The
Decline of the Drama.

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Doubtless it appears remarkably singular upon superficial examination, that, while the present age is making such wonderful progress in almost all the arts and sciences towards a millennium of civilization, the genius of poetry should be less powerful than it was in a more undeveloped state of society. Especially this would seem true, when we recall the luxuriant growth in the remaining field of literature. For prose, having first received the plastic touch of a formative style scarcely two hundred years ago, has rapidly arisen by careful cultivation to astonishing productiveness and beauty. History, criticism and the novel in particular have attained to a degree of perfection never before known. Yet it cannot be denied, that for more than two centuries the poetical talent of the English has
been upon the decline. Naturally enough lyrical poetry has been affected least of all by the ravages of time; for expressing as it does the feelings and passions of the moment its dithyrambic forms will always be moulded in harmony with the movements of the soul. It is in the drama that we are to look for the greatest fall from its pristine vigor, and consequently it is here that we would be most surprised on seeing the discrepancy. But upon a more careful investigation into its nature and the elements necessary to its success, our astonishment immediately ceases; for we find ample cause why it should have halted in its majestic progress and drifted along with a less vigorous animation. We shall attempt to trace some of the more powerful influences which have led to its decline.

In the first place the general nature of the drama has materially changed since its golden
age during the time of Shakespeare, while at a certain period of its existence it even assumed a licentious and immoral tone in direct contradiction to its primitive virtuous and elevating cast. At present, it is true, it has emerged from the lecherous character given it by Wycherly, Congreve, Farquhar, Vanbrugh, &c., but the religious spirit, which then became entirely divorced from it, has never since been more than partially reconciled. One of the greatest oppositions it meets today is from a numerous class of sectarians who strenuously maintain that it has a uniformly immoral tendency. Supposing this defect exists only in the over-pious imagination, it nevertheless illustrates the fact that the drama has not now the favorable conditions for its development, which it had at an earlier date. There is another change in the vital part of its nature, however, which is unmistakable. Year by year the public taste becomes
more and more perverted by the opera, the melo-
drama and all manner of farcical exhibitions
which constitute the lower species of the drama,
while pure tragedy and comedy receive scarcely
an iota of encouragement. Thus we see there is
a vast change in its character and that every va-
riation has been detrimental to its true genius.
But the fact that the drama has undergone mod-
amorphoses during its career, leads to an underly-
ing principle which explains these transformations
and clearly shows that all have proceeded from
legitimate causes.

Probably the foremost of the agencies that
assist in the progress of the drama is found in the
patronizing and encouraging spirit of the age, which
stimulates to redoubled exertions. With few excep-
tions authors certainly will not have an eager
and inspiring desire to cultivate any field of lit-
erature where there is no expectation of a
bountiful harvest either of applause or of remuneration. Moreover if there is not a poetical spirit pervading the whole body of the people and a taste and talent fostered for the drama, it would soon become an anomaly, if a genius were to spring up capable of mastering the art. It would be not only a strange result of mental training but also a process opposed to the very idea of evolution. Let us strengthen this position by testimony derived from an historical reference. Risk as the Persians, Arabians and other Mohammedans are in poetical feeling and inspiration, a native drama is wholly unknown in their extensive dominions. Such a distaste for it has been generated, that it is even incorporated in the Koran, and they are utterly forbidden histrionic representation. Such is the state of the drama where the national taste has permeated the laws; and, to anticipate somewhat, an approach to this situation has frequently occurred.
for similar reasons in countries where it had recently flourished in oriental magnificence. It is well known that the puritans of England brought it to such extremities. We shall take one more example, but from an European source, where the national taste has been expressed only tacitly. The Portuguese have evinced all the poetical elements required for a finished drama except the one under consideration, and especially in the epic Camoëns has adorned the literature of Europe with his admirable Susiád. Yet their drama has never emerged from its hatching infancy. Under such circumstances we surely cannot expect an appreciable dramatic development, and yet the conditions have come from the dominant spirit of the age, or, perhaps better in these instances, from the spirit of the nation. These illustrations have a particular bearing upon the dependency which the drama has
for its existence upon the predilections of a people. At various periods in England allied principles have affected it almost to a similar extent. If it were necessary to show how it varies with this taste, it would not be a difficult matter to explain its fluctuations before and after the shutting of the theatres, as well as its present tendency to a superfluous use of musical composition and pantomimic action. Some of the results of the former are stamped upon its face to this day. We believe all of the more marked features of its change have grown out of the applauding patronage of the people. It is they who invariably damn, or praise into success, a particular species as well as a particular play.

