened by each successive exhibition, and the restraints of virtue are proportionably weakened.

Villany, artifice, intrigue, and lewdness, now dance before his heated and corrupted imagination, decked with the plumes of honour, bravery, magnanimity, and renown. He lives in a world of fancy, and sips the cup of sensual pleasure. Vice and virtue are but unmeaning names. Their substance has vanished, and a new quality compounded of the two, has appeared, and is worshipped as the standard of morals. Such is this enchanted mirror! Such is the power of that magic sceptre, which is swayed in this school of virtue!

The stage is not a faithful mirror. There “vice wears the garb, assumes the name, and claims the reward of virtue.” Facts are misrepresented, and truth is caricatured.

“Stage-poets,” says Thomas Fuller, the church historian, “have themselves been very bold with, and others very merry at, the memory of Sir John Oldcastle; whom they have fancied a boon companion, a jovial roister, and yet a coward to boot, contrary

to the credit of all chronicles, owning him a martial man of merit. The best is, Sir John Falstaff hath relieved the memory of Sir John Oldcastle, and of late is substituted buffoon in his place.”

This species of misrepresentation characterized the stage as far back as the time of Socrates, who owed his death to a most base instance of it.

This distinguished philosopher, aware of the evil tendency of the stage, expressed his disapprobation of the licentiousness of the comic poets and players, both as it respected their conduct and writings. This exasperated Aristophanes, who conspired with three others to seek revenge.

The great reverence which the people cherished for his character, defended him from the assaults of his enemies, until Aristophanes, by caricature and wit, destroyed that reverence which was his protection. In the comedy of “The Clouds,” he cast such ridicule upon the venerable philosopher, as to destroy the respect of the mob for his character, and their regard for his services. The way being thus prepared, Socrates was

arraigned before the tribunal of five hundred, and on false charges, was convicted by the testimony of suborned witnesses. This fact illustrates the unfaithfulness of this mirror of nature, and, moreover, shows what a dangerous influence the stage may acquire over the mass of the people. It was not without a deep knowledge of human nature, that one said, "let me make the ballads of a nation, and I care not who makes its laws." Let the stage be once clothed with that controlling influence which the system is so well adapted to create, and "our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honour" are at its mercy. The pulpit and the religious press, with the divine blessing, must save the country from this, as well as from every other internal foe.

The stage presents a false view of human nature, and erects a false standard of right and wrong. The spendthrift is called a liberal man, the murderer a man of honour and courage, the libertine a gentleman of pleasure and fashion, and his accomplishments are in proportion to his cunning and artfulness.

Even the laudable avocations of life are

grossly caricatured. The clergyman is either a hypocrite or a fool; the lawyer is a knave; the physician is a quack; the learned man is a pedant; and the tradesman is either a miser or a rogue.

The virtues of human life are misrepresented. Meekness is called a stupid want of spirit. Forbearance is called cowardice. Forgiveness of injuries is a weakness. Chastity is prudery. Humility is affectation. A high toned morality is sanctimoniousness. Religion is fanaticism, &c. &c.

Thus, in this mirror of nature, vice appears as virtue, and virtue as vice.

## CHAPTER VIII.

## IS THE THEATRE A SCHOOL OF VIRTUE ?

It has been contended in behalf of the theatre, that it is a school of virtue and good morals. Most writers in defence of the stage, however, content themselves with advancing this position conditionally—that if it were reformed, and rid of its abuses, it might become an institution favourable to virtue.

While even this position may be justly questioned, yet it entirely abandons the claim set up for the theatre in its present state; and amounts to an admission that as now conducted, it is unfriendly to virtue and good morals. That this has always been the case appears abundantly, both from its history, and from the unsuccessful attempts which have been made to reform it. A writer in the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, who evidently favours the stage, charges the evils of the theatre upon the taste and desires of those

who patronize it. "It has been frequently a subject of debate," says he, "whether the stage be favourable to morals. We do not mean to enter into the controversy; but we will make an observation or two. It will be allowed by all, that the intention of the players in acting, is to procure money; and the intention of the audience in attending the theatre, is to seek amusement. The players, then, will only act such plays as they believe will answer their intention. And what sort of plays are these? They are such as correspond with the opinions, manners, and taste of the audience. If the taste of the audience be gross, therefore, the plays will be gross; if delicate and refined, they will be the same. And if we go back to the time of Shakspeare, we shall find that this has been uniformly the case. The conclusion, then, which we draw is this, if the taste of the audience be pure, free from licentiousness, the plays will be the same, and the stage will be favourable to virtue."

This, however, can not be considered an argument in favour of the stage, although it seems to be all that its advocate could say in

its behalf. It is rather an admission of the immoral tendency of the theatre, with an attempt to account for it. It is immaterial to the point before us, to what cause the evil in question is chargeable. All we have to do at present is with the fact, which seems here to be admitted. And it is no palliation of the evil to say, that it is owing to the depraved taste and manners of the people. For if the stage is determined to cater to the public taste, the argument against it remains unaffected.

As the human heart is depraved, and as the public taste has consequently always called for plays of an injurious tendency, and as the stage must be modeled after the taste of its patrons, it follows that the stage will never be reformed, till the influence of religion has so reformed the people, as to change and correct their present taste. All attempts at reformation hitherto, have been commenced at the wrong end. We must first reform the public taste, and if successful, the reformation of the stage will follow as a matter of course. This will account for the fact that the stage never has been so reformed as to become

favourable to virtue; and it affords the strongest presumptive evidence that it never will be. It bars out from the stage all reform, till its patrons are reformed. And if it be a school of virtue, why has it not reformed them long ago?

The truth is, that the reforming influence must proceed from the audience, and operate upon the stage, and not *vice versa*. The people must become the school of virtue, and the stage must become their pupil. Instead of the stage teaching the people what *they ought to be*, the people dictate to the stage what *it must be*. The stage thus gratifies the present vitiated taste of its patrons, and by gratifying, strengthens it. The stage instead of mortifying and correcting, constantly cherishes that very taste of the public on which are charged all its abuses. How, then, can it be, or become a school of virtue?

It seems to be evident that such a reformation of the people as is thought necessary to purify the stage, would in fact destroy it altogether. For as men become truly pious they abandon the theatre, not only as pernicious, but also as incurable. It is conse-

quently left to be patronized, controlled, and modeled by those who encourage its abuses.

Should an attempt to reform it be made by a manager of sufficient wealth, and moral courage, and only such pieces exhibited as inculcated the purest morality, free from every licentious sentiment or allusion, the majority of its present patrons would probably forsake it, as insipid and uninteresting, while the accession of new patrons would be too small to sustain it.

