

# PLAYS AND PURITANS

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The British Isles have been ringing for the last few years with the word 'Art' in its German sense; with 'High Art,' 'Symbolic Art,' 'Ecclesiastical Art,' 'Dramatic Art,' 'Tragic Art,' and so forth; and every well-educated person is expected, nowadays, to know something about Art. Yet in spite of all translations of German 'Aesthetic' treatises, and 'Kunstnovellen,' the mass of the British people cares very little about the matter, and sits contented under the imputation of 'bad taste.' Our stage, long since dead, does not revive; our poetry is dying; our music, like our architecture, only reproduces the past; our painting is only first-rate when it handles landscapes and animals, and seems likely so to remain; but, meanwhile, nobody cares. Some of the deepest and most earnest minds vote the question, in general, a 'sham and a snare,' and whisper to each other confidentially, that Gothic art is beginning to be a 'bore,' and that Sir Christopher Wren was a very good fellow after all; while the middle classes look on the Art movement half amused, as with a pretty toy, half sulkily suspicious of Popery and Paganism, and think, apparently, that Art is very well when it means nothing, and is merely used to beautify drawing-rooms and shawl patterns; not to mention that, if there were no painters, Mr. Smith could not hand down to posterity likenesses of himself, Mrs. Smith, and family. But when 'Art' dares to be in earnest, and to mean something, much more to connect itself with religion, Smith's tone alters. He will teach 'Art' to keep in what he considers its place, and if it refuses, take the law of it, and put it into the Ecclesiastical Court. So he says, and what is more, he means what he says; and as all the world, from Hindostan to Canada, knows by most practical proof, what he means, he sooner or later does, perhaps not always in the wisest way, but still he does it.

Thus, in fact, the temper of the British nation toward 'Art' is simply that of the old Puritans, softened, no doubt, and widened, but only enough so as to permit Art, not to encourage it.

Some men's thoughts on this curious fact would probably take the form of some aesthetic a priori disquisition, beginning with 'the tendency of the infinite to reveal itself in the finite,' and ending—who can tell where? But as we cannot honestly arrogate to ourselves any skill in the *scientia scientiarum*, or say, 'The Lord possessed me in

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the beginning of His way, before His works of old. When He prepared the heavens, I was there, when He set a compass upon the face of the deep;’ we shall leave aesthetic science to those who think that they comprehend it; we shall, as simple disciples of Bacon, deal with facts and with history as ‘the will of God revealed in facts.’ We will leave those who choose to settle what ought to be, and ourselves look patiently at that which actually was once, and which may be again; that so out of the conduct of our old Puritan forefathers (right or wrong), and their long war against ‘Art,’ we may learn a wholesome lesson; as we doubtless shall, if we believe firmly that our history is neither more nor less than what the old Hebrew prophets called ‘God’s gracious dealings with his people,’ and not say in our hearts, like some sentimental girl who sings Jacobite ballads (written forty years ago by men who cared no more for the Stuarts than for the Ptolemies, and were ready to kiss the dust off George the Fourth’s feet at his visit to Edinburgh)—‘*Victrix causa Diis placuit, sed victa puellis.*’

The historian of a time of change has always a difficult and invidious task. For Revolutions, in the great majority of cases, arise not merely from the crimes of a few great men, but from a general viciousness and decay of the whole, or the majority, of the nation; and that viciousness is certain to be made up, in great part, of a loosening of domestic ties, of breaches of the Seventh Commandment, and of sins connected with them, which a writer is now hardly permitted to mention. An ‘evil and adulterous generation’ has been in all ages and countries the one marked out for intestine and internecine strife. That description is always applicable to a revolutionary generation; whether or not it also comes under the class of a superstitious one, ‘seeking after a sign from heaven,’ only half believing its own creed, and, therefore, on tiptoe for miraculous confirmations of it, at the same time that it fiercely persecutes any one who, by attempting innovation or reform, seems about to snatch from weak faith the last plank which keeps it from sinking into the abyss. In describing such an age, the historian lies under this paradoxical disadvantage, that his case is actually too strong for him to state it. If he tells the whole truth, the easy-going and respectable multitude, in easy-going and respectable days like these, will either shut their ears prudishly to his painful facts, or reject them as incredible, unaccustomed as they are to find similar horrors and abominations among people of their own rank, of whom they are naturally inclined to judge by their own standard of civilisation. Thus if any one, in justification of the Reformation and the British hatred of Popery during the sixteenth century, should dare to detail the undoubted facts of the Inquisition, and to comment on them dramatically enough to make his readers feel about them what men who witnessed them felt, he would be accused of a ‘morbid love of horrors.’ If any one, in order to show how the French Revolution of 1793 was really God’s judgment on the profligacy of the ancien regirne, were to paint that profligacy as the men of the ancien

