

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Bibliotheca Sacra* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bib-sacra_01.php

ARTICLE IV.

THE ELIZABETHAN DRAMATIC DEVELOPMENT.

BY PROFESSOR THEODORE W. HUNT, PH.D., LITT.D.,
PRINCETON, N. J.

THE Golden Age of English Letters is made so especially by its distinctive dramatic development. Whatever excellence it may have had along other lines of verse, and in the sphere of prose, it is its dramatic character that at once attracts attention, and puts the student on the search after the causes sufficient to account for it; an age which had, as has been said, "many hundreds of pieces and more than fifty masterpieces." Mr. Taine, the eminent French critic of English Literature, would make an application here of his notable threefold condition of the literary status of a nation — that of race, of epoch, and of environment. While dramatic ability, as general literary ability, may be, in part, assignable to natural causes — to genius, to special talent, and to certain innate aptitudes — Mr. Taine insists that the finally determining agencies are external, and so universally such, that no order of genius is independent of them. Shakespeare, Dante, Homer, and Cervantes are thus as surely influenced by them, though not, perhaps, as fully, as are the inferior authors of a nation.

Thus, on the principle of Race, the drama is more germane to certain peoples than to others. The Greek thus offers us a more excellent dramatic literature than the Latin, and the South European continental nations, as a whole, a more excellent drama than the North European, not only as a matter of literary history, but as a matter of racial instincts, capabil-

ities, and tendency, antecedent to history and quite independent of it. As peoples, the one are more dramatic in spirit and function than the other. Nationally and racially, it is easier for them than for others to express their literary life along such lines and in superior forms. They are constitutionally dramatic, so that they must belie their inherited characteristics if they fail to reach decided results in this direction. In this respect, the English race may be said to stand midway between the North and the South of Europe, evincing some of the salient racial tendencies of each, while having distinctive dramatic capacities of its own.

So, as to the second condition, that of Epoch, as determining both the form and quality of literary product at any given period, Mr. Lowell, in his essay on Shakespeare, lays down a general principle which is here in point, as he says, "The first demand we make on whatever claims to be a work of art is, that it shall be in keeping"; and, he adds, "this may be either extrinsic or intrinsic." It is this principle of propriety, in its extrinsic form, that is here in place; so that the authorship shall be in "keeping" with the era in which it is produced, a synchronism and not an anachronism, the natural product of the age and the hour. Applying this principle historically, we would not expect to find in the Dark Ages of Europe that dramatic development which we find in later and more enlightened periods; nor, in despotic eras, what we find in those of free thought and general national rule; nor, in the earlier epochs of a literature, what we find in the later, when crude conditions give way to maturity, and experiment, to settled literary habit. The lighter forms of verse, the lyric and descriptive, may flourish in the earlier eras as they have historically done, and poetry appear antecedent to prose. Hence, the drama of England, in the sixteenth century, was timely, as

it could not have been in the fifteenth or seventeenth. In fact, in no succeeding century has there been an opportune time for the English drama, even though Dryden, Byron, Robert Browning, and Tennyson have done conspicuous work in that direction. Just why this is so is clear enough as to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but not so clear as to the nineteenth, one of the explanations, however, lying in the fact that the material civilization which prevailed in the last century encouraged the production of prose rather than verse and, in verse itself, the lighter lyric forms.

The most sanguine among us are not rationally looking, at the opening of the twentieth century, for a reappearance of the Miltonic epic or Shakespearian drama. So, as to Environment, one of the most favorite words of modern science and literature, one of those sociological terms which other interests have borrowed by which to express certain forms and measures of influence not otherwise explained. What is the habitat of literature, its homestead, the nature of its vicinage? Is it wholesome or unwholesome, incitive or repressive of that which lies dormant, awaiting expression? Are the surroundings favorable or unfavorable? Here and there, as in the case of Milton's great epic, in the sensuous days of Charles the Second, literature comes to high embodiment despite all adverse conditions, as men of bodily vigor will occasionally be found in the most unsanitary districts. This, however, is not the law of life. Literature, if we may so express it, must have good air and an abundance of it, good soil in which to cast and cultivate its seed, sufficient light and heat to insure its growth. In a word, it must have, in all these particulars, a fair chance in its struggle for existence, if so be the fittest may survive and perpetuate its kind. Here, again, England in the sixteenth century was most fortunate, as Italy, also, was, so that the