Corneille's *Polieucte* was condemned on account of the religious sentiment which it contained. It was submitted to the actors, for their approbation, in 1640. But there was in it a scene touching religion, the awfulness of which struck the principal performer with a persuasion, that it demanded a solemnity in the execution of it, not practised on the stage; and indeed, that it required a total departure from the usual extravagance and frivolity of scenic representation. It was consequently rejected. It happened that one of the actors, who was intrusted by the rest to return it to Corneille, took it into his head to take another glance at it, as he walked

up and down his chamber; and meeting a passage in it which, to his own delicate taste, was very offensive, and greatly discomposed his temper, dashed it out of his hand, throwing it in such a direction that, by mere accident, it fell upon the tester of his bed, and he thought no more of it—or at least, he did not think it was worth his while to give himself any further trouble about it, and there left it. About eighteen months after, an upholsterer, being employed to take down the bed, found it, and it was restored to its author. Corneille resolved to press forward the representation of it; and to that end, read the piece to a body which then constituted the most learned and liberal tribunal over all literary controversies existing in France, and which met at the Hotel de Rambouillet. Out of regard to the feelings of the author, the members applauded the piece in his presence; but after his departure, they committed it in charge to M. de Voiture, to inform Corneille, in the most delicate manner possible, that *Polieucte* was not viewed by that body, with that encouraging warmth that might be expected; and that

there were some passages in it, those especially which touched upon religion, that displeased them. Corneille now determined to withdraw it from the stage, but having left it in the hands of the actors, they resolved to make the experiment of a representation. Bellerose, a celebrated actor, who performed the part of Severus, was averse to the introduction, in any way, of a subject so sacred, on the mimic scene; but it being determined to act the play, he undertook the part with emotions of reverential awe, and exerted himself to make it as solemn and impressive as possible. The play pleased that portion of the audience, which appreciated the value of public morality; and especially the municipal government, which, in order to discountenance the theatre, on account of its licentious tendency, had imposed very severe disqualifications upon the members of the histrionic profession.

As this performance promised a reformation of the stage, the following *arret* or decree was made in its favour:

“In case the said comedians regulate the action of their performances, so as to be entirely

free from impurity, we will that their exhibitions, as by this means they will innocently amuse the public, be considered as void of blame and reproach; and also, that their occupation shall not be pleaded as an impediment to the exercise of business or connexion in public commerce.”\*

While the religious sentiment and grave performance of the *Polieucte* pleased one portion of the audience, the genius displayed in it pleased the remainder, to whom it would have been quite as acceptable, if not more so, without the religion.

The rejection of this play by the actors, and its subsequent condemnation by the literary tribunal of France, on account of its religious sentiment, show very clearly what amount of favour morality and piety may expect from the stage.

Its genius, and not its religion, was its recommendation to public favour. The public taste in this respect is very well understood by dramatists; and as their object is to make money, and not to reform the people, they are left to this alternative, either to

\* *Mirror of Taste*, Vol. III. p. 332.

abandon the stage altogether, as a means of support, or to adapt it to the taste of the majority. The latter is their choice. Now what is the taste of the majority? A late English writer answers the question thus:

“The vicious tendencies of the majority of the population, and more especially in cities, are not matters of speculation, they are matters of fact and daily experience. That these tendencies were early in operation, we have the testimony of Holy Writ; and in modern times, even the atheist *Hobbes* has given his evidence to the same effect. This depraved population, then, being the majority, would by the withdrawal of their patronage, ruin the stage. It has, therefore, been always the object of the managers to minister to the gratification of their vitiated tastes. Garrick’s Prologue upon Prologues, and the greater part of the spoken addresses, bear testimony to the fact.”

We say again, that it is no apology for the stage to say that the taste of the majority of its patrons is vitiated. If, as a consequence of this, the tendency of theatrical amusements is injurious to the public morals, this simple fact, apart from its cause, is quite sufficient

for our argument. It is surprising to see the self-complacency and air of triumph with which the defenders of the stage attempt to cast the odium of its licentiousness upon the depraved appetites of the people, as if that, in the smallest degree, absolved the stage from the {guilt of ministering to them. If a whole community should crave poison, no one would be justified, on that account, in administering it.

Even the great Dr. Johnson seems to have overlooked this fact, when he wrote the following lines in defence of the stage: for the truth contained in them is in fact a condemnation of it, agreeably to the principles already laid down.

“Hard is his lot that here by fortune plac’d,  
Must watch the wild vicissitudes of taste ;  
With every meteor of caprice must play,  
And chase the new-blown bubbles of the day.  
Ah ! let not censure term our fate our choice,  
The stage but echoes back the public voice ;  
The drama’s laws the drama’s patrons give,  
For we that live to please, must please to live.  
Then prompt no more the follies you decry,  
As tyrants doom their tools of guilt to die.”

Here it seems to be conceded that the theatre does not, and never can exert a reforming influence over the public taste. It but

“echoes back the public voice.” If that voice be in favour of licentiousness and immorality, such will the drama be also. So that unless the restraints of virtue are strengthened by the gratification of a vitiated taste, the theatre can not be regarded as the school of good morals.

In proportion as the taste and habits of a community become purified, the patronage of the theatre ceases, whereas if it were a school of virtue, or even a harmless entertainment, this would not be the case.

It is also true that in proportion as the habits of a people become corrupt, the patronage of the theatre increases. It is stated as a fact worthy of consideration, that “during the progress of the most ferocious revolutions which ever shocked the face of heaven, theatres, in Paris alone, multiplied from six to twenty-five. Now, one of two conclusions, follows from this; either the spirit of the times produced these institutions, or the institutions cherished the spirit of the times; and this will certainly prove that they are either the parents of vice, or the offspring of it.”

The London Quarterly Review, although it labours to defend the stage, nevertheless contains a candid admission that it cannot be regarded as a school of virtue. In Vol. 17, p. 248, we find the following language: "Possessing and asserting this large share of influence, its (the theatre's) importance has nevertheless been exaggerated, both by those who have attacked, and those who have defended it; and perhaps, as is often the case, it has suffered more from the zeal of its friends, than from the malignity of its enemies. By the latter, it has been represented as operating to the pollution of morals, the relaxation of laws, and even the subversion of governments. By the former, it has been praised as not only polishing the manners, and refining the taste of a nation, but as essentially connected with the harmony of society, and the morals of mankind. The truth is that the drama is not a cause, but an effect of the state of society. Men go to a theatre, neither to be improved nor depraved, neither to learn or unlearn the precepts of morality, or the rules of life; they go to it as to a place where the mind is to be employed,

while the senses are gratified; where genius is to appear arrayed in the graces of elocution, and the splendour of external decoration. They go to witness the representation of sufferings to which all are exposed, or of follies in which all have participated; and they return with their principles neither confirmed nor shaken, except by the operations of the passions which they brought with them, and which would perhaps have operated, if they had never entered the walls of a theatre. They go, in a word, to be amused; to seek, in the representations of fictitious life, a solace, or a forgetfulness of the evils of reality; and if amusement can be obtained without mischief, though it is the lowest praise with which the admirers of the drama will be contented; it is, perhaps, among the highest that can be bestowed on any known mode of public recreation."