That the popular spirit of the English has appreciably declined in its poetic, and especially in its dramatic character, has, possibly,
been much more than intimated. Upon comparing its present condition with its state during the rise and progress of the drama, we observe a striking difference in a number of aspects. For now we find the drama condemned by a large body of people, as has already been remarked, while a larger portion is indifferent about its existence. Even its largest supporting element prefers to witness the representation of it in its lowest character. But little more than two centuries ago there was not a Christian heart which was not mortified at its licentiousness, and when those devout protestants seized the reins of government, they banished it from the stage. That it should become more perverted upon occasion after such rigid treatment, was perfectly natural. Let us now turn to its origin and development, and notice the contrast in the public spirit which
formulated laws for the drama.

If we were to form comprehensive, or even seminal theories of the origin of the drama from the character it almost invariably assumes at the present, we would be liable to wander into a labyrinth of errors; for its prevailing cast of character is now of a worldly nature, while in the first years of its infancy it was apprenticed to the service of religion and was the peculiar care of the clergy. Like the theatre of the Greeks, it arose from the popular observance of religious and festal rites by an organic embodiment of physical and mental aspirations, only the one was due to a Christian, and the other to a pagan influence. The Dionisie and Harvest Horns on the one hand have a striking correspondence to the Mysteries and Rural Festivals on the other. Let it suffice for our purpose,
however, that the drama sprang from religious and festive sources with a gradual inclination to a worldly character, as is exemplified in its transitions through Mysteries or Miracle-plays, Passion-plays, Moralities, Car-nival-plays, and Interludes to its proper form. At its birth, we have said, it was fostered by the church; and as the sovereign pontiff was then dictator both in spiritual and temporal affairs, the church had the most widely commanding influence in the kingdom. In fact a remarkable number of the subjects were ordained in the priesthood, while only an impotent few disregarded its commands. In this way the whole body of the people became eager spectators of the undeveloped drama; and the impulse its literature received while it yet interested such a great number of persons, was naturally augmented as it
allowed free scope in the choice and treatment of its subjects. The worldly spirit of men was then gratified as well as the religious spirit, and the additional charm gained additional devotees. This harmonious combination of spiritual and temporal elements continued well nigh up to its culmination under Shakespeare. But when the worldly influence expelled the religious, there came to be a constant conflict for years between the very factors which had united to produce the rise of the drama. With rare exceptions they have never since coalesced, as they did in France in the production and representation of Racine's Athalie and Esther. It is certain that the popular interest has not yet been revived as it once existed.

In Greece the drama never lost the distinctive traces of its religious origin. This
with the fact that the national poetical spirit
never subsided until the state was dismem-
bered by invaders, forms a striking contrast to
the state of dramatic interest at present. Dur-
ing her whole life she threw her very soul
into the study and cultivation of the beau-
tiful and the ideal. Every member thrilled
with a poetical pulse. Being national rites
at which all were encouraged in attending, the
public coffers were drawn upon to defray
the expenses of theatrical representation, and
magnificent theatres were erected for the ac-
commodation of the multitudes and the conven-
ience of the actors. The result was that poetry
has never had such a luxuriant and perfect
growth elsewhere as in Greece. Aeschylus, Soph-
icles, Euripides and Aristophanes have been apo-
thecized by subsequent dramatists. How little the
environments of the drama today resemble
those of its classical progenitors! Within a few centuries, proscribed, received back into favor, rejected again and then fondled anew, it has passed periods of precarious existence.

During the most productive age of any intensely national dramatic literature either of the Classical or Romantic school, there has universally been a youthful, vigorous spirit throughout the nation such as can come only from a previously dormant condition. It was the case with Greece as previously observed; it was true of France under Corneille, Racine and Molière, of Spain under Calderon, Lope de Vega and Cervantes, of Italy under Metastasio, Alfieri and Goldoni, of Germany under Lessing, Goethe and Schiller; and it was not less true of England under Shakespeare, Beaumont & Fletcher and Marlowe. We do not mean that of late years energetic research and permutation of the
public mind has become less active. Probably stagnation of ideas has never been more alien to a people than at present. But at those times the growth in a commercial and political sense was not as now a gradual movement which fortified itself at each successive step like the nature of poetry itself, as all seemed to spring at once into the freshness of life, just as the beautiful flowers shoot suddenly up from the sluggish bosom of the soil. The whole influential body appeared to march ahead in civilization: the arts, sciences, professions and trades had not yet been relegated by differentiation to their exclusive dominions. The astronomer then knew something of woodcraft, and the mercer could discourse fluently on magic as well as on archery. Each person, being left to depend largely on his own resources, was masters of a dozen crafts, and,
as the arts were yet but partially developed, he understood the brief technology of a dozen
more. As a consequence the drama was not composed of antiquities, scientific subtleties
and unknown allusions, which it would re-
quire half a life to comprehend.

