

The History of the Drama.
By
Mabel Crump '97

Table of Contents.

I Origin of the drama.

II Rise of the drama.

(1) View of the theatres of all nations.

(2) The drama in France.

(a) French comedy - Moliere.

III The English Theatre - the two periods.

(1) Shakespeare - life and character of his writings.

(2) Decline of the drama by the Puritans.

(3) Revival of stage under Charles II.

The desire to give expression to feelings and conceptions is inseparable from human nature.

Man expresses his thoughts and emotions by gesture and speech and these expressions he soon learns to vary into song and dance. One form of expression is imitation. "To imitate," says Aristotle, is instinctive in man from his infancy; and from imitation all men naturally receive pleasure. "The assumption of character whether real or fictitious is therefore the earliest step towards the drama. Action implies an operation of the will and an execution of its resolutions. It implies a procedure from cause to result. Every imitation of action by action is a drama. After this step has been taken it only remains to assume a form regulated by literature. A drama should contain a unity of action and this unity of action means that everything in it should form a link in a single chain of cause and effect.

At all periods of history the stage has been a mirror of the age and race in which it has written. Dramatic poets reproduce the life of men around them; exhibiting their aims, hopes, aspirations and passions in an abstract more intensely colored than the diffuse facts of daily experience. "The result obtained by the drama is two fold. On the one hand it is strictly local, national, true to the epoch of its origin and on the

other hand it is a glass held up to nature reflecting what is permanent in man beneath the customs and costumes, the creeds and politics of age or nation. It seems perfectly obvious and natural in the invention of dramatic art because man has a great disposition to mimicry." In the very minute descriptions of ancient Egypt given by Herodotus there is no trace of the drama. The Etruscans who in many respects resemble the Egyptians had theatrical representations. The Arabs and Persians are unacquainted with the drama. When Christianity was introduced the plays handed down from the Greeks and Romans were put aside because they had reference to heathen ideas and degenerated into immorality, and they did not then revive until nearly one thousand years. Even in the fourteenth century we do not find any trace of them (plays).

The English circumnavigators say that among the islanders of the South Seas, although of the lowest grade of civilization, they observed a rude drama and also among the Indians plays were known before they could have received any foreign influence.

The Chinese have their standing national theatres and we might say they leave the best Europeans far behind them. The Chinese are unacquainted with the distinction between tragedy and comedy; they classify their plays according to subjects into twelve categories.

The religious element in the Chinese drama is often sheer buffoonery. In theory, no drama could be more consistently elevated in purpose and in tone than the Chinese. Those of the Chinese who write immoral plays are to expect death a purgatory which will last as long as these plays continue to be performed.

Among the Greeks dramatic talent was far from universal. The theatre was invented in Athens and in Athens was it brought to perfection.

In Spain the people possessed a dramatic literature of great wealth.

The Portuguese have never possessed a national theatre. They would rather listen to plays of a foreign dialect than to invent or to translate and imitate for themselves.

In the fifteenth century the new European stage sprang up with its morality and mystery plays. In these rude beginnings lay the germ of the romantic drama.

In France the earliest attempts were in imitating the ancients. In the first tragedies that were represented, the Cleopatra and the Dido of Jodelle, a prologue and chorus were introduced. Corneille, a French writer, did not execute his dramas as so many school exercises on the model of the ancients, they were in more of a story form. He was a great lover of the Spanish theatre and although Seneca led him astray he knew and loved the Spanish theatre and it had a great influence

on his mind. The first of his pieces with which the classical era of French tragedy commences and which is one of his best, the Cid, is well known to have been borrowed from the Spanish. It violates in a great deal the unity of place and it is animated throughout by the spirit of chivalrous, love and honor.

Racine, a French writer, was just the opposite of Corneille. He of all the French writers was best acquainted with the ancients. He found the practice of the theatre already firmly established and he did not undertake to deviate from it.