As the Review can say nothing in favour of the moral tendency of the theatre, it is determined to say nothing against it. In order to preserve this species of neutrality, the Review finds it necessary to deny virtually the influence of the drama altogether.

The extent and power of that influence, however, are too well known to be disbelieved. The want of a good influence is attributed to the want of any influence whatever. This is probably designed to take off the edge of the admission that the theatre has no tendency to improve the morals of mankind. To say that men do not go to the theatre to be depraved, is no answer to the allegation that they do not go there to be improved. Amusement is the chief object in view, and the question is, whether the amusement is accompanied by good or evil to the morals of the people? Evil consequences are implied in the above extract, but attributed to the operation of the passions, which the people take with them to the theatre. But these evil passions are there excited and strengthened, instead of being chastened and subdued.

Upon the whole, it seems that nothing more can be claimed for the theatre, by this warm advocate, than that it is a harmless recreation; that is, it is harmless so far as the effect of the exhibition upon the morals of the people is concerned. But can that be harmless, which wastes time and money, without

affording in return some improvement or benefit? Is it harmless to spend time and money *merely* in the indulgence of pleasure? Were they given to rational and accountable beings for no other purpose?

The amusement itself, apart from its immoral tendency, is calculated to injure especially the weaker portion of the audience. The excitement occasioned by the exhibition is often too great, and instead of being a recreation becomes exhausting. The object of recreation is to relieve the body and mind, to restore strength, and to produce calmness and serenity. But the exhibition of a deeply interesting tragedy overtasks the powers of an audience, and leaves the mind and body in a feverish condition. The time, the place, and the attendant circumstances of the exhibition, all tend to increase, rather than diminish this undue and injurious excitement.

Bayle gives a curious account of a violent fever which raged for several months in Abdera, a city of Thrace. It appears that those who were seized with it, were converted into players. They were perpetually

reciting scraps of tragedy, especially of the *Andromeda* of Euripides, as if they were upon the stage; so that the streets were full of pale and lean actors, who were making tragical exclamations. He quotes Lucian as accounting for its origin thus. Archelaus, a good player, having acted the *Andromeda* of Euripides, before the citizens of Abdera, during a very hot summer, many came out of the theatre in a fever, and having their imaginations deeply affected with the tragedy, the ravings caused by the fever represented nothing to them but *Andromeda*, *Perseus*, *Medusa*, &c., and so strongly excited in them the ideas of those objects, and of the pleasure they had received from the representation, that they could not forbear reciting and acting in imitation of Archelaus. This was probably an extreme case, but the tendency of theatrical exhibitions is to produce injurious excitement. The passions are inflamed, the sympathies are excited, and a multitude of various emotions crowd upon and often overwhelm the soul. Disgust, hatred, revenge, sorrow, joy, and lasciviousness, all revel in the bosom and exhaust its energies.

The effect of this certainly can not be recreation. It is a laborious exercise which prostrates while it gratifies. The intoxicating bowl may, by its undue excitement, afford momentary pleasure, but it is at the expense of subsequent health and serenity of mind.

Another injurious effect of the drama, apart from its immoral tendency, is to unfit especially the youthful mind, for the realities of every day life. The drama, like most of the novels and romances of the day, holds up before the mind an ideal state of things. The common events of life are so decked off with imaginary circumstances, that they are not recognized when they actually occur in real life. The mind is taught and trained to live on fancy, and to dwell in a world which is the creature of imagination. Hopes are cherished only to be blasted; prospects are painted to the mind, never to be realized; and expectations are excited, never to be fulfilled. Consequently the dull realities of life are encountered with feelings of disappointment and disgust. Such individuals can neither be happy nor useful. They become drones in society, and sigh away their fleet-

ing days in peevish complaints and fruitless lamentations.

The theatre, therefore, can be regarded neither as a recreation, nor a harmless amusement. But we believe that theatrical exhibitions are positively immoral, and greatly tend to promote licentiousness of principle and practice. They unfit the mind to attend with profit upon the public exercises of instruction, both religious and scientific. A mind accustomed to the excitement and pleasure of the drama, will regard the instructions of the pulpit as dull, insipid, and uninteresting. It tends to draw off the youthful mind from the attainment of knowledge. In nearly all the large cities, lectures on the sciences are delivered by benevolent and competent gentlemen to the young men. The theatre tempts them to its doors, and the lecture is abandoned. Having experienced the excitement of the former, they can no longer relish the calm and sober instruction of the latter.

Hardy, the French dramatist, inspired the people with so passionate a fondness for dramatic entertainments, and such an avidity for

frequenting the theatre, that the performances, which, when he began to write for the stage, never took place more than three times a week, long before he died, *took place every day, Sunday itself not excepted.*

The fascinations of the stage, and the character of sentiment sometimes exhibited, tend to weaken the restraints of virtue and honesty. Money has often been purloined from its lawful owners, by those in their employ, for the purpose of gratifying their desire to attend the theatre.\* Here was the temptation: the young man, on whose character till now, there was no foul blot, yields to the temptation and becomes a thief. The barrier

\* Professor Griscom, of New York, in a report on the causes of vice and crime in that city, made three years since, has the following statement:

“Among the causes of vicious excitement in our city, none appear to be so powerful as the theatrical amusements. The number of boys and young men who have become determined thieves, in order to procure the means of introduction to the theatre and circus, would appal the feelings of every virtuous mind, could the whole truth be laid before them.

