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ARTICLE VI.

ENGLISH DRAMATIC VERSE AFTER SHAKESPEARE.

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THIS era includes the comprehensive period between Elizabeth and Victoria, an era of over three centuries, as contrasted with the half-century of the drama of the Golden Age, in which contrast is found a sufficiently striking difference between the dramatic character and product of the respective periods. There is a sense, indeed, in which English literature may be said to have had but one specifically dramatic age, all Post-Shakespearian dramatic product being properly classified as secondary. In this respect, English dramatic verse is strikingly distinct from English lyric as a steadily progressive literary evolution, and more in keeping with English epic, which reached as high a status in the poetry of Milton in the seventeenth century as it has done in any subsequent era.

Hence, it may, at the outset, be noticed that it is quite impossible to speak of the Historical Development of the Modern English Drama, as we speak of that of Modern English Prose or English Lyric, in the sense of discovering a progressive evolution of better and better product. If we call the Pre-Elizabethan Age preparative, as it was, and the Elizabethan, culminative, then, all that is Post-Elizabethan must be, at its best, but a little more than a reproduction, in varied and somewhat inferior form, of antecedent product. When it is said by Ward, "that all literary growths are continuous," it

would be sufficient to show in the case of the later English drama that it is not strictly a growth at all, but rather a literary history with its diversified features of progress and decline. It is this fact that Ward himself has in mind when he adds: "In literary, as in all other history, it is generally difficult to say where growth passes into decline, and where, in the midst of exuberant life, the first signs announce themselves of the beginning of the end." In other words, growth had ceased by "passing into decline," and it becomes the object of the student's researches to follow carefully the course of the decline and note any deviations from it to that which is better.

In any case, the first fact of interest as to the drama before us is, that it is a record of decline, however complex and concealed the causes of such a decline may be. These are found, in part, (*a*) in the uniform principle of literary reaction, (*b*) in the increasing emergence of non-dramatic conditions, and (*c*) in the necessary limitations of the human mind, making it incapable of the prolonged exercise of such a high order of literary genius, the literary history, in the main, following the course of the civic and social history of the nation. Be the causes what they may, what is called the Decadence of the Drama had definitely begun. The volume "From Shakespeare to Pope," by Gosse, is substantially applicable to dramatic poetry, as a specific form, well called "a mundane" order of poetry, seeking its sources in purely secular and temporal conditions. Saintsbury classifies the Plays of the century into four periods,—those of Marlowe, Shakespeare, Beaumont and Fletcher, and Massinger, respectively. The last of these is the era of decadence, becoming more and more decadent as the century closes. The Shakespearian Plays of the period are sufficient proof of such a

decadence, evincing its progress by an ever-increasing number of mere dramatic adventures and poetasters. What is known among the critics as the Artificial English Drama now prevailed, when the masters had disappeared, and the novices had assumed control.

THE EARLY STUART AND THE PURITAN PERIOD.

As we enter this era, including the reigns of James I. and Charles I., there is an explanation of decadence, as seen in the Loss of National Prestige. "Queen Elizabeth and the glories with which her name was identified seem all but forgotten." "Had England, at the time," writes Ward, "taken a resolute part in the great European struggle, the traditions of a great national epoch must have counted for much." "As it was," he adds, "the pacific policy of James, and the uncertainty in the councils of Charles, doomed England to virtual inaction in the midst of a tremendous European crisis, and the ancient glories rusted in the national consciousness." The stirring memories of Elizabethan days, of the Spanish Armada, and the triumphs of British arms were but dimly recalled by the Stuart kings. Hence the drama was out of sympathy with the current thought of the time, either at home or on the Continent. It was denationalized, isolated, and unsympathetic, localized in area, and positively restricted in the free expression of its national life. In the reign of James I., it is true, some of the old Elizabethan playwrights were still at work,—Beaumont, Fletcher, Jonson, Massinger, and Webster; as, in that of Charles I., there were Ford and Johnson, Massinger and Marlowe. The premonitions of decline, however, were at hand, hastened by the political disturbances of the time, and the approach of the Puritan non-dramatic era. Though some encouragement to the higher drama was given by James I., and though the tastes of

Charles I. and his queen were somewhat literary and in sympathy with true dramatic development, the environment was, in the main, unfriendly. The flagrant corruptions of the Court of James had left its baneful influence upon that of his successor; wider and wider distances were drawn between the classes and the masses. The best elements were in abeyance to the worst, until the English stage and drama were at length overwhelmed by the outbreak of the Revolution of 1640. Manifestly, the higher drama could not flourish under such conditions, despite the efforts of the last of the Elizabethans to sustain it. Even in comedy, the comedy of character gave way to the comedy of manners and intrigue and verbal artifice. Playwrights vied with each other in mere fertility of production and in the inverse ratio of its literary merit. Despite the efforts of Herbert and Chillingworth, Fuller, Taylor and Milton, the moral atmosphere of the time reached such a measure of defilement that it was impossible for a man of conscience "to draw his breath freely."