regime unblushingly painted it themselves, respectability would have a right to demand, 'How dare you, sir, drag such disgusting facts from their merited oblivion?' Those, again, who are really acquainted with the history of Henry the Eighth's marriages, are well aware of facts which prove him to have been, not a man of violent and lawless passions, but of a cold temperament and a scrupulous conscience; but which cannot be stated in print, save in the most delicate and passing hints, to be taken only by those who at once understand such matters, and really wish to know the truth; while young ladies in general will still look on Henry as a monster in human form, because no one dares, or indeed ought, to undeceive them by anything beyond bare assertion without proof.

'But what does it matter,' some one may say, 'what young ladies think about history?' This it matters; that these young ladies will some day be mothers, and as such will teach their children their own notions of modern history; and that, as long as men confine themselves to the teaching of Roman and Greek history, and leave the history of their own country to be handled exclusively by their unmarried sisters, so long will slanders, superstitions, and false political principles be perpetuated in the minds of our boys and girls.

But a still worse evil arises from the fact that the historian's case is often too strong to be stated. There is always a reactionary party, or one at least which lingers sentimentally over the dream of past golden ages, such as that of which Cowley says, with a sort of naive blasphemy, at which one knows not whether to smile or sigh -

'When God, the cause to me and men unknown,  
Forsook the royal houses, and his own.'

These have full liberty to say all they can in praise of the defeated system; but the historian has no such liberty to state the case against it. If he even asserts that he has counter-facts, but dare not state them, he is at once met with a *praejudicium*. The mere fact of his having ascertained the truth is imputed as a blame to him, in a sort of prudish cant. 'What a very improper person he must be to like to dabble in such improper books that they must not even be quoted.' If in self-defence he desperately gives his facts, he only increases the feeling against him, whilst the reactionists, hiding their blushing faces, find in their modesty an excuse for avoiding the truth; if, on the other hand, he content himself with bare assertion, and with indicating the sources from whence his conclusions are drawn, what care the reactionists? They know well that the public will not take the trouble to consult manuscripts, State papers, pamphlets, rare biographies, but will content themselves with ready-made history; and they therefore go on unblushingly to republish their old romance, leaving poor truth, after she has been painfully haled up to the well's mouth, to tumble

miserably to the bottom of it again.

In the face of this danger we will go on to say as much as we dare of the great cause, Puritans v. Players, before our readers, trusting to find some of them at least sufficiently unacquainted with the common notions on the point to form a fair decision.

What those notions are is well known. Very many of her Majesty's subjects are of opinion that the first half of the seventeenth century (if the Puritans had not interfered and spoilt all) was the most beautiful period of the English nation's life; that in it the chivalry and ardent piety of the Middle Age were happily combined with modern art and civilisation; that the Puritan hatred of the Court, of stage-plays, of the fashions of the time, was only 'a scrupulous and fantastical niceness'; barbaric and tasteless, if sincere; if insincere, the basest hypocrisy; that the stage-plays, though coarse, were no worse than Shakspeare, whom everybody reads; and that if the Stuarts patronised the stage they also raised it, and exercised a purifying censorship. And many more who do not go all these lengths with the reactionists, and cannot make up their mind to look to the Stuart reigns either for model churchmen or model courtiers, are still inclined to sneer at the Puritan 'preciseness,' and to say lazily, that though, of course, something may have been wrong, yet there was no need to make such a fuss about the matter; and that at all events the Puritans were men of very bad taste.