“In the case of the feebler sex, the result is still worse; a relish for the amusements of the theatre, without the means of indulgence, becomes too often a motive for listening to the first suggestions of the seducer, and thus prepares the unfortunate captive of sensuality for the haunts of infamy, and a total destitution of all that is valuable in the mind and character of woman.”

is broken down, and he repeats the crime with less compunction of conscience. The desire to attend the theatre is increased by every exhibition he witnesses, and the restraints of honesty are weakened by every effort to break through them. Under this double influence he rapidly descends in crime, till at length it becomes a habit. Many a culprit may, doubtless, trace his disgrace and suffering to the temptations and fascinations of the theatre.\* What wise merchant or tradesman would send his clerk or apprentice to the theatre to study the lessons of virtue, honesty, and fidelity? Are the defenders of the stage willing to act upon their own representations of its tendency? If the theatre be a school of virtue, then would men be wise to send their clerks and children to witness its exhibitions, *for the purpose*, not merely or chiefly of amusement, but of instruction in

\* "It was but a few days since," says Rev. J. A. James, of Birmingham, "that a venerable and holy man, now the Deacon of a Christian Church, said to me, 'Sir, the theatre had nearly brought me to the gallows. There I found associates who introduced me to every crime. When likely to be prevented, by want of money, from going to meet them at the theatre, I robbed my father to gain a shilling admission to the gallery.' "

virtue and good morals. Who will send his daughter there to learn modesty and chastity, and to be strengthened and fortified against an impure imagination, and unclean thoughts? Say, thou parent of a lovely daughter, just blooming into womanhood, on whose ear has never yet fallen an unchaste word, and whose young heart has never yet been chilled by one impure insinuation; say, will you send her to the theatre, to witness those lascivious looks and gestures, and to hear those lewd suggestions and licentious sentiments, which afford so much amusement to the profligate and abandoned of her sex? Will you send her there to learn lessons of virtue, and to keep her mind and heart pure from the touch of obscenity and crime?

A very remarkable testimony to the immodesty even of female performers, is borne by Thomas Weston, the comedian, whose ruling passion, even in death, seems to have been facetiousness, if we may judge from his eccentric and humorous will, from which the following is an extract.

“Item. I leave to the ladies, in general, on the stage, (if not the reality, yet) the appear-

ance of modesty; 'twill serve them on more occasions than they are aware of."

There sit the beauty and fashion of the city to witness the exhibition of a popular play. The curtain rises—the play proceeds. The house echoes with the boisterous laugh of the lewd and vicious. But why do those decorated heads hang down? Why do those cheeks crimson with the blush of shame? They are receiving the lessons of virtue and chastity! Their minds are becoming free from all impure thoughts! The restraints of modesty are becoming strengthened! They are enjoying an innocent amusement!

But why dwell upon the picture? It is one of almost nightly occurrence, and the most zealous advocates of the stage are familiar with it. Yet they will contend that the theatre is a school of virtue! They will take their daughters and sisters to the theatre, and in their own presence, permit men and women to say to them publicly from the stage, what it would be, perhaps, death to utter to them at their fireside. This they will not only permit, but applaud and defend.

Not only are the exhibitions of the stage

often repugnant to delicacy and modesty, but also what is frequently seen and heard among the baser portion of the audience, is equally so. An English clergyman, who was so zealous an advocate of the stage, as to desecrate the pulpit to its defence, published, some thirty years ago, several discourses on the subject, in one of which he makes himself a witness to the fact here stated. His testimony goes to show the demoralizing influence of much of the company usually found in the theatre. "I was myself," says he, "at the Hay-Market theatre, with my wife and daughter. There was no listening to the play, and as to the conversation of our delectable company, it was so profligate, so loud, so knowing, and so beastly, that out of delicacy to all the modest ears it assailed, I would have given the world to have been any where else. This I hinted to my wife, when one of the rakes, who was perhaps a haberdasher, and came in with an order, thought proper to take offence, and cried out to me, in a manner insufferably insolent, 'Sir, I'll tell you what it is, if you will bring modest women into the flesh-mar-

ket, you must take the consequence.' My answer was, 'I thank you, Sir, I will do so,' and we quitted the house."

One reason why men are not more frequently convinced of the truth in a controversy, is that they do not always advance the true reason of their opinion, but keep it locked up in their own bosoms, either through shame, or because they fear that it can not live through the ordeal of a candid examination. Other reasons are therefore advanced, which have more of plausibility, and although these may be shown to be insufficient, yet conviction does not follow, because the opinion defended does not in fact rest upon them.

We believe that this is very much the case in regard to the controversy relative to the moral tendency of the theatre. The true reason why some, perhaps all, advocate the theatre is, the pleasure it affords them. But unable to defend it upon this ground alone, they find it necessary to resort to other arguments, and to advance other reasons why such exhibitions should be continued and patronized. Hence, there is always a la-

boured effort to make it appear that the theatre is favourable to virtue. Thus instead of advocating the propriety of mere personal gratification, they would appear to advocate the cause of virtue and good morals.

If, indeed, the theatre be a school of virtue, it is the only one which enjoys unbounded popularity with that very class which most needs reformation. The pulpit is confessed by all to be the source of instruction in good morals; but those who most need its instructions are seldom seen within the walls of the sanctuary.

We would ask the advocate of the stage to point us to *one* example of reformation, effected through the influence of the theatre. Whom has it benefited? Whom has it purified?

Do you ask whom has it injured? Whom has it ruined? If the secrets of all hearts were revealed, and the hidden causes of wretchedness and crime laid open to view, thousands would appear as witnesses against the theatre. The alms-house, the prison, and the chambers of disease and death, could unfold a tale whose thrilling import would cause

the ears to tingle, and the heart to bleed with sympathetic pity.

The injurious effects of the theatre upon the mass of a community, are well known to all discerning men. It is a subject of observation as well as of history. It is impossible, on any other principle, to account for the uniform opposition of the wise and good of all ages, to the theatre. Perhaps one of the most remarkable testimonies to the immoral tendency of the stage, is to be found among the politic measures of Julian, the apostate, to counteract the spread of the Christian religion. Julian was not ignorant of the happy influence of the Christian religion upon the habits and manners of its real subjects, nor was he blind to their exemplary lives and correct deportment. He was aware of the effect which such a practical argument in favour of Christianity, would have upon the minds of the people. And to counteract its influence, he adopted such measures as would tend to destroy the force of this argument, by making his pagan subjects as devout and moral as the Christians. He encouraged virtue, prohibited immorality and vice, and interdicted

all idle books and wanton plays. He declared that in no case should the priests frequent the theatres, nor should they even be seen in the company of a charioteer, player, or dancer.\* If the theatre did not tend to corrupt the priests, why should they be forbidden to attend it? And if it had this tendency, how much greater would naturally be its injurious influence upon the common people? And we may ask, why has a common consent sanctioned the impropriety of clergymen attending the theatre? If it be regarded merely as innocent recreation, why should they be debarred from its enjoyment? We are aware that superstition often clothes the ministerial office with a fictitious solemnity, which is regarded as incompatible with every thing like gaiety, cheerfulness, and amusement; but the common sentiment in regard to the impropriety of clergymen attending the theatre, is not founded in superstition, for it is entertained by the intelligent and well informed, as well as by the ignorant and vulgar. It extends, moreover, to professors of religion, and to a great degree, con-

\* Milner's Church History, Vol. 1. p. 304.

demns the practice in them as improper and inconsistent.