"According to French critics, and the opinion which has become prevalent through them, Moliere alone, of all their comic writers, is classical and all that has been done since his time is merely estimated as it approximates more or less to this supposed pattern of an excellence which can never be surpassed, nor even equalled." He was the founder of the French Comedy. "Moliere has produced works in so many departments, and of such different value, that we are hardly able to recognize the same author in all of them; and yet it is usual, when speaking of his peculiarities and merits, and the advance which he gave to his art, to throw the whole of his labors into one mass together." He was born and educated in low rank in life and he learned by experience the

modes of living among the industrious portion of the community and of acquiring the talent of imitating low modes of expression. At an early period Louis XIV took him into his service and here he had the opportunity of observing the court. He afterwards became an actor and he always took the comic part. His mimetic zeal went so far, that, actually sick, he acted and drew his last breath in representing his Imaginary Invalid. His business was to invent all manner of pleasant entertainments for the court, and to provoke "the great monarch of the world" to laughter, by way of relaxation from his state affairs or warlike undertakings. This external position of Moliere was the reason why many of his works had their origin as mere occasional pieces in the commands of the court. He became acquainted with the Italian comic masks on the Italian theatre at Paris and so did not have to travel out of France. "In the Spanish comedies he studied the ingenious complication of intrigue: Plautus and Terence taught him the salt of the Attic wit, the genuine tone of comic maxims, and the nicer shades of character." All this he employed with more or less success, in the spur of the moment, and also in order to deck out his drama in a sprightly and variegated dress, made use of all manner of means, however foreign to his art. He knew how to turn every thing

to profit. The pieces he borrowed from the Spanish were designed merely to please the eye. In his farcial pieces, Moliere did not go to foreign pieces, he tried to introduce a sort of masked character without masks, who should constantly recur with the same name. This did not take very well in France though. Unless the praise bestowed by the French on their tragic writers be exceedingly extravagant, their praises of Moliere are out of proportion with all of their subjects. "Voltaire calls him the Father of Genuine Comedy. According to La Harpe, Comedy and Moliere are synonymous terms; he is the first of all moral philosophers, his works are the school of the world. Chamfort terms him the most amiable teacher since Socrates; and is of the opinion that Julius Caesar who called Terence a Half Menander a half Moliere."

The higher comedies of Moliere contain many admirable observations happily expressed; others are infected with the narrowness of his own private opinions. The most celebrated piece of Moliere is the Aware. The Amphitryon is hardly anything more than a free imitation of the Latin original. It is said that the most unsuccessful of Moliere's imitations of the ancients is that of the Thormio in the "Fourberies de Scapin." The whole plot is borrowed from Terence, and,

by the addition of a second invention, been adopted, well or ill, or rather tortured, to a consistency with modern manners." The poet has gone to work very hurriedly and patched this play together. I think that Molière succeeded best with the coarse and homely comice. The classical reputation of Molière still preserves his pieces on the stage, although in tone and manner they are altogether out of date.

The earliest dramatic attempts in England as I have said were Mysteries and Moralities. The history of the English theatre divides itself naturally into two periods. The first beginning with the reign of Elizabeth and extending to the reign of Charles I when the Puritans gained the ascendancy and stopped all kinds of dramas. The closing of the theatre lasted thirteen years. Then came the second period when Charles II was restored to the throne. He coming from France brought the French ways with him and naturally gave quite a different character to the plays subsequently written.

In the first period the drama was more than a national amusement. It was used as a means of education. They taught Bible lessons by illustrating some legends by short scenes. They were played by professional people called Guilds. These Miracle Plays, as they were called, were played during the

thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The Moral play was another play played to teach some Moral lesson. These early plays had little poetic merit. To our eyes they lacked in dignity, but they pleased and instructed a simple minded audience; they prepared a way for dramatic development. The revival of classical learning helped England a great deal in the establishment of the regular drama. Ralph Roister Doister, by Nicholas Udall, was the first regular comedy played and the Caebodius, or Ferrex and Porrex, of Sackville and Norton, was the first tragedy.

During this period we have the plays of the great dramatist Shakespeare. He was born on the 23rd day of April 1564 on Stenley St. in Statford-on-Avon. His early education was received at the town grammar school where he studied "small Latin and less Greek." His father having the misfortune to loose some money had to take William out of school.

In 1582 he married Anne Hathaway a lady some years older than himself. In 1587 he went to London and the few years spent there we know little of his life but it is supposed he was studying the French and Latin languages.