We are thus naturally led to the discuss-
on of the twofold prosaic nature of specialties—
its opposition to a uniform poetical spirit, and
the corrosion it produces upon poetical lan-
guage. In regard to the first we must say
that its action has been of a violent na-
ture. Instead of leaving an universal sym-
pathy of brotherhood springing from knowledge
and occupations of a kindred character, it
has created a wide dissimilarity of views and
inclinations. By its scientific dissections, what
was once extremely poetical to all, has become
extremely prosaic to a majority. A multitude
of old graceful images and expressions have become obsolete or lost all their peculiar charm, while only a few narrow or pedantic ones have been discovered to supply their places. It may be a fact, that in the aggregate, since many unoriginal elements of the past have been refined into beauty, there is as much poetical spirit at present throughout the world as ever existed; but the sum total of the stock must be split up into a thousand different divisions, each having little in common with another. The farmer, the merchant, the doctor, the lawyer, the minister, the scientist and an infinite number of other classes must each have his own professional drama as the whole kingdom formerly had its national drama. Holmes' poem on "Evening by a Tailor" furnishes a humorous illustration of the fact. Farther than this, since the English have come to be "a nation of shop-keepers," our power of
appreciating and experiencing true dramatic action has been wonderfully impaired. Shut up by special professions and occupations from the thrilling movement of the world, our natures grow more and more sluggish and exact, more philos-
matic and philosophical we might say. The dulness of the printed page now supplies the animation that once swelled upon the eye and the ear. We are in this manner not only deprived of a substantial foundation for a drama whose scenes are laid in the present, but the pleasure that should arise from genuine tragic or comic action if the past is also unduly lessened. This is a sufficient ex-
planation for the disappearance of a play from the stage after an extended number of years; and it furnishes a key to the rareness at present of the representations of the masterpieces of the golden age of our drama. In other words we say "it is not adapted to our modern stage": No one scène
ly will contend that recent dramatic talent can compete in any way with that of Shakespeare, Massinger, Marlowe, Beaumont & Fletcher, Ben Jonson, Webster, Ford and a galaxy of others; and yet their nearly faultless tragedies and comedies have been almost unexceptionally crowded from the stage by vastly inferior later productions. What need of stronger proof that our creative and receptive poetical spirit have both come to be of a less intensity? We shall now see that specialization, which perverts out every poetical germ in all the departments of life, has also, in combination with other influences, greatly injured our language as regards its successful use in dramatic composition.

A second requisite for comedy and tragedy, which is well nigh as indispensable as a general poetical spirit pervading the masses, is the possession of a poetical language. It is not only
necessary that the vocabulary should be extensive, beautiful and expressive, but the regular forms of expression and the idioms must be endowed with a subtle grace and pervading energy, if we would be adequately moved by language. It is true that savages and barbarians have their species of drama where audible signs are scarcely used even in the most exciting catastrophe; but when the drama makes any pretensions to great merit, the poetical language, embodying the more poetical concept, becomes the most conspicuous portion, and in the classical school determines the course of the action to a wonderful extent. It would hardly be incorrect to say, that the greater part of our beautiful and expressive words, phrases and varied forms of sentences have been introduced and naturalized by means of poetry. Pure and lofty sentiments lose half their force and ideality
unless invested with equally pure and lofty language.

In the earlier stages of the drama our language was characterized as has just been described. Manners and customs, arts, sciences and professions varied approximately in a uniform degree throughout the masses, so that the same national speech was easily understood by all contemporaries. Moreover, since it arose from a desire to perpetuate bold and noble deeds alone, the words and expressions were vigorous and replete with poetical action. When science began to unfold, however, and specialization delegated each class to a different field of labor, an inappreciable miscellaneity of meaning was created in one portion of the vocabulary, while another was flooded with straw feast of words. It would be difficult to estimate which of the two influences has affected the poetry of our language most materially. On the
One hand, by the vast division and distribution of human work and study, nearly the whole time of one class of people is occupied in a limited sphere where only a few of the entire population have access. Here they immediately become familiar with a whole vocabulary of technical terms which form an important part of their daily conversation but which only gradually creep out into the broader world, and, having little leisure or inclination for the acquisition of general knowledge, they never get sufficiently acquainted with the body of our language to appreciate the beauties beyond their immediate vocabulary. In this way a host of newly popular words and vulgarisms is rapidly entering our language, while, at the same time, the stately words and phrases of an earlier formation are as rapidly losing their force and beauty with the dictating multitude. On the other hand
science is constantly restricting and varying the
meaning of words. One strong, expressive term
is too general in its import to suit scientific
purposes until its whole poetical life is crush-
ed out by narrowing its content. Another has a
special notion attached to it from a former
theory; but, as theories and most scientific
superstructures are changing from year to year,
the word must take upon itself a new con-
struction at each successive revolution. If
true poetry remains untarnished in words
after such fluctuations of meanings, it is more
than should be expected of its evanescent nature.
The preponderance of representations embell-
ished with music at the present day unmistak-
ably shows that so much of the poetry of our lan-
guage has been expressed and evaporated, that it
has become necessary to call in the aid of
music to assist in retaining its former influence
over our passions and imaginative faculties. What deficiency there has come to be in the power of our language and in the poetical and creative spirit of the age, is sought to be supplied by an excessive use of foreign elements. The tendency of the whole modern drama bears a marked resemblance to that of Greece after its corruption and to that of Rome during its entire career. Both ended in pantomime, declamation, imitation and criticism.