Mr. Gifford, in his introduction to Massinger's plays (1813), was probably the spokesman of his own generation, certainly of a great part of this generation also, when he informs us, that 'with Massinger terminated the triumph of dramatic poetry; indeed, the stage itself survived him but a short time. The nation was convulsed to its centre by contending factions, and a set of austere and gloomy fanatics, enemies to every elegant amusement and every social relaxation, rose upon the ruins of the State. Exasperated by the ridicule with which they had long been covered by the stage, they persecuted the actors with unrelenting severity, and consigned them, together with the writers, to hopeless obscurity and wretchedness. Taylor died in the extreme of poverty, Shirley opened a little school at Brentford, and Downe, the boast of the stage, kept an ale-house at Brentford. Others, and those the far greater number, joined the royal standard, and exerted themselves with more gallantry than good fortune in the service of their old and indulgent master.'

'We have not yet, perhaps, fully estimated, and certainly not yet fully recovered, what was lost in that unfortunate struggle. The arts were rapidly advancing to perfection under the fostering wing of a monarch who united in himself taste to feel, spirit to undertake, and munificence to reward. Architecture, painting, and poetry were by turns the objects of his paternal care. Shakspeare was his "closet companion," Jonson his poet, and in conjunction with Inigo

Jones, his favoured architect, produced those magnificent entertainments,' etc.

He then goes on to account for the supposed sudden fall of dramatic art at the Restoration, by the somewhat far-fetched theory that -

'Such was the horror created in the general mind by the perverse and unsocial government from which they had so fortunately escaped, that the people appear to have anxiously avoided all retrospect, and, with Prynne and Vicars, to have lost sight of Shakspeare and "his fellows." Instead, therefore, of taking up dramatic poetry where it abruptly ceased in the labours of Massinger, they elicited, as it were, a manner of their own, or fetched it from the heavy monotony of their continental neighbours.'

So is history written, and, what is more, believed. The amount of misrepresentation in this passage (which would probably pass current with most readers in the present day) is quite ludicrous. In the first place, it will hardly be believed that these words occur in an essay which, after extolling Massinger as one of the greatest poets of his age, second, indeed, only to Shakspeare, also informs us (and, it seems, quite truly) that, so far from having been really appreciated or patronised, he maintained a constant struggle with adversity,—that even the bounty of his particular friends, on which he chiefly relied, left him in a state of absolute dependence,—that while 'other writers for the stage had their periods of good fortune, Massinger seems to have enjoyed no gleam of sunshine; his life was all one misty day, and "shadows, clouds, and darkness rested on it."'

So much for Charles's patronage of a really great poet. What sort of men he did patronise, practically and in earnest, we shall see hereafter, when we come to speak of Mr. Shirley.

But Mr. Gifford must needs give an instance to prove that Charles was 'not inattentive to the success of Massinger,' and a curious one it is; of the same class, unfortunately, as that with the man in the old story, who recorded with pride that the King had spoken to him, and—had told him to get out of the way.

Massinger in his 'King and the Subject' had introduced Don Pedro of Spain thus speaking -

'Monies! We'll raise supplies which way we please,  
And force you to subscribe to blanks, in which  
We'll mulct you as we shall think fit. The Caesars  
In Rome were wise, acknowledging no law  
But what their swords did ratify, the wives  
And daughters of the senators bowing to

Their will, as deities,' etc.

Against which passage Charles, reading over the play before he allowed of it, had written, 'This is too insolent, and not to be printed.' Too insolent it certainly was, considering the state of public matters in the year 1638. It would be interesting enough to analyse the reasons which made Charles dislike in the mouth of Pedro sentiments so very like his own; but we must proceed, only pointing out the way in which men, determined to repeat the traditional clap-trap about the Stuarts, are actually blind to the meaning of the very facts which they themselves quote.

Where, then, do the facts of history contradict Mr. Gifford?