If the theatre be a school of virtue, or even an innocent amusement, whence arises this common sentiment? Some may profess to dissent from this general opinion, but they must be conscious of a diminution of regard for the piety and character of a clergyman whom they should meet in a theatre. Their sense of propriety would forbid them to regard him any longer as a consistent and devout man. Often the very persons who profess to see no impropriety in it, are the first to cast it up as an evidence of hypocrisy and irreligion. The same is true, to a very great extent, in regard to professors of religion. We allude to this common feeling or sentiment, as an argument against the theatre. It is a testimony borne by those who advocate and frequent the theatre, and one, the force of which must be felt by all.

It were to be desired that a like sentiment existed in regard to the female sex as such. It seems to be a reflection on their characters for virtue and propriety, to suppose that they may witness with impunity, what would be

disgraceful in a clergyman to witness. Certainly that which chiefly renders the theatre an unfit place for clergymen and Christians, does also render it unsuitable for females. We sincerely think that they should have more regard for their sex, and for that character for modesty and purity, which is above all price, ever to countenance the exhibitions of the stage.

From a piece entitled a "Defence of the Stage," we make the following extract, relating to this subject, as it contains important concessions.

"Quick feelings and lovely dispositions are the most open to the evil insinuations of any wrong bias from the stage; but a girl, (for I particularly think of that sex on whom an intemperate fancy commits most ravages,) whose passions are not curbed and strengthened by reason, will most probably err from misguided sentiment, even though she never witnessed a comedy which derides virtue, or a tragedy which softens vice. Right principles will always yield to wrong impulses in a character whose foundation has never been built upon consistent morality; the danger

does not lie in the contagion of the theatre, but in the mind which has been previously prepared to imbibe it; we are infected only with that disease which is congenial to our constitution.”

Let us pause here, and examine the sentiment advanced in the above extract. It supposes that the mind of the spectator must be previously prepared to imbibe injury, before it can receive any from the exhibitions of the theatre. The theology of this sentiment is as bad as its logic. We believe that sin has already made, in every human heart, the very preparation alluded to. It has so affected our moral constitution as to make it congenial to the infection of the theatre. Education can not remove the depravity of the heart. If we were as pure as the holy angels, we might escape the injury to which, as sinful beings, we are now exposed. To say that the danger does not lie in the contagion of the theatre, but in the preparation of mind to imbibe it, is no better argument for the theatre, than it would be for drunkenness, to say that the contagion does not lie in the liquor, but in the preparation of our physical

constitution to imbibe it. The heart is as really prepared to receive injury from the exhibitions of the theatre, as the brain and other parts of our physical frame are to receive injury from the use of ardent spirits. This writer admits that the contagion of the theatre injures those whose hearts are prepared to imbibe it. The Bible clearly teaches that all human hearts are depraved, and thus prepared to imbibe the contagion; and we leave the reader to draw the conclusion.

The concessions to which we alluded are contained in the following part of the extract:

“If love is to be caught from seeing it represented, or felt because a woman has listened to its description, the fire of imagination must have quenched her delicacy. An admiration of the drama is scarcely ever derived from an enjoyment of its literary beauties; young women dwell with pleasure, not upon the performance, but upon the performers; how such a fine passage was repeated, is not remembered as elucidating the author’s intention, but with reference to the favourite actor or actress’s pronounciation of it. When this is the case, I clearly agree with the public

abridgers of gaiety, that the impression is dangerous." "No pardon can be extorted for those who attend to witness a piece, where

‘Intrigue is plot, obscenity is wit,’

nor is pardon asked. A female who feels gratified, or does not express herself disgusted at a licentious performance, has not within her grasp one firm motive to break the force of temptation. To be one of the audience at Farquhar’s ‘Constant Couple,’ must be distressing to genuine modesty.”\*

If then, it be true, as this defender of the stage asserts, that “an admiration of the drama is *scarcely ever* derived from an enjoyment of its literary beauties,” and that “young women dwell with pleasure, not upon the performance, but upon the performers;” it is certainly a very cogent reason why they should never be found within the walls of a theatre.

“The importance of woman in society,” says an intelligent writer, “has been felt and acknowledged; her influence is potent; to her we are indebted for social comfort

\* Mirror of Taste, Vol. 2. p. 49, 50.

and domestic joy. Preserve her modesty, let her heart confine her wishes and affections within the circle of intellectual improvement, domestic duties, and domestic pleasures, and woman becomes what her Creator designed, 'a help meet for man;' the gentle friend of his youth; the kind instructor, as well as the mother of his children; his counsellor in difficulties; the soother of his sorrows in affliction; and I might almost add, the arbitress of his fate. But transform her character; let modesty, the guardian of every female virtue, retire; let the averted eye, which turns disgusted from the remotest approach of evil, grow confident; let that delicacy of sentiment, which feels a 'stain like a wound,' give place to fashionable apathy; let the love of home, and a taste for the sweetly increasing employments of the domestic scene, be changed for the pursuits of theatrical entertainments, and the vagrant disposition of a stylish belle, and the picture is reversed; the female is degraded, and society has lost its most powerful attraction.

“There is a charm in native modesty; and when this is wanting only in appearance, the

conversation even of a sensible woman is rendered insipid and disgusting. The world may call a woman virtuous, who with a countenance of brass, can sit unmoved, when Heaven is insulted by profaneness, and the audience by oaths; when decency is trampled on, and licentiousness indulged; and this may be the current virtue of a depraved age; but give me the innocence that shrinks at the touch of vice. When the outworks of modesty are demolished, the conquest of the citadel is comparatively easy. There can be no doubt that the theatre is one great source whence have flowed many crimes of fashionable life."

Another writer on the subject of females attending the theatre, reasons with great point thus:

"What apology you may form in respect to the indecencies of the stage, I cannot easily imagine. To say you admit them for their own sake, is to deny your respect for virtue. To say you bear with them for the sake of the better part of the performances, is to make amusement of more account than decency; it is to sacrifice your self-respect

to your love of pleasure. To say you suffer them because your acquaintance do, is to say, propriety is with you a thing of fashion. You are drifters with the current, be it clear or muddy. To say you tolerate them, like good republicans, in deference to the loose majority of the house, is to sanction their profligacy, and consent to your own reproach. You condescend to a compromise with the vile, that you may share with them the amusements of the place. In common fairness, you can do no less. It were a hard case, if privileges, which equally belong to all, were made the monopoly of a few. Verily, the theatre is a most peculiar institution!—without its parallel, except perhaps in the ancient feasts of Cybele and Saturn. Here virtue stoops to vice, and shame is privileged; wealth and fashion forget their aristocracy; and elegance and taste consort with more than plebeian coarseness.”