It did not take him long to make a place for himself among the crowd of rising dramatists for in 1592 he was a very successful author and actor. "Shakespeare

seems to have begun his work as a dramatist by adopting and partially rewriting old plays."

In the two plays, The Two Gentlemen of Verona and Love's Labor's Lost, Shakespeare's knowledge of the Italian comedy was distinctly shown.

In the year 1594 Shakespeare acted with Burbage before Queen Elizabeth. "Everything indicates that, so far as his worldly things were concerned, Shakespeare steadily prospered. In the active and hard working years he grew in fortune as well as in reputation; he showed himself a practical and capable man of business as well as a transcendent genius, and by his character he won the love and respect of his fellows." In 1612 Shakespeare retired to Stratford where he lived till his death in 1616. "Shakespeare speaks to all time and nations for the English nature and genius. He gathers and sums up the best that has gone before him - the Celtic wit, fancy, and deftness; the Teutonic solidity and sincerity, its earnestness, morality, and reverence for the unseen. To this capacious nature, drawing its forces from the genius of two races, awakened Italy gives her tribute; and through it the English Renaissance finds its supreme poetic utterance. This man then, stands for the English people, a king over them for all time."

We will speak a few words about his plays.

Among the comedies, The Two Gentlemen of Verona, The Taming of the Shrew, and The Comedy of Errors, bear many traces of an early origin. The Two Gentlemen of Verona paints the irresolution of love, and its infidelity to friendship, pleasantly enough, but in some degree superficially we might say with the levity of mind which a passion suddenly entertained and as suddenly given up presupposes." 18

The Comedy of Errors is the only work of Shakespeare that is imitated or borrowed from the ancients.

The Taming of the Shrew has the air of an Italian comedy; and indeed the love intrigue, which constitutes the main part of it, is derived from a piece of Ariosto. The characters and passions are lightly sketched; the intrigue is introduced without much preparation, and in its rapid progress impeded by no sort of difficulties; while in manner in which Petruchio thought previously cautioned as to Katherine, still encounters the risks in marrying her, and contrives to tame her - in all this the character and peculiar humor of the English are distinctly visible. The colors are laid on somewhat coarsely but the ground is good.

Among Shakespeare's tragedies Hamlet is considered the best. It is a tragedy of thought inspired by continual and never-satisfied meditation on human destiny and the dark perplexity of the events of this world, and

calculated to call forth the very same meditation in the minds of the spectator.

Romeo and Juliet has excellent dramatic arrangement and every character comes in its right place.

Of the two tragedies Macbeth and King Lear you cannot exhaust the praises.

On his historical dramas many criticisms and also many comments could be made but we will not linger to take them up but we will enumerate a few of the plays. Julius Caesar I think is considered his best. Antony and Cleopatra is in some measure a continuation of Julius Caesar. Timon of Athens and Troilus and Cressida are not historical plays but they cannot be classed as tragedies or comedies. The dramas derived from the English, ten in number, form one of the most valuable of Shakespeare's works, and partly the fruit of his maturest age.

Before Shakespeare's death the drama was steadily declining. It is associated closely with the increase of the Puritans who were very bitter against it. They prohibited the representation of plays on Sunday. Under the Puritan rule to act or even to be a spectator of plays was prohibited under a severe penalty. A civil war followed and the players compelled by want, joined that political party the interests of which were intimately connected with their own existence. Almost all of

them entered the army, many perished for the good cause, and those that were left returned to London and continued to exercise their art in secret. The Puritans not only despised the drama but they even shut their ears to church music and called it a demonical howling. The oppression of the drama continued down to the year 1660 when it returned with Charles II.

As the Puritans had brought republicanism and religious zeal into universal odium, so Charles II seemed expressly born to sport away all respect for the kingly dignity. Under his rule the English played a part which was altogether unnatural to them. They existed no real knowledge of the fine arts; the age neither felt a true want of poetry, nor had any relish for it. Still they merely wished for a light and brilliant entertainment. The theatre before had attracted the people solely by the excellence of the dramatic works and the skill of the actors, but now it is furnished out with all the appliances with which we are at this day familiar, but what is gained in external decoration, is lost in internal worth.