The culmination of this series of movements expressed itself in the Puritan Period of 1649–60, which, though brief, is crowded with critical events, historical and literary; stands midway between the monarchy of the early Stuarts and the anarchy of the later; contains within itself the extremes of evil and of good, and is, even yet, in all its bearings, something of a puzzle to literary and civic historians. Of dramatic history, it may be said that it had none. Seven years prior to its opening, in 1642, theaters were closed by due process of law, and not re-opened until the accession of Charles II., in 1660. It was, indeed, a penal offense even to be a spectator of plays. This is not the place in which to discuss the Puritan protest against the English drama, the most charitable conclusion being that, with pure motive and a

just occasion in the excesses of the time, some modification of their drastic method might have conduced to wholesome issues. What is known as the Anti-Theatrical literature of the time is of this violent and extreme character, culminating in Prynne's "Histrio-Mastix" (The Players' Scourge), in which he holds that all plays originate with the devil, and contribute directly to his dominance in the world. In an age when Taylor and Baxter and Bunyan were writing, it is not strange that, by way of reaction from the profligacy that had prevailed, these serious-minded Covenanters should have denounced all plays and players as of the devil, and in their zeal for Christian honor have exhibited an unchristian temper.

Nor is it any the less strange that, when the Puritans had had their day, and Charles II. returned from France with the latest schooling in Parisian ethics, all prior records should have been surpassed, and the English theater, now re-opened, should have become the synonym for mental imbecility and moral debauchery.

THE LATER STUART DRAMA—RESTORATION DRAMA.

This extends from the restoration of Charles II., in 1660, to the death of Dryden, in 1700, continuing its influence, more or less directly, into the reign of Queen Anne on to its close in 1714. As already suggested, in accounting for the special type of drama introduced at this time, scarcely any further cause need be assigned than that of Reaction. The Restoration itself was a reactionary movement in English politics and life, as contrasted with the immediately preceding Puritan Period. The restrictions of the Commonwealth could no longer be tolerated by a monarch and a court of the Restoration type, and this unbridled desire for fullest liberty naturally expressed itself in the re-opening of the theaters, in 1660. Just as the Puritans, at the opening of the inter-regnum, in

1649, represented a reactionary anti-dramatic movement against the antecedent dramatic order; so, in the later Stuart era, we note a reactionary dramatic movement against the antecedent anti-dramatic order, literary history here repeating itself, and in obedience to what we are wont to call an inevitable law of providence. Short as the era is, its position midway between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries of English history and literature gives it a character and influence altogether above its intrinsic merits, and makes it all the more essential that the interpretation of its place should be a just one.

Mr. Gosse, in describing the conditions of the English Drama after the Restoration, remarks, "that the drama took a place in English Literature during the last third of the seventeenth century relatively more prominent than it has ever taken since." "Certain sections of society," he adds, "were passionately addicted to theatrical amusements. Their appetite had been whetted by eighteen years of enforced privation." This imperious demand, of course, created a corresponding measure of supply. One of the chief reasons why dramatic literature now so prevailed was the specifically practical one of its immediate money returns. Scores of playwrights had been impatiently waiting for just such a demand for their theatrical product, and when the conservative policy of the Puritans gave way to the free indulgence of the Stuart Era these poverty-stricken authors emerged from their retreats with manuscripts in readiness, and the English market was fairly burdened with the weight of their dramatic wares. This is one reason, among others, why, on the one hand, so many authors of the day were playwrights, and, on the other, why so few of them attained to anything like literary eminence in dramatic verse.