external aided the internal, and what we may call the topography of the literature was the best possible to enable authors to do their best work. Locality is one of the factors in all national development — educational, literary, and social. We speak correctly of the *genius loci*. There is the spirit of the place as well as of the people and the period, a something in the field itself in which we labor to stimulate or stifle exertion. Such are Mr. Taine's conditions, each having force, and together constituting a most important element in the interpretation of any literature.

To these, however, must be added a fourth, the Author himself, in the sum total of his personality, above all external conditions, be they as potent as they may. The production of great literary results under the most unfriendly circumstances has been often enough illustrated in the history of literature to teach us that there are times when the author will prove himself superior to his antecedents, his epoch, and his environment, and confirm the priority of all personal factors. The production of "The Faerie Queene" amid the wild wastes and the wilder political disturbances of Ireland, or of "The Pilgrim's Progress" in the Bedford jail amid the civic commotions of the Commonwealth, is quite enough to attest the principle. Though genius is dependent somewhat on conditions, there is a sense in which, because it is genius, it is independent of them, and in the great opportunities of authorship takes them but little into account. Literature is one of the Humanities and the human element is central, so that the best explanation of the Elizabethan dramatic development is the genius of the dramatists. In noting, more specifically, the Reasons for this special development of the drama at this era, we emphasize three or four of marked significance.

The first is seen in the Revival of Classical Learning, in that

learning was then embodied more fully in the ancient languages than in any other one department of human investigation. More especially was this true as to the Greek, consequent on the Fall of Constantinople, in 1453, when the Greek language and literature were disseminated over Europe and the West. Hitherto, in the centuries preceding the Fall of Rome and the Fall of Constantinople, theology and philosophy were the prevailing studies, and the Latin, as the language of Rome and the Romish church, was the dominant language of Europe. When the "new learning" came into prominence, in the days of Elizabeth, theology and philosophy became less and less Romish, and the Greek language, more and more prominent — the language, it is to be noted, in which the best expressions of literature in dramatic form had appeared. These tragedies and comedies were the model of all Europe, so that the revival of Greek was the revival of the classical drama, as a standard form of verse. It was now, naturally, the ambition of the native English dramatists to do for England what Sophocles and Æschylus had done for Greece, to establish the drama as national, and on broad and lasting foundations. In connection with this revival, there came in the best results of Medieval learning, especially as expressed in the great semi-dramatic poem of Dante. The coarser elements of Medievalism were largely disappearing, or were transformed by Bacon and others into more modern and attractive forms; so that, while the essential spirit of scholarship and literary inquiry remained, much of the bondage of the letter had disappeared. Dramatists, actors, and patrons of the stage now understood each other better than in the early days of the Miracle Plays and Mysteries, when religious bigotry so prevailed.

A second reason for this unwonted dramatic development is found in a new awakening of the national mind and spirit,

awaiting, as it arose, the pen and voice of those who might be capable of appreciating and interpreting it. It was because of this demand for immediate and fitting interpretation, that it begat and fostered a distinctly dramatic tendency. We may thus call the essential type of this national revival, histrionic, possessed of scenic and delineative elements, needing the playwright and the open stage to embody and portray it. For the first time in its history, the modern English nation may be said to have known itself — what it was, just where it stood in modern history, what was expected of it, and what it could reasonably do. In fact, there had been no Modern England previous to this. Modern English statehood and Protestantism now began, as well as Modern English civilization, and so suddenly and fully that the impression was dramatic in its influence on the national mind. Scores of poets, receiving the new impulse, betook themselves to dramatic writing as the first necessity of the hour.