The drama is a powerful engine; and so long as it is made dependent on the popular will and taste, it must be a dangerous one to the cause of virtue. The object of the actors being to make money, they will conduct it

in that way which most effectually secures this object. The theatre must afford amusement, otherwise it will not be patronized. And in order to afford amusement, it must be adapted to the taste of the people. That taste has always hitherto demanded a drama unfavourable to virtue; and it always will, until it is transformed and purified by the influence of religion, and then that influence, by another bearing, will put an end to all theatrical exhibitions. Herein consists the improbability, if not impossibility, of ever making the drama subservient to the cause of good morals. The influence thus exerted is both great and ruinous.

“The privilege of influencing an assembled crowd,” says Schlegel, “is exposed to a most dangerous abuse. As we may inspire them in the most disinterested manner, for the noblest and best of purposes, we may also ensnare them by the deceitful webs of sophistry, and dazzle them by the glare of false magnanimity, of which the crimes may be painted as virtues, and even as sacrifices. Under the delightful dress of oratory and poetry, the poison steals imperceptibly into

the ear and heart. Above all things, let the comic poet take heed, as from the nature of his subject, he has a tendency to split on this rock, lest he afford an opportunity for the lower and baser parts of human nature to exhibit themselves without any disguise; for if, by the appearance of a common participation in these ignoble propensities, the shame is once overcome, which generally confines them within the bounds of decency, the depraved inclinations soon break out with the most unbridled licentiousness.

“The powerful nature of such an engine for either good or bad purposes, has justly, in all times, drawn the attention of the legislature to the drama. Many regulations have been devised by different states, to render it subservient to their views, and to guard against abuses. The great difficulty is to combine such a degree of freedom as is necessary for the production of works of excellence, with the precautions demanded by the customs and institutions of every state. In Athens, the theatre flourished under the protection of religion, with the most unlimited freedom; and the public morality preserved it for a

time from degeneracy. The comedies of Aristophanes, which, with our views and habits, appear so intolerably licentious, and in which the senate and the people themselves are covered with ridicule, were the seal of the Athenian freedom. Plato, again, who lived in the very same Athens, and witnessed or anticipated the decline of the art, proposed the entire banishment of dramatic poets from his ideal republic."

The difficulty suggested by Schlegel, of combining a degree of freedom necessary to the excellence or popularity of a play, with a due regard to the customs of the state, and we may add, with the demands of modesty and virtue, is one which has never yet been removed. And the reason is this—that freedom, which is essential to the popularity of a play, that freedom, which is necessary to adapt it to the taste of the mass of those who attend the theatre, must transcend the bounds of modesty, either openly, or by insinuations, and unchaste allusions. Because such is the popular taste: and it is well known that these lewd insinuations constitute the seasoning which gives zest to the

play, and gratifies the taste of the vulgar and depraved. Wherever this is wanting, the play is insipid to a large portion of the audience. It seems that the dramatists must either continue to gratify this taste, or become bankrupt in the attempt to purify the stage.

The truth of these observations is substantially admitted by Schlegel, when he says, "From the nature of the dramatic art, the poet must put much into the mouths of his characters, of which he does not himself approve; and he conceives that his own sentiments should be appreciated, from the spirit and connexion of the whole. It may again happen, that a piece is perfectly inoffensive with respect to single speeches, and that they defy all censorship, while upon the whole, it may be calculated to produce the most dangerous effects. We have, in our times, seen but too many plays favourably received throughout Europe, overflowing with ebullitions of good-heartedness, and traits of magnanimity, and in which, notwithstanding, a mind of any penetration could not mistake the concealed aim of the writer to sap the

foundations of moral principles, and the respect for whatever ought to be held in veneration by men; and by that means, to make the dissolute effeminacy of his contemporaries, the panders to his success.”\*

The prevalence of a sound morality among the people, is the strongest defence to a republican government, against anarchy and dissolution. The structure and genius of our government demand, for its safety and perpetuity, the controlling influence of sound principles and healthy moral feelings. This is the pledge of our security. And the importance of it cannot be too frequently nor too earnestly pressed upon the attention of the American people. The dissemination of knowledge, and the maintenance of religious institutions, are the props on which, as a nation, we must and do rely for stability and prosperity. And the earnestness with which Washington, in his farewell address to the citizens of these States, urged this consideration, shows how deeply convinced he was of its truth and importance.

Whatever, therefore, tends to the encou-

\* Schlegel's *Dramatic Literature*, pp. 20, 21.

ragement of vice and licentiousness, whatever opposes itself to religion and pure morality, does, to the extent of its influence, endanger the liberties of the country. The causes of a nation's downfall are often unobserved in their origin. Their influence is silently exerted, and constantly increasing. Their ultimate tendency is not perceptible to the mass of the people; and they are, consequently, incredulous as to the existence and efficacy of such causes. Unlike conspiracy, sedition, or rebellion, they are commonly moral in their nature, and for this reason, are not so likely to arrest public attention, or excite general alarm. Hence, the moral causes of national destruction are less apt to be guarded against, and on this account are most to be dreaded. The fair fabric is undermined before one note of alarm is sounded. Institutions which have awed the world, while they commanded its admiration, have crumbled to dust at the touch of effeminacy, indolence, luxury, licentiousness, and irreligion. These are the silken cords which have bound hand and foot, the once free and brave of

other nations, that now live only on the page of history.

Marcus Scaurus built a theatre at Rome, which cost a million of pounds sterling, and which contained thirty thousand spectators. Pliny says of this celebrated edifice, that it proved more fatal to the manners and the simplicity of the Romans, than all the proscriptions and the wars of Sylla had done to the inhabitants of the city.

While we by no means charge either upon the actors or the patrons of the drama, *any design* whatever, to jeopard the civil privileges we all enjoy in common with them, yet, if the tendency of theatrical exhibitions be to promote licentiousness, effeminacy, and immorality among the people, it becomes a serious question of duty, what shall be done to counteract their influence? In this country the people are the seat of power. The people make our laws, the people govern the nation. And if this fountain of authority becomes corrupt, where is our security against misrule, anarchy, and ruin? Our government is a great political brotherhood. Each man's interest is bound up with that of all the rest,

while it is, at the same time, at the mercy of all the rest. We rely for safety and protection upon mutual confidence and good will. Hence, each man becomes the lawful guardian of all the rest. It is both his interest and his duty to watch, to counsel, and to admonish those to whom he has entrusted his liberties and property; and to receive from them the same friendly offices of kindness and fidelity.