If we inquire as to the characteristics of these Restoration

Plays, they may all be summarily expressed in the one word Servility,—mental, moral, literary, and official. The Restoration was that of Charles II. and his court, and monarchy itself was out-monarchied by the manner in which that which was written, in prose and verse, was written in abject deference to the Stuart will. It was the king and the courtiers and their immediate followers who suggested the themes and the general tenor of the tragedy and comedy; who smiled or frowned as the plays pleased or displeased them; on whom authors and actors were alike dependent for their daily living, in that they created by their influence the public demand for the stage. The drama was thus, out and out, servile: a drama of the court and the crown, and not of the great English commonalty; a drama of civil and religious partisanship, and not of unshackled opinion in church and state; mentally and morally inferior, because servile and incapable, thereby, of rising to anything like poetic primacy. It was, to this extent, wholly un-Elizabethan. It is in keeping with this view that Ward writes, "Had the Restoration drama been in true sympathy with the Elizabethans, it might have reached a commanding level of excellence," by which he means, had it been more catholic and independent, it would have been nobler and thoroughly in line with the best English traditions. "It is," he adds, "because it was untrue to these traditions that its history is that of a decay such as no brilliancy can conceal."

More specifically, he gives us a satisfactory triple explanation of this decline, when he states, that this later drama was "untrue to the higher purpose of the dramatic art, to the nobler tendencies of the national life, and to the eternal demands of the moral law." Each of these instances of unfaithfulness, it may be said, was but the result or evidence of that base servility that stifled all genius and patriotism and

art. When Collier issued, in 1698, his "Short View of the Profaneness and Immorality of the English Stage," it was not altogether against specific moral abuses that he was contending, but against the entire spirit and motive of the drama of his day as unworthy of the antecedent history of England, as un-English as it was un-Elizabethan. High dramatic art gave way to the lowest forms of Sentimental Comedy; and the direful teachings of Hobbes, that conscience is a myth, and right and wrong unfounded antitheses, became the current doctrine of the hour. It was the High Noon of imbecility and immorality, when the English stage, according to Henry Irving, was "a mere appendage of court life, a mirror of patrician vice hanging at the girdle of fashionable profligacy."

Of dramatists busily at work, in this intervening era, there is no lack, as almost every writer of any literary talent made the attempt, at least, to meet the increasing dramatic demand. Hence the names of Etherege, Aphra Behn, Davenant, Wycherley, Farquhar, Vanbrugh, Otway, Lee, Southerne and Congreve. High over all, in general and special gifts, the name of John Dryden stands, the semi-dramatic work of Milton; giving him, also, an historic place among the Restoration dramatists. Of these several authors it is not within our present purpose to speak. Suffice it to say, that they reveal, in part, the fact that dramatic literature was a representative poetic type of the time; that the great majority of these playwrights serve but to show what imposing proportions poetic mediocrity can assume, and to prove the truth of Ward's statement "that of all forms of literary art the drama can least reckon without its responsibilities." Here and there, in this vast volume of dramatic product, an author or a Play of distinctive merit appears, the nearest approximation to the excellence of Dryden appearing in the work of Congreve,

author of "The Mourning Bride," "The Double Dealer," "Love for Love," whom Dryden praises in unstinted terms, to whom Pope dedicates his Iliad, and of whom Voltaire says, "that he raised the glory of comedy to a greater height than any English writer before or since."

It was Dryden, however, who was the "hero of the age and the stage," as central in later Stuart literary history as Shakespeare was in the earlier, and Sheridan in the following era; a dramatic critic as well as composer; a writer of tragedies, comedies, prologues and epilogues; the accepted censor of his age; and, despite the ridicule of Buckingham in his "Rehearsal," possessed of undoubted literary genius, though often prostituted to the basest ends. It was reserved for Dryden to illustrate, at once, the servility and scurrility of the Stuart drama, and, also, to redeem its name from the charge of mental mediocrity. The attempt of Milton in his "Samson Agonistes" to take a part in this drama is as interesting as it is anomalous, as if, in the character of the last of the Elizabethans, he would recall his contemporaries to the forgotten traditions of their fathers; protest, in the name of truth and virtue, against the riotous rule of the Philistines in literature, and ominously point out to Charles II. the certain fate of those who set at naught the laws of God and man. In the same volume with "Paradise Regained," and issued in 1671, but a few years after the publication, in 1667, of "Paradise Lost," this great English champion of purity and truth persisted in uttering his message in the ears of a king and court utterly indifferent thereto, absorbed as they were in the dissolute dramas of Aphra Behn and Nathaniel Lee.

It is not strange that this order of things required nothing less than the Great Rebellion of 1688, to nullify, in part at least, its baneful influence and institute a new and better

order. The substitution of the House of Orange for the Stuart dynasty was not only the substitution of limited monarchy for absolutism, of Protestantism for Romanism, and of mental freedom for mental bondage, but it was the introduction of an entirely new spirit in literature, and, thus, of a distinctively preparative literary movement, as the later century approached. Even the Orange dramatists felt its influence, while the protestations of Collier became, at length, so effective that authors and actors alike were placed under bonds to keep within the limits of moral propriety. Dryden himself acknowledged the substantial truth of the charges against him, and, in the two years of his life yet remaining, did what he could to redeem his record and that of the age which he represented. In the closing year of the century, 1700, Dryden died, and the Restoration Drama passed into history. The way was now fully opened for the Augustan Era and the English Drama of the Eighteenth Century.