Hence, an additional reason for the special literary expansion now visible is found in the Emphasis of Life as related to literature. Never had the English nation been so thoroughly alive and so impelled, on every hand, to be what it was and do what it did, in the most vital forms. There was nothing in the line of indifference or an easy-going dependence on the past. It was the unique feature of the time, that the past was to be subordinate to the present, that the era was to be, in reality as well as in name and chronology, the Modern Era. All this, it is to be noted, tended to produce dramatic authorship, on the principle that action is the central element of the drama, the word itself meaning action, which is but another name for life. Hence, the comedy of the time was known, and is now known, as the Comedy of Life and Manners. The tragedy of the time was nothing more nor less than the presentation of life on its

serious side. So, the historical plays depicted the story of the diversified life of man. Life itself is essentially dramatic, so that human experience in its manifold phases was the theme and content, as it was the imposing cause, of the Elizabethan Plays.

If to these various reasons we add a fourth, the Comprehensiveness of the Era, including the old and the new, the real and the ideal, the pagan and Christian, the native and foreign, all unified and fused into what we call the Elizabethan Age, we have a sufficient explanation of the age itself, of its fundamental quality as dramatic, and of its undisputed primacy, even, yet, in the sphere of representative verse.

The second question of interest that arises is, The Influence of this Sixteenth-century Drama on other forms of contemporary literature. From the fact that it was central it must have affected, more or less closely, every existent form of literature, and, mostly, those forms which stood nearest to it in type and aim.

Its influence on the Prose of the period is, first of all, noticeable. Despite the fact that certain broad distinctions exist between prose and verse, as respectively metrical and unmetrical, there is an area common to them both, within the sphere, especially, of poetical prose and didactic poetry. Hence, in Shakespeare's drama, as in some of Goethe's, prose is not only found coexistent with the poetry, but, at times, in prominent form, as in "Much Ado about Nothing," "As You Like It," and "The Merry Wives of Windsor," in which last play Falstaff discourses in prose with Mrs. Page and with Pistol and the other characters. In fact, he mingles prose and verse, as he mingles blank verse and rhyme, when, in accordance with his literary insight, the thought and purpose demand it. So the other dramatists of the time, of whom Jonson, in his

"Cynthia's Revels" and "Silent Woman," is a notable example. So, Marlowe, in his "Doctor Faustus." Of Lyly's nine dramas, seven are in prose, these facts sufficing to show that the drama is not necessarily, though it is presumably, expressed in verse, and that, when the occasion or sentiment demands it, the poet passes freely into the prose-writer. Herein, lies the excellence of Blank verse, as a poetic form, in that it is a kind of accepted compromise between specific prose and specific verse; being verse, in that it is metrical, and having, yet, a prose type, in that it is rhymeless. Hence, epic and dramatic verse have adopted it as their prevailing form, while the lyric and descriptive are, in the main, in rhyme. So, the Drama and the Epic are related. In each of them, the three historic unities — of time, place, and action — are present, though the last of these is more prominent in the drama. Differing somewhat, in that the epic is mainly narrative and deals with the past, while the dramatic is mainly descriptive, and deals with the present and is given in the form of dialogue, each of them, at times, crosses the border-line that separates them, minimizing all differences between them, so as to present a unified effect. Tragedy has an essentially epic element, on the side of moral sublimity, as the Historical Plays have such an element to the degree in which they are narrative. Spenser's "Faerie Queene," though a modified epic poem, has a distinctive dramatic feature; with its incidents, scenes and characters, its seriousness and pleasantry, so as to make upon the reader a semi-dramatic impression. So, as to the Drama and the Lyric, as in the Sonnets of Shakespeare, essentially lyric, but partly dramatic, as in Spenser's "Shepherd's Calendar," a pastoral poem with dramatic elements, most of the playwrights of this era having done something in the sphere of lyric verse. In the Songs and Choruses of the drama, this relation is es-

pecially conspicuous. The emotional element germane to tragedy is the central feature of the lyric. So, Humor and Satire as natural to Comedy are essentially lyric. Hence, it appears that, from whatever point of view we study it, dramatic literature in the Golden Age was central, affecting and affected by every other form of literature. Herein is another proof of the fact that the current opinion of criticism as to the superiority of the epic to all other forms of poetry is to be so far modified as to make it subordinate to the dramatic. Its status is, at least, an open question.