How narrowly does the creditor watch the habits and conduct of his debtor, in whose credit and success in business is involved his own fortune? Should he discover in him habits of intemperance, of idleness, of dishonesty, or of extravagance, ought he not to be alarmed and concerned? Is it not both his duty and his privilege to counsel and admonish him? And are not we, as a people, all mutual debtors and creditors to one another, in a different sense? Whatever, therefore, affects the moral character of the people, affects the rights, privileges and interests of each individual. This is the theory of our government; and who that believes in the licentious and corrupting tendency of the

stage, can, or should be indifferent to it? We say again, that it is a question of no ordinary magnitude, what shall be done to counteract its influence? The evil is a moral one, and the remedy must be such too. The municipal restrictions of the theatre are all vain and nugatory; and perhaps are designed to be so, as far as they relate to the suppression of it. Perhaps the tax imposed is designed, rather to swell the treasury than to suppress an evil. The rule by which this tax seems to be graduated is this, that it shall not be so heavy as to close the doors of the theatre, and yet it shall be heavy enough to become a pecuniary object with those who impose it.

We are in principle opposed to this taxation of an evil. Such a tax supposes the thing taxed to be an evil. The same is supposed by the tax upon the retailers of spirituous liquors. They are both regarded professedly, as evils, and only to be tolerated by a pecuniary compensation.

If the theatre be an evil to the community, it is a moral evil, and one which cannot be compensated by dollars and cents. The morals of a community are not a marketable

commodity, to be bought and sold at pleasure. The theatre is as much an evil after the payment of the tax as before it. The morals of the people suffer the same injury, whether taxed or not. And the tax itself looks very much like "the wages of unrighteousness." A moral evil can not be graded by a pecuniary scale.

What would be thought of selling for a tax, the privilege of infecting a city with the small-pox? If incendiaries were taxed, and their vocation thus legalized, there would be far more consistency, because the tax might be so graduated as to cover the loss of property. But what would be thought of taxing a conspirator, or the mover of a sedition, and thus legalizing their calling? Can money compensate for the loss of life, or the loss of our liberties? And yet it is implied in the taxation of actors, and the retailers of ardent spirits, that the loss of the virtue and morality of a community may be thus compensated.

The power to restrict an evil, implies the power of prohibiting it altogether, for restriction is a limited prohibition. If the theatre be an evil, and if the civil authorities feel

bound to legislate on the subject, let them prohibit it, either directly by a law to that effect, or indirectly by imposing a tax so heavy, as virtually to suppress it. The former method, however, is preferable, as it is more candid and consistent.

If, on the other hand, the theatre be a school of virtue, or even an innocent recreation, why tax it at all? Why not tax museums, public halls, or institutes for scientific lectures? Why has the theatre been selected out of all the public amusements, as one necessary to be restricted?\* It must be because, in the candid judgment of most men, it is an evil. And we regard every restriction of the theatre as evidence against it.

If the legislatures of the different states should notice the theatre at all, it should not be by taxation, but agreeably to the recommendation of Congress passed soon after the Declaration of Independence; let them suppress and prohibit it entirely.

If the legislatures should do nothing, as we presume they will not, then let every friend

\* The circus is regarded as only another species of the same amusement.

to virtue, every friend to his country, RESOLVE, *not to patronize the theatre.*

The Congress of these United States, in its virgin purity, solemnly and earnestly recommended to the several states, as we have before noticed, "to take the most effectual measures for the suppressing of theatrical entertainments, horse-racing, gaming, and such other diversions as are productive of idleness, dissipation, and a general depravity of principles and manners."

Here we find, that in the judgment of this nation, expressed at a time when her representatives may be justly supposed to have been actuated by the purest regard for her welfare, theatrical entertainments are to be considered in the same light as horse-racing and gaming, and as productive of idleness, dissipation, and depravity. Who were the men that composed that Congress, and that voted the above resolution? They are men whom we teach our children to venerate for wisdom, patriotism, and for every virtue that can adorn a citizen. They were men who had fought for our liberties, and who knew how to value and preserve them. They were men willing to

make the sacrifice of personal gratification, for the sake of promoting the public good. They were wise men, who foresaw the ultimate effects of theatrical exhibitions upon the destiny of this country. They lifted their warning voice. It remains for us to decide whether we will heed it, or perish by our own folly. The liberties of both Greece and Rome were doubtless sacrificed at the shrine of the drama.

The public morality kept the licentiousness of the stage in check as long as it could, but that morality was ruined by its influence, and the barrier being removed, effeminacy and corruption overspread the land. It was in the view of this, that Plato banished all dramatists from his ideal republic.

It is greatly to be regretted that some estimable citizens, whose friendship to virtue, morality, and good order, cannot be questioned, should lend their sanction to an entertainment so licentious in its tendency. The influence of example is immense, especially upon the minds of the young. When the moral and virtuous in a community, are seen with their families in the theatre, it em-

boldens others, who may have had some misgivings of conscience, as they entered its doors. To what extent the influence of such example is exerted, cannot be ascertained, but the responsibility of exerting it is by no means enviable.

That man who takes his children to the theatre, or even goes without them, and thus sets them the example, ought not to be surprised if they should ultimately disgrace his name, and bring down his grey hairs with sorrow to the grave.

It is no palliation for a patron of the stage to say, that in other respects his conduct is unexceptionable; this is rather an aggravation, as his influence is greater, and the force of his example is stronger on that account. How many young men have been ruined by such examples, eternity alone can reveal.

Let every man of standing and influence in society, ponder this matter. Let him count the cost, both to himself and others, before he ventures upon the responsibility of setting an example which may ultimately

involve in ruins the most promising of our youth.

We would ask such, whether they think more highly of a young man, because he is a visiter of the theatre? Is such a practice regarded by them as a recommendation? Why then encourage our youth by your example, in a practice which, while it detracts from their standing and respectability, at the same time exposes them to numerous and powerful temptations? It is in vain to charge the evil of attending the theatre upon what may be called an *excess*. There is no rule by which to determine what is, and what is not excess. Different minds will adopt different standards on this subject. If you sanction and countenance one degree of indulgence, you cannot prescribe limits to the youthful passion.

For every degree of indulgence, it will plead your example, and derive from it impunity and license. The conscience will, thereby, be measurably silenced, and the indulgence thought to be justified.

Who, among the respectable and influential in society, will take the noble stand, and set

the magnanimous example of sacrificing mere personal gratification for the public good, by abstaining altogether from theatrical entertainments? Who will throw himself into the breach, and strive to stay the moral pestilence, which threatens to destroy the fairest portion of our national heritage?