We believe that, so far from the triumph of dramatic poetry terminating with Massinger, dramatic art had been steadily growing worse from the first years of James; that instead of the arts advancing to perfection under Charles the First, they steadily deteriorated in quality, though the supply became more abundant; that so far from there having been a sudden change for the worse in the drama after the Restoration, the taste of the courts of Charles the First and of Charles the Second are indistinguishable; that the court poets, and probably the actors also, of the early part of Charles the Second's reign had many of them belonged to the court of Charles the First, as did Davenant, the Duke and Duchess of Newcastle, Fanshaw, and Shirley himself; that the common notion of a 'new manner' having been introduced from France after the Restoration, or indeed having come in at all, is not founded on fact, the only change being that the plays of Charles the Second's time were somewhat more stupid, and that while five of the seven deadly sins had always had free licence on the stage, blasphemy and profane swearing were now enfranchised to fill up the seven. As for the assertion that the new manner (supposing it to have existed) was imported from France, there is far more reason to believe that the French copied us than we them, and that if they did not learn from Charles the First's poets the superstition of 'the three unities,' they at least learnt to make ancient kings and heroes talk and act like seventeenth century courtiers, and to exchange their old clumsy masques and translations of Italian and Spanish farces for a comedy depicting native scoundrelism. Probably enough, indeed, the great and sudden development of the French stage, which took place in the middle of the seventeenth century under Corneille and Moliere, was excited by the English cavalier playwrights who took refuge in France.

No doubt, as Mr. Gifford says, the Puritans were exasperated against the stage-players by the insults heaped on them; but the cause of quarrel lay far deeper than any such personal soreness. The Puritans had attacked the players before the players meddled with them, and that on principle; with what justification must be considered hereafter. But the fact is (and this seems to have been, like many

other facts, conveniently forgotten), that the Puritans were by no means alone in their protest against the stage, and that the war was not begun exclusively by them. As early as the latter half of the sixteenth century, not merely Northbrooke, Gosson, Stubs, and Reynolds had lifted up their voices against them, but Archbishop Parker, Bishop Babington, Bishop Hall, and the author of the *Mirror for Magistrates*. The University of Oxford, in 1584, had passed a statute forbidding common plays and players in the university, on the very same moral grounds on which the Puritans objected to them. The city of London, in 1580, had obtained from the Queen the suppression of plays on Sundays; and not long after, 'considering that play-houses and dicing-houses were traps for young gentlemen and others,' obtained leave from the Queen and Privy Council to thrust the players out of the city, and to pull down the play-houses, five in number; and, paradoxical as it may seem, there is little doubt that, by the letter of the law, 'stage plays and enterludes' were, even to the end of Charles the First's reign, 'unlawful pastime,' being forbidden by 14 Eliz., 39 Eliz., 1 Jacobi, 3 Jacobi, and 1 Caroli, and the players subject to severe punishment as 'rogues and vagabonds.' The Act of 1 Jacobi seems even to have gone so far as to repeal the clauses which, in Elizabeth's reign, had allowed companies of players the protection of a 'baron or honourable person of greater degree,' who might 'authorise them to play under his hand and seal of arms.' So that the Puritans were only demanding of the sovereigns that they should enforce the very laws which they themselves had made, and which they and their nobles were setting at defiance. Whether the plays ought to have been put down, and whether the laws were necessary, is a different question; but certainly the court and the aristocracy stood in the questionable, though too common, position of men who made laws which prohibited to the poor amusements in which they themselves indulged without restraint.

But were these plays objectionable? As far as the comedies are concerned, that will depend on the answer to the question, Are plays objectionable, the staple subject of which is adultery? Now, we cannot but agree with the Puritans, that adultery is not a subject for comedy at all. It may be for tragedy; but for comedy never. It is a sin; not merely theologically, but socially, one of the very worst sins, the parent of seven other sins,—of falsehood, suspicion, hate, murder, and a whole bevy of devils. The prevalence of adultery in any country has always been a sign and a cause of social insincerity, division, and revolution; where a people has learnt to connive and laugh at it, and to treat it as a light thing, that people has been always careless, base, selfish, cowardly,—ripe for slavery. And we must say that either the courtiers and Londoners of James and Charles the First were in that state, or that the poets were doing their best to make them so.

We shall not shock our readers by any details on this point; we shall only say that there is hardly a comedy of the seventeenth century,