THE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY DRAMA.

In so far as time is concerned, this period extends from the opening of Queen Anne's reign, in 1702, well on toward the close of the reign of George III., its actual ending in 1820 taking us well into the first quarter of the century following. Hence, we notice, at the outset, that, in so far as the drama is concerned, much of the activity of the Stuart Era proper passed over into the eighteenth century, such dramatists as Wycherley, and Cibber, and Vanbrugh, and Farquhar, and Rowe producing plays within each era, thus serving to connect the drama of the two centuries. This is especially true as to English Comedy. As Ward states it, "Both what was weakest and what was brightest in the English Comedy of the Eighteenth Century already existed in the Seventeenth." Hence, it is urged, "that Goldsmith has a predecessor in

Farquhar, and that Sheridan is but the legitimate successor of Congreve and the adopter of Vanbrugh," the rise of Sentimental Comedy, as fairly attributed both to Steele and Cibber, finding thus its rightful place in the period preceding.

No student of this era can fail to note the dramatic influence of Dryden, in the sphere of comedy, the acknowledged leader of the Stuart Era. In so far as tragedy is concerned, these conclusions must be modified, the tragic excellence of the Age of Dryden finding no worthy successor nor parallel in the later age. "The tragedy of the Eighteenth Century," writes Saintsbury, "is almost beneath contempt, being, for the most part, a faint French echo or else transpontine melodrama, with a few plaster-cast attempts to reproduce an entirely misunderstood Shakespeare." Indeed, it may be said, that, although the revival of interest in the Shakespearian Drama, in the seventeenth century, was mainly due to the agency of Dryden, and, though actors such as Garrick and authors such as Rowe and Addison did what they could to reinstate the influence of this "great national genius," still, the drama of this century, especially in tragedy, cannot be said even to remind us of Shakespeare, either in content or spirit. The century is, in no sense, dramatic, as was the Elizabethan or even the Stuart Era. From the very opening of the century, literary interests assumed other and more absorbing types, partly due to changes in political sentiment and social life, and partly to a decided decadence of dramatic genius itself. If we seek for the causes of such a decadence, we note that the century opened as a distinctive Prose era, on the periodical side, as expressed in the *Spectator* and the *Tatler* and similar collections, while, within the province of poetry itself, the formal school of Pope was engaging the chief attention of the critics, and impressing itself upon the literature of the nation at large.

Thus, if we call for a list of our eighteenth-century dramatists, we shall be surprised to find that the number of names, all told, is a limited one, while that of the masters in the art may be reduced to here and there a name. According to Schlegel, a genius of the first rank in tragedy did not appear in the century. "Why has this revival of the admiration of Shakespeare," asks Schlegel, "remained unproductive for dramatic poetry," his suggestive answer being "that he has been too much the subject of astonishment, as an unapproachable genius who owed everything to nature and nothing to art." "Had he been considered," he adds, "more from an artistic point of view, it would have led to an endeavor to understand the principles which he followed in his practice and to an attempt to master them." The causes of the absence of Shakespearian genius in the eighteenth century lie deeper down, we submit, and farther back than this language of Schlegel's would argue. The fact of its absence is, however, a potent one. Here and there are visible traces of dramatic power, sufficient to awaken the interest of the inquiring student and make it possible for him to prophesy the near appearance of a better day. Not to mention the names of those already cited as properly belonging to both centuries, such as Congreve and Cibber, we note the names of Addison and Steele, and, especially, of Goldsmith and Sheridan, who may be said to be the two specially dramatic authors of the century proper, the dramatic translations of Goethe and Schiller by Scott and Coleridge, respectively, and the dramatic verse of Byron properly belonging to the succeeding age.

Of the dramatic genius of Addison, as seen in his "Cato," it may be said, that, despite the favor with which the tragedy was received by the Augustan public, it cannot justly be regarded as reaching anything more than average merit. Pre-

pared with a view to reinstate classical ideals in English Verse and, yet, prepared amid the political agitations of the time, it cannot be said to have been either a literary or a political success, its contemporary repute being strangely due to the fact that each of the warring factions of the day, the Whig and the Tory, insisted in claiming it as an exponent of its party principles, a tragedy full, as Ward expresses it, of "effective commonplaces" and so exalting French and classical models in dramatic composition as to throw discredit on the old Elizabethan models and thereby serve to check that Shakespearian movement in whose advance alone the future excellence of the English drama was to lie. With Addison, tragic composition was a left-handed and an unnatural exercise, his gifts and mission lying in quite other literary spheres.