Coming now to a more definite survey of this affluent dramatic era, it is in place to note the individual dramatic poets who served, more or less successfully, to make the era what it was in our history. Shakespeare excepted as the central and immutable exponent of the age, it is the critical habit to classify all other playwrights as Minor Authors, whether his predecessors, immediate contemporaries, or successors. Special care is, therefore, to be taken lest the phrase Minor Elizabethan Dramatists be falsely interpreted. The very fact that they are Elizabethan, giving to the Golden Age something of its excellence, is sufficient to show that they are not to be underrated. So able a critic as Hazlitt devotes one-half of his "Elizabethan Literature" to these so-called secondary poets. Lamb, in his "Specimens of English Dramatic Poets," writes in a spirit even more decidedly favorable. More recently and, as if to secure a continued interest in these authors, Whipple, in his "Essays and Reviews," pays them a high eulogium; while substantially the last literary work which Mr. Lowell did consisted of a careful discussion of these poets, whom he calls, "Old English Dramatists," thus anticipating a series now in preparation, under the title "The Best Plays of the Old English Dramatists." No better proof can be found that the term

Minor, as here applied, must be used relatively only, and in view of the unique position of Shakespeare at the time. So high was the standard established, that, in any other age, these secondary dramatists, secondary to Shakespeare only, would have been among the first of their order, as the best of them are, even yet, regarded as far above the intellectual average of any subsequent age. Though their work was not Shakespearian, it was invaluable, in separate instances closely bordering on Shakespearian form; while, as a body of playwrights, their aggregate product was of a distinctive order. It is questionable whether Shakespeare himself would have been the peerless author that he was, apart from these forerunners and contemporaries. It is a well-known fact of literary history, that even Shakespeare's asserted preëminence was contested by contemporary critics, nor was it till a century later, in the days of Dryden, that this preëminence was accepted without question. It was the general representative work of Jonson and Marlowe, and the occasional masterly product of Beaumont and Fletcher, Ford and Webster and Massinger, Lodge and Peele and Chapman, that kept this open question before the English public on to the age of Anne. A few suggestions as to these Minor Dramatists may serve to show the important place that they held in the literature of the time.

First of all, they were the real exponents of their age. This is true both in a literary and a mental sense, and especially true of those half-dozen among them who held the leading place. Particularly is it true of the Marlowe Group, as Shakespeare's immediate predecessors, that they heralded the coming epoch and prepared the way for it, using well what light they had, and marking a definite dramatic advance over all that had, as yet, existed. Though not representative to the same degree that Shakespeare was, they were, still, represen-

tative, and thus in line with the general literary progress and the specific dramatic progress of the period. Moreover, as a rule, these dramatists were University men, and, thus, by liberal training, qualified to take their place and play their part in the new and broader economy. Some of them, by way of distinction, were known as "University Wits," and thus connected the literary life of the time with its scholarship and culture. Scarcely too much emphasis can be laid upon the fact that, whatever the failings of these minor poets, they had enjoyed special intellectual training at Oxford and Cambridge, and not infrequently exhibit its good effects in their authorship. Here, again, the mastery of Shakespeare's mind and art is all the more amazing, in that he stood in no wise related to the great literary institutions of the nation.

Their exceptional excellence in Dramatic Art is, also, noteworthy. In the special province of versification or verse-structure they were, in the main, far in advance of their time, using the modern accentual method in preference to the older syllabic method, and thus revealing their independence of classical models. Marlowe, at this point, is held in high repute, his "Tamburlaine" being the first English Play in blank verse, as his "Edward the Second" was the first Historical Play of note. His "mighty line" was always effective, so that the Iambic Pentameter of later English verse became firmly established as the prevailing Heroic measure. This inner harmony between the poetic structure and the sense was truly Shakespearian, and at no point do many of these minor dramatists so closely resemble their master.

It should, also, be noted that these so-called secondary poets were a Coöperative School of Workers, and thus unified and intensified their dramatic power. Thus Beaumont and Fletcher, Chapman and Dekker, Webster and Dekker, Middleton and

Rowley, Nash and Marlowe, composed their plays in common. They constituted a real Authors' Club or Guild, working toward common ends and on similar methods, while not surrendering, at all, their individual tastes and aims. They were, for the time, real fellow-craftsmen, partly, of necessity, and, partly, by preference and fraternal feeling. Thus Shakespeare himself worked conjointly with Jonson and Marlowe, his two greatest dramatic contemporaries. Indeed, the measure of this mutual indebtedness can never be fully determined. That it existed at all is proof in point that there was, in the main, good fellowship between the great master and his colleagues, so that the current criticism to the contrary must be modified. It is a fact of Elizabethan history that Shakespeare, when first in London, devoted most of his effort to the revision of the work of his inferiors.

In fine, the more we study the real character of this great dramatic age, the more distinctly it appears that much of its greatness lay in the fact, that, Shakespeare apart, there were at work a body of playwrights masterful enough to give repute to any age in which they lived, and justly classified in later history as Minors only on the principle that the age was strictly exceptional, and that the imposing presence of the greatest dramatist of all literature overshadowed every lesser light.

From this brief discussion as thus outlined, a question of peculiar interest emerges, as to Shakespeare's Indebtedness to other authors. The vexed question of originality in an author is still an open one — what it is; what its relation to existing opinion is; to what degree and how an author must evince it justly to be called original, and whether or not it is compatible with a good degree of deference to established authority. Have we any strictly original treatise on Poetics since Aristo-

tle, or on Sublimity, since Longinus? Are Carlyle and Emerson original because they state old truth in new forms, or how is the critic to distinguish, in Tennyson's "Idylls of the King," as based on the old Arthurian Legends, what is original and what imitative? In fact, Aristotle himself insists that poetry, and thereby he means dramatic poetry, is essentially an imitative art, the poet being but an expositor of existing truths. Be this as it may, when we come to the study of Shakespeare, we are, at first, jealously careful to insist that he, above all others, was out and out original, a veritable genius in the province of the drama, independent of all preceding and contemporary aids. The most cursory examinations of his writings, however, is enough to disabuse our minds of this *a priori* supposition, so that we are now prepared to read from so favorable a critic as White, what would at first have startled us, "that Shakespeare, the greatest of the creative minds who have left their mark upon the ages, produced nothing new in design." In this language, it is to be carefully noted that Shakespeare is called creative, his originality consisting mainly in something else than the design or invention of the material of the Plays. Mr. White interprets for us his own language as he adds: "His supreme excellence was attained simply by doing better than any one else that which others had done before him." To the same effect, Professor Moulton, in his recent work "Shakespeare as a Dramatic Artist," insists that the staple or "raw material" of the great poet's drama, the *materia dramatica*, was scarcely Shakespeare's at all, but gathered by others before him, and utilized by him in that inimitable way to which he only was competent. His genius lay in the fact that he was beyond imitation, though himself appropriating all that came to his hand that he needed in the evolution of his work.

The proofs of this dependence are not far to find. In his first non-dramatic poem, "Venus and Adonis," he resorted to Ovid's "Metamorphoses" for the substance of the story. So, as to the non-dramatic poem immediately following it, "The Rape of Lucrece," Shakespeare having recourse to Chaucer and Lydgate and the earlier ballads for the current story of Lucretia the chaste, it being possible that he may have been acquainted with such classical accounts of the story as are found in the "Fasti," rendered into English in 1570 and thus accessible to all later writers in English. The French historian Guizot, in his instructive work "Shakespeare and his Times," gives a brief analysis of several of his Tragedies, Historical Plays, and Comedies, emphasizing in each this dependence of the author on antecedent history. "Romeo and Juliet" looks back to "La Gioietta," rendered into English, and made the subject of an English poem by Brooke, in 1562. "Hamlet" reminds the reader of the History of Denmark by Saxo Grammaticus, accessible, in translated form, in the sixteenth century. "King Lear" recalls the name of Holinshed and, prior to him, that of Goeffrey of Monmouth, and Ina, King of Saxons. In "Macbeth," Holinshed is again the authority. In "Julius Cæsar," Shakespeare may have consulted an existing Play of that name by Sterline. In "Othello," we are led back to Cinthio's "Hecatommithi," regarding which Guizot remarks, "There is not a single detail in Shakespeare's tragedy which does not occur, also, in Cinthio's novel."

As to the Historical Plays, it goes without saying, that Shakespeare availed himself of all accepted authorities on the respective kings and eras. Turning to the Comedies, the "Merchant of Venice" reminds us of various sources, such as the "Gesta Romanorum," and Giovanni's "Pecorone." Of "The Merry Wives of Windsor," it is said "that a number of

novels may contest the honor of having furnished the poet with the substance of the adventure." "The Tempest" finds its occasion in the same antecedent Italian Romance. "As You Like It" reminds us of "The Tale of Gamelyn," of Chaucerian days, finding its plot in Lodge's "Rosalind." In "The Winter's Tale," the dramatist draws freely on Greene's "Pandosto." "Cymbeline" depends, in part, on Holinshed; on the semi-mythical material of Medieval Romance, and on Boccaccio's version of the story, in "The Decameron." So "Much Ado about Nothing" borrows from Ariosto and Bandello. The "Midsummer Night's Dream" recalls Chaucer's "Knight's Tale," as, also, Ovid and Plutarch. So "Twelfth Night" makes a modified use of Italian authors, so frequent a source of reference of Shakespeare that we must argue therefrom to his wide knowledge of its history and literature.

Thus Shakespeare's indebtedness is revealed. If to this form of aid the fact is added, that, in not a few instances, the poet seemed to seek the aid of his fellow-dramatists, in the composition and final setting of a Play, as he in turn gave them aid, it is clear that this indebtedness has not as yet been sufficiently emphasized. Herein, moreover, is shown Shakespeare's poetic wisdom, and his economy in the use of material, in that he subordinated to his service all truth and fact that he could find, while yet maintaining his natural powers intact. Here was, indeed, an evidence of genius, in that no other poet could have done this as he did. It was a genius of adaptation or utilization, and, in its place and way, an expression of genius as valuable as that of absolute creative skill. Professor Dowden speaks of the Mind and Art of Shakespeare. His art as well as his mind revealed his genius, and his manifestations of it in unison produced the matchless product that we have in his dramas.

Thus in Shakespeare and the Minor Dramatists alike is seen the special dramatic development of the Elizabethan Age, each contributing in his way to the aggregate result, and each acknowledging in just degree, the principle of interdependence in authorship. Had it not been that many of these dramatists were men of a low type of morals; that not a few of them were absolutely dependent on the Court for a livelihood, and thus more or less servile in their literary work; and that the prevailing vice of Euphuism affected much of their literary product, the Golden Age would have been still more phenomenal in our dramatic history, and all efforts to reproduce it still more hopeless.

As it is, however, its limitations all conceded, it has as yet no counterpart in our later literary history and favorably compared at the time with any contemporary continental drama.

That such an era should not be continuous through the later history was to be expected, so that, as we stand at the opening of the seventeenth century, evidences of decadence already appear. Such is the law of life and of literature, the law of action and reaction, of decline and disappearance. In due time, however, reviving forces should assert themselves, and once again, a race of poets appear who should take up the history of dramatic progress where once it was interrupted, and, under the newer impulse of succeeding eras, fully reproduce the genius of Shakespeare and his time.