with the exception of Shakspeare's, in which adultery is not introduced as a subject of laughter, and often made the staple of the whole plot. The seducer is, if not openly applauded, at least let to pass as a 'handsome gentleman'; the injured husband is, as in that Italian literature of which we shall speak shortly, the object of every kind of scorn and ridicule. In this latter habit (common to most European nations) there is a sort of justice. A man can generally retain his wife's affections if he will behave himself like a man; and 'injured husbands' have for the most part no one to blame but themselves. But the matter is not a subject for comedy; not even in that case which has been always too common in France, Italy, and the Romish countries, and which seems to have been painfully common in England in the seventeenth century, when, by a *mariage de convenance*, a young girl is married up to a rich idiot or a decrepit old man. Such things are not comedies, but tragedies; subjects for pity and for silence, not for brutal ribaldry. Therefore the men who look on them in the light which the Stuart dramatists looked are not good men, and do no good service to the country; especially when they erect adultery into a science, and seem to take a perverse pleasure in teaching their audience every possible method, accident, cause, and consequence of it; always, too, when they have an opportunity, pointing 'Eastward Ho!' i.e. to the city of London, as the quarter where court gallants can find boundless indulgence for their passions amid the fair wives of dull and cowardly citizens. If the citizens drove the players out of London, the playwrights took good care to have their revenge. The citizen is their standard butt. These shallow parasites, and their shallower sovereigns, seem to have taken a perverse and, as it happened, a fatal pleasure in insulting them. Sad it is to see in Shirley's 'Gamester,' Charles the First's favourite play, a passage like that in Act i. Scene 1, where old Barnacle proclaims, unblushing, his own shame and that of his fellow-merchants. Surely, if Charles ever could have repented of any act of his own, he must have repented, in many a humiliating after-passage with that same city of London, of having given those base words his royal warrant and approbation.

The tragedies of the seventeenth century are, on the whole, as questionable as the comedies. That there are noble plays among them here and there, no one denies—any more than that there are exquisitely amusing plays among the comedies; but as the staple interest of the comedies is dirt, so the staple interest of the tragedies is crime. Revenge, hatred, villainy, incest, and murder upon murder are their constant themes, and (with the exception of Shakspeare, Ben Jonson in his earlier plays, and perhaps Massinger) they handle these horrors with little or no moral purpose, save that of exciting and amusing the audience, and of displaying their own power of delineation in a way which makes one but too ready to believe the accusations of the Puritans (supported as they are by many ugly anecdotes) that the play-writers and actors were mostly men of fierce and reckless lives, who had but too practical an

acquaintance with the dark passions which they sketch. This is notoriously the case with most of the French novelists of the modern 'Literature of Horror,' and the two literatures are morally identical. We do not know of a complaint which can be justly brought against the School of Balzac and Dumas which will not equally apply to the average tragedy of the whole period preceding the civil wars.

This public appetite for horrors, for which they catered so greedily, tempted them toward another mistake, which brought upon them (and not undeservedly) heavy odium.

One of the worst counts against Dramatic Art (as well as against Pictorial) was the simple fact that it came from Italy. We must fairly put ourselves into the position of an honest Englishman of the seventeenth century before we can appreciate the huge praejudicium which must needs have arisen in his mind against anything which could claim a Transalpine parentage. Italy was then not merely the stronghold of Popery. That in itself would have been a fair reason for others beside Puritans saying, 'If the root be corrupt, the fruit will be also: any expression of Italian thought and feeling must be probably unwholesome while her vitals are being eaten out by an abominable falsehood, only half believed by the masses, and not believed at all by the higher classes, even those of the priesthood; but only kept up for their private aggrandisement.' But there was more than hypothesis in favour of the men who might say this; there was universal, notorious, shocking fact. It was a fact that Italy was the centre where sins were invented worthy of the doom of the Cities of the Plain, and from whence they spread to all nations who had connection with her. We dare give no proof of this assertion.

The Italian morals and the Italian lighter literature of the sixteenth and of the beginning of the seventeenth century were such, that one is almost ashamed to confess that one has looked into them, although the painful task is absolutely necessary for one who wishes to understand either the European society of the time or the Puritan hatred of the drama. *Non ragionam di lor: ma guarda e passa.*

It is equally a fact that these vices were imported into England by the young men who, under pretence of learning the Italian polish, travelled to Italy. From the days of Gabriel Harvey and Lord Oxford, about the middle of Elizabeth's reign, this foul tide had begun to set toward England, gaining an additional coarseness and frivolity in passing through the French Court (then an utter Gehenna) in its course hitherward; till, to judge by Marston's 'Satires,' certain members of the higher classes had, by the beginning of James's reign, learnt nearly all which the Italians had to teach them. Marston writes in a rage, it is true; foaming, stamping, and vapouring too much to escape the suspicion of exaggeration; yet he dared not have published the things which he does, had he not fair ground for some at least of his assertions. And Marston, be it remembered, was no

Puritan, but a playwright, and Ben Jonson's friend.