Of Steele, author of "The Conscious Lovers," "the first English comedy," according to Schlegel, "that can be called moral," suffice it to say, that he shares, with Cibber, the honor of having introduced Sentimental Comedy, and, with Addison, the honor of having effectively rebuked the literary immorality of the age.

Goldsmith's dramatic work was not the ablest part of his product as a writer. Author of "The Good-natured Man," of which he himself was a signal example, and of the still abler composition "She Stoops to Conquer," it is just to say that each of them is a worthy expression of English Comedy, and holds its place even yet in general literary esteem. The first of them, according to Johnson, was "the best comedy seen on the English stage for forty years" (1728–68), while the second, according to Gosse, is "one of the great comedies of the world." What Goldsmith did, he did with high motive and on sound literary principles. All defects

conceded, his dramatic work is far above the average of his time, and may justly be cited in connection with that of Sheridan, the leading dramatic exponent of the time; author of "The Rivals," written at twenty-two, and of "The School for Scandal," written at twenty-four; known among critics "as the best existing English comedy of intrigue," each of them being still in favor on the boards of the English and the American theater. Based on the best examples of Restoration Comedy, and on such a model as Molière, they justly remind us of Elizabethan traditions, and justify a hopeful outlook into the following century.

THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY DRAMA.

This is a period so recent that but little need be said as to its type and merits. This much, however, may safely be ventured, that it cannot be called a high order of drama, despite the fact that a goodly number of workers have been busy throughout the century, so that the dramatic product is by no means limited. As Saintsbury states it, "There has always been something out of joint with English nineteenth-century tragedy." The same might be said of comedy. The drama is academic and artificial, rather than popular and natural, and the spontaneous expression of native genius, the "mere by-work" of most of the poets, and not their legitimate literary calling. From the fact of the high esteem in which such a secondary dramatist as Knowles was held, it may be argued that the critical standard was lamentably low, that tragedies and comedies devoid of dramatic impulse and vigor were classified as representative. This inferiority is somewhat remarkable when we recall, as has been suggested, the large number of English poets of the last century who were dramatic authors,—Byron, author of Cain; Shelley, in his "Prometheus Unbound"; Coleridge, in his "Fall of Robespierre"; Southey,

in "Sappho"; Bulwer, in "Richelieu"; Landor, in "Roderic"; Matthew Arnold, in "Empedocles on Etna"; Browning, in his Monologues; Mrs. Browning, in her renderings of "Euripides" and "Prometheus"; Scott, in his translation of Goethe; and Tennyson, in his several dramatic productions; while to these may be added the names of authors now working among us. Here is a wide variety and volume of effort, suggesting a favorable comparison with the days of Elizabeth, and yet a living critic, with this product before him, affirms of Browning's "Blot in the 'Scutcheon," that it is the one play of the century which shows any tragic vigor in its central part. Of these poets it may be said, without any exception, that they were dramatic writers without being dramatists; that their Plays were delineative, and not essentially dramatic; that some of them, as Browning, wrote Monologues or Monodramas only; that others, such as Scott, translated dramas, and that others still, as Landor and Shelley, failed to apprehend aright the structural side of this order of verse. It is thus that we read "that Byron's tragedies are not the worst part of his work"; that "Scott had no dramatic faculty"; that "Shelley's 'Cenci' is not actable"; and that the drama of the century as a whole lacks the quality of greatness. These are just conclusions when the reader sits down to find in this product a half-dozen specimens that may faintly remind him of Marlowe and Johnson.

The comparative failure of Tennyson in this field is sufficient evidence that dramatic genius was not one of the gifts of the gods to the England of his day.

CONTEMPORARY BRITISH DRAMA.

Of the Contemporary British Drama, represented, especially, in Swinburne, Austin, Jones, and Phillips, suffice it to say, that it has merit, though not masterly merit; that, while indi-

cating an advance upon the later Victorian Era, it is not Elizabethan. The strength of the opening century lies elsewhere,—in lyric verse as of old, and, especially, in historical, critical, and philosophic prose. Possibly, under conditions as yet non-existent, English verse may assume epic and dramatic eminence, and remind us, once again, of Milton and Shakespeare.