We call the licentious influence of the stage, a moral pestilence, because it extends to all ranks in society, and to all the relations of social and domestic life; producing evils, numerous, great, and lasting.

As it regards those who profess to be governed by the precepts and spirit of the Gospel, there can be but one opinion among all truly devout Christians, in relation to their duty in this matter. Both the world and the church unite in the sentiment, that it is inconsistent and improper for Christians to attend the theatre. The world may not always be willing to own it, but it is nevertheless true, that they cherish a secret contempt for the religion of a play-going professor. And they not unfrequently refer to such as examples of hypocrisy. Men of the world very generally know what to expect of Christians. And

their defects and aberrations from the path of rectitude, are rigidly observed. Let the reader take an example: let him imagine that the most pious and devout Christian of whom he has any knowledge, should begin to visit the theatre, and take delight in its entertainments; what would be thought of him? Would he not be regarded as having lost either his senses or his religion, or perhaps both? The Christian church has always borne its testimony against the stage. Even Gibbon, bears his testimony to the "pious horror," as he calls it, with which the theatre was regarded by the primitive Christians. And if the theatre be, what we have endeavoured to show it always has been, how could it be otherwise than offensive to the pious Christian? The tendency of the stage is to counteract and defeat the very ends which Christianity aims to accomplish. They are antagonist influences, and utterly irreconcilable. He that is a friend to the one must be an enemy to the other. The one aims to gratify the carnal heart, the other to mortify it. The one tends to cherish the evil passions of our nature, the other to sub-

due and eradicate them. What communion, then, has the one with the other?

Even if these sentiments should be regarded by any one, as indicative of a weak conscience, yet, seeing that so many of his brethren entertain them, the Christian is bound by his profession to regard such a conscience, and act agreeably to apostolical example and precept. "But when ye sin so against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, ye sin against Christ. Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend."\* This is the true principle on which that professor of religion should act in reference to this matter, who may regard the theatre as an innocent recreation. If he be unwilling to sacrifice personal gratification to the observance of this principle of Christian ethics, he has great reason to doubt the genuineness of his religion. To violate it, is not only a sin against his brethren, but it is expressly declared to be a "sin against Christ."

The question is not unfrequently asked,

\* 1 Cor. viii. 12, 13.

wherein consists the danger of attending theatres and balls? The answer we propose to give may, to some ears, sound strangely, but we believe it to be a sound one. We would reply, that you have not sufficient grace to attend these places of amusement, without serious injury. Your danger consists in a want of sufficient holiness of heart to withstand the temptations which there assail the passions.

A perfectly pure and holy being, might, if duty called him to it, attend such places without injury. But we apprehend no Christian on earth can do it, and not suffer: much less, an unconverted man.

A professor of religion, in order to justify his attending the theatre, may argue against the probability of receiving personal injury. But this is presumption. It is a sinful reliance upon human strength; and God may be thus tempted to leave you to yourself, that, by your fall, you may learn your weakness and your guilt. Such presumption grieves the Spirit of God, and may open upon the soul the flood-gates of temptation, till it is overwhelmed with misery, and ready to

despair. With what face or heart can he pray, "lead us not into temptation," who voluntarily exposes himself to the multiform and powerful temptations of the theatre? \* The Christian meets with temptations enough, in the the ordinary discharge of his duties, without straying into forbidden paths to encounter them. "Watch and pray, lest ye enter into temptation."

As it relates to the truly devout and pious, it is a great mistake to suppose that they abstain from theatrical entertainments merely for the sake of consistency, and through fear of church censure. Neither is it to such, a self-denial. The relish for such entertainments is destroyed. It is supplanted by a taste for holiness and heavenly communion. For such communion the wicked have no taste. Herein lies the difference between the two characters. It is no self-denial to the wicked to abstain from secret and social prayer. Neither is it a self-denial to the

\* "He that is not satisfied," says Bishop Wilson, "that plays are an unlawful diversion, let him, *if he dare*, offer up this prayer to God *before he goes*: 'Lord, lead me not into temptation, and bless me in what I am now to be employed.'"

pious Christian to avoid the haunts of profligacy and vice. The Spirit of God has wrought a change in the disposition and heart of the latter. For "if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new."\*

In conclusion, we would call the attention of the reader to the tendency and influence of those dramatic associations of young men, commonly called *Thespian Clubs*. Can there be a doubt in any mind that these associations beget and cherish a taste for theatrical entertainments? Not only is this true in regard to the members themselves, but also in regard to those who witness their exhibitions. We could name instances where these clubs have directly led to the establishment of theatres in places, where otherwise they would not have been sustained for a long time to come, if ever.

If a theatre be injurious to the morals of a community, whatever leads to, and encourages it, becomes *particeps criminis*. Young

\* 2 Corinthians, v. 17.

men of respectability, intelligence, and talents, may, by forming such associations, unwittingly become the foes to the public weal. We suggest, therefore, whether they should not be discouraged, as ultimately leading to evil.

Such is poor human nature in its lapsed state, that what, under other circumstances, might be a rational and innocent amusement, is now fraught with serious detriment to all parties concerned. Let the lovers of good order, of social virtue, and of domestic peace, weigh these considerations, and act agreeably to the dictates of a wise discretion, and of a clear conscience.

What has now been said of Thespian Clubs will apply with but little abatement, if any, to the practice of converting school-boys and collegians into temporary actors, and requiring them to perform plays at their public examinations. The tendency of this practice has, we are persuaded, been overlooked by the wise and the good who have sanctioned it. This practice existed even among the rigid Puritans. We find that the

Rev. Samuel Shaw, who was silenced by the act of uniformity, was chosen principal of the free school in *Ashby de la Zouch*. His biographer states, that he endeavoured to make the youth, that were under his care, in love with piety, to principle them in religion betimes, by his good advice. Yet he fell into the error of which we are now speaking. It appears that he wrote two Comedies; one entitled "Words made visible, or Grammar and Rhetoric;" the other, "The different humours of Men." These two pieces, says his biographer, were acted by his own scholars for their diversion, and for the entertainment of the town and neighbourhood at Christmas-time. We admit, therefore, that good men have sanctioned the practice; but we think that the authority in favour of it, is not greater than the argument against it. Let those who have the charge of youth, ponder well this subject, and observe its tendency to create and foster a taste for the amusements of the stage.

We now submit this whole subject, with its facts and arguments, to the judgment of a

candid public. Let us all so decide, and so act in this matter, that a death-bed review of our course, may bring with it no self-reproach, no agonizing fears of a future retribution.

THE END.







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