Bishop Hall, in his 'Satires,' describes things bad enough, though not so bad as Marston does; but what is even more to the purpose, he wrote, and dedicated to James, a long dissuasive against the fashion of running abroad. Whatever may be thought of the arguments of 'Quo vadis?—a Censure of Travel,' its main drift is clear enough. Young gentlemen, by going to Italy, learnt to be fops and profligates, and probably Papists into the bargain. These assertions there is no denying. Since the days of Lord Oxford, most of the ridiculous and expensive fashions in dress had come from Italy, as well as the newest modes of sin; and the playwrights themselves make no secret of the fact. There is no need to quote instances; they are innumerable; and the most serious are not fit to be quoted, scarcely the titles of the plays in which they occur; but they justify almost every line of Bishop Hall's questions (of which some of the strongest expressions have necessarily been omitted):-

'What mischief have we among us which we have not borrowed?

'To begin at our skin: who knows not whence we had the variety of our vain disguises? As if we had not wit enough to be foolish unless we were taught it. These dresses, being constant in their mutability, show us our masters. What is it that we have not learned of our neighbours, save only to be proud good-cheap? whom would it not vex to see how that the other sex hath learned to make anticks and monsters of themselves? Whence come their (absurd fashions); but the one from some ill-shaped dame of France, the other from the worse-minded courtesans of Italy? Whence else learned they to daub these mud-walls with apothecaries' mortar; and those high washes, which are so cunningly licked on that the wet napkin of Phryne should he deceived? Whence the frizzled and powdered bushes of their borrowed hair? As if they were ashamed of the head of God's making, and proud of the tire-woman's. Where learned we that devilish art and practice of duel, wherein men seek honour in blood, and are taught the ambition of being glorious butchers of men? Where had we that luxurious delicacy in our feasts, in which the nose is no less pleased than the palate, and the eye no less than either? wherein the piles of dishes make barricadoes against the appetite, and with a pleasing encumbrance trouble a hungry guest. Where those forms of ceremonious quaffing, in which men have learned to make gods of others and beasts of themselves, and lose their reason while they pretend to do reason? Where the lawlessness (miscalled freedom) of a wild tongue, that runs, with reins on the neck, through the bedchambers of princes, their closets, their council tables, and spares not the very cabinet of their breasts, much less can be barred out of the most retired secrecy of inferior greatness? Where the change of noble attendance and hospitality into four wheels and some few butterflies? Where the art of dishonesty in practical Machiavelism, in false equivocations? Where the slight account of

that filthiness which is but condemned as venial, and tolerated as not unnecessary? Where the skill of civil and honourable hypocrisy in those formal compliments which do neither expect belief from others nor carry any from ourselves? Where' (and here Bishop Hall begins to speak concerning things on which we must be silent, as of matters notorious and undeniable.) 'Where that close Atheism, which secretly laughs God in the face, and thinks it weakness to believe, wisdom to profess any religion? Where the bloody and tragical science of king-killing, the new divinity of disobedience and rebellion? with too many other evils, wherewith foreign conversation hath endangered the infection of our peace?'—Bishop Hall's 'Quo Vadis, or a Censure of Travel,' vol xii. sect. 22.

Add to these a third plain fact, that Italy was the mother-country of the drama, where it had thriven with wonderful fertility ever since the beginning of the sixteenth century. However much truth there may be in the common assertion that the old 'miracle plays' and 'mysteries' were the parents of the English drama (as they certainly were of the Spanish and the Italian), we have yet to learn how much our stage owed, from its first rise under Elizabeth, to direct importations from Italy. This is merely thrown out as a suggestion; to establish the fact would require a wide acquaintance with the early Italian drama; meanwhile, let two patent facts have their due weight. The names of the characters in most of our early regular comedies are Italian; so are the scenes; and so, one hopes, are the manners, at least they profess to be so. Next, the plots of many of the dramas are notoriously taken from the Italian novelists; and if Shakspeare (who had a truly divine instinct for finding honey where others found poison) went to Cinthio for 'Othello' and 'Measure for Measure,' to Bandello for 'Romeo and Juliet,' and to Boccaccio for 'Cymbeline,' there were plenty of other playwrights who would go to the same sources for worse matter, or at least catch from these profligate writers somewhat of their Italian morality, which exalts adultery into a virtue, seduction into a science, and revenge into a duty; which revels in the horrible as freely as any French novelist of the romantic school; and whose only value is its pitiless exposure of the profligacy of the Romish priesthood: if an exposure can be valuable which makes a mock equally of things truly and falsely sacred, and leaves on the reader's mind the fear that the writer saw nothing in heaven or earth worthy of belief, respect, or self-sacrifice, save personal enjoyment.

Now this is the morality of the Italian novelists; and to judge from their vivid sketches (which, they do not scruple to assert, were drawn from life, and for which they give names, places, and all details which might amuse the noble gentlemen and ladies to whom these stories are dedicated), this had been the morality of Italy for some centuries past. This, also, is the general morality of the English stage in the seventeenth century. Can we wonder that thinking men should have seen a connection between Italy and the

stage? Certainly the playwrights put themselves between the horns of an ugly dilemma. Either the vices which they depicted were those of general English society, and of themselves also (for they lived in the very heart of town and court foppery); or else they were the vices of a foreign country, with which the English were comparatively unacquainted. In the first case, we can only say that the Stuart age in England was one which deserved purgation of the most terrible kind, and to get rid of which the severest and most abnormal measures would have been not only justifiable, but, to judge by the experience of all history, necessary; for extraordinary diseases never have been, and never will be, eradicated save by extraordinary medicines. In the second case, the playwrights were wantonly defiling the minds of the people, and, instead of 'holding up a mirror to vice,' instructing frail virtue in vices which she had not learned, and fully justifying old Prynne's indignant complaint -

'The acting of foreign, obsolete, and long since forgotten villainies on the stage, is so far from working a detestation of them in the spectators' minds (who, perchance, were utterly ignorant of them, till they were acquainted with them at the play-house, and so needed no dehortation from them), that it often excites dangerous dunghill spirits, who have nothing in them for to make them eminent, to reduce them into practice, of purpose to perpetuate their spurious ill-serving memories to posterity, leastwise in some tragic interlude.'

That Prynne spoke herein nought but sober sense, our own police reports will sufficiently prove. It is notorious that the representation in our own days of 'Tom and Jerry' and of 'Jack Sheppard' did excite dozens of young lads to imitate the heroes of those dramas; and such must have been the effect of similar and worse representations in the Stuart age. No rational man will need the authority of Bishop Babington, Doctor Leighton, Archbishop Parker, Purchas, Sparkes, Reynolds, White, or any one else, Churchman or Puritan, prelate or 'penitent reclaimed play-poet,' like Stephen Gosson, to convince him that, as they assert, citizens' wives (who are generally represented as the proper subjects for seduction) 'have, even on their deathbeds, with tears confessed that they have received, at these spectacles, such evil infections as have turned their minds from chaste cogitations, and made them, of honest women, light huswives; . . . have brought their husbands into contempt, their children into question, . . . and their souls into the assault of a dangerous state;' or that 'The devices of carrying and re-carrying letters by laundresses, practising with pedlars to transport their tokens by colourable means to sell their merchandise, and other kinds of policies to beguile fathers of their children, husbands of their wives, guardians of their wards, and masters of their servants, were aptly taught in these schools of abuse.' 2

The matter is simple enough. We should not allow these plays to be acted in our own day, because we know that they would produce their

effects. We should call him a madman who allowed his daughters or his servants to see such representations. 3 Why, in all fairness, were the Puritans wrong in condemning that which we now have absolutely forbidden?

We will go no further into the details of the licentiousness of the old play-houses. Gosson and his colleague the anonymous Penitent assert them, as does Prynne, to have been not only schools but antechambers to houses of a worse kind, and that the lessons learned in the pit were only not practised also in the pit. What reason have we to doubt it, who know that till Mr. Macready commenced a practical reformation of this abuse, for which his name will be ever respected, our own comparatively purified stage was just the same? Let any one who remembers the saloons of Drury Lane and Covent Garden thirty years ago judge for himself what the accessories of the Globe or the Fortune must have been, in days when players were allowed to talk inside as freely as the public behaved outside.

Not that the poets or the players had any conscious intention of demoralising their hearers, any more than they had of correcting them. We will lay on them the blame of no special *malus animus*: but, at the same time, we must treat their fine words about 'holding a mirror up to vice,' and 'showing the age its own deformity,' as mere cant, which the men themselves must have spoken tongue in cheek. It was as much an insincere cant in those days as it was when, two generations later, Jeremy Collier exposed its falsehood in the mouth of Congreve. If the poets had really intended to show vice its own deformity, they would have represented it (as Shakspeare always does) as punished, and not as triumphant. It is ridiculous to talk of moral purpose in works in which there is no moral justice. The only condition which can excuse the representation of evil is omitted. The simple fact is that the poets wanted to draw a house; that this could most easily be done by the coarsest and most violent means; and that not being often able to find stories exciting enough in the past records of sober English society, they went to Italy and Spain for the violent passions and wild crimes of southern temperaments, excited, and yet left lawless, by a superstition believed in enough to darken and brutalise, but not enough to control, its victims. Those were the countries which just then furnished that strange mixture of inward savagery with outward civilisation, which is the immoral playwright's fittest material; because, while the inward savagery moves the passions of the audience, the outward civilisation brings the character near enough to them to give them a likeness of themselves in their worst moments, such as no 'Mystery of Cain' or 'Tragedy of Prometheus' can give.

Does this seem too severe in the eyes of those who value the drama for its lessons in human nature? On that special point something must be said hereafter. Meanwhile, hear one of the sixteenth century poets; one who cannot be suspected of any leaning toward Puritanism;

one who had as high notions of his vocation as any man; and one who so far fulfilled those notions as to become a dramatist inferior only to Shakspeare. Let Ben Jonson himself speak, and in his preface to 'Volpone' tell us in his own noble prose what he thought of the average morality of his contemporary playwrights:-

'For if men will impartially and not asquint look toward the offices and functions of a poet, they will easily conclude to themselves the impossibility of any man's being a good poet without first being a good man. He that is said to be able to inform young men to all good discipline, inflame grown men to all great virtues, keep old men in their best and supreme state, or, as they decline to childhood, recover them to their first strength; that comes forth the interpreter and arbiter of nature, a teacher of things divine no less than human, a master in manners and can alone (or with a few) effect the business of mankind; this, I take him, is no subject for pride and ignorance to exercise their railing rhetoric upon. But it will here be hastily answered that the writers of these days are other things, that not only their manners but their natures are inverted, and nothing remaining of them of the dignity of poet but the abused name, which every scribe usurps; that now, especially in dramattick, or (as they term it) stage poetry, nothing but ribaldry, profanation, blasphemies, all licence of offence toward God and man is practised. I dare not deny a great part of this (and I am sorry I dare not), because in some men's abortive features (and would God they had never seen the light!) it is over true; but that all are bound on his bold adventure for hell, is a most uncharitable thought, and uttered, a more malicious slander. For every particular I can (and from a most clear conscience) affirm that I have ever trembled to think toward the least profaneness, and have loathed the use of such foul and unwashed . . . [his expression is too strong for quotation] as is now made the food of the scene.'

It is a pity to curtail this splendid passage, both for its lofty ideal of poetry, and for its corroboration of the Puritan complaints against the stage; but a few lines on a still stronger sentence occurs:-

'The increase of which lust in liberty, together with the present trade of the stage, in all their masculine interludes, what liberal soul doth not abhor? Where nothing but filth of the mire is uttered, and that with such impropriety of phrase, such plenty of solecisms, such dearth of sense, so bold prolepses, such racked metaphors, with (indecent) able to violate the ear of a Pagan, and blasphemy to turn the blood of a Christian to water.'

So speaks Ben Jonson in 1605, not finding, it seems, play-writing a peaceful trade, or play-poets and play-hearers improving company. After him we should say no further testimony on this unpleasant matter ought to be necessary. He may have been morose, fanatical,

exaggerative; but his bitter words suggest at least this dilemma. Either they are true, and the play-house atmosphere (as Prynne says it was) that of Gehenna: or they are untrue, and the mere fruits of spite and envy against more successful poets. And what does that latter prove, but that the greatest poet of his age (after Shakspeare has