To make a thorough examination into the causes of the decline of the drama, if we were able, would be an interesting task, but of almost limitless extent, since prominent as well as subtle influences affecting both its nature and its conditions ramify every department of life. But we shall be content to remark one more factor operating upon it with a sinister effect. It is imitation, which is one of the
most fruitful sources that lead to the decline of the drama. When the Alexandrians dissected and analyzed the Greek models to construct rules for the composition of tragedies, the art immediately fell; and the fact that the Romans imitated the Greek drama without creating a national species of their own, is considered a sufficient reason why it should never have appeared better than under Terence, Plautus and Seneca. And it has ever been the same in whatever form of imitation. It was due to this that the Classical school lost its supremacy in such few years after the origin of the Romanic school which progressed so rapidly until it was bound with the shackles of imitation; and it is because of less stringent rules and a less tendency to imitation, that the Romantic still maintains a superiority. It is in the very nature of imitation that it should not improve upon the
original, nor even equal if except in very rare occurrences. Remarkable examples of this are
found in Goethe's Iphigenia and Schiller's Bride of Messina. Both authors were perfectly inclined
with classical learning, and yet a critic will readily detect blemishes in their classical concep-
tions. In the sister art of painting we also find
that Michael Angelo, Raphael and Titian failed to
fill the world with astonishment and admiration
until they wedded their original and creative pow-
ers with their skill in imitation. Still, fruitful
as imitation is to the development of the drama,
it has been well nigh uniformly followed since
Shakespeare produced his wonderful creations, and
it is a significant fact that the drama en-
tered upon its decline with the following
generation. Dryden, Otway, Conyngham—nearly all
of the subsequent dramatists have used his
works as prototypes for imitation. We are
pleased to exclude Sheridan, Goldsmith and a few others from the immense number, since it came from a reliance upon their own genius, that they gave such an impulse to the decreasing movement of the drama and by their success showed that originality can do what imitation fails to perform.

Almost the whole of Europe may be characterized by a decline in the drama similar to that in England, inasmuch as like causes and effects have been in existence there also. It is especially true of France, Germany, Spain and Italy. In each there was a gradual development of the drama from religious and festive rites into its finished form. In each also there has been a strong decline after reaching the culminating point, so that today in the more civilized nations of the globe tragic and comic genius of the highest order
is most probably not to be found. Yet we have seen that the dramatist should not be solely held accountable for the decline of his art. The spirit of the age has dictated forms and rules which he must observe, if he would gain the applause of his contemporaries; and we trust we have shown ample cause why this spirit is now at changed, that he is no longer furnished with adequate dramatic action and allowed the necessary scope and license both in prose and in poetry, in form, in language, in chaste and licentious expressions, in passions, in scenes, in imagination, in the morality and occupation of the dramatic personal; in short unbridled freedom in the whole domain of dramatic poetry, as long as he shall use it for a harmless or moral end. The golden ages, which are synonymous with the ages of poetry, have turned into an age of steel. Science,
philosophy, invention and systematic research hold sway over the realms which once were the
pelves of poetry, and the new natures they produce
in me demand new means of satisfaction.
We do not wish to say, that the insurpa-
tion of poetry by scientific and other elements
has been a detriment to our times. Far from
it. Certainly this one class of amusement
and instruction has greatly decreased in gen-
eral value; but the comfort, convenience,
pleasure and manifold other blessings aris-
ing from the cultivation of the arts and
sciences and a fuller form of civilization
greatly overbalance the loss we have sus-
tained in the one particular. It has simply
been our endeavor to show that dramatic
Talent of the highest order is incompatible
with the altered state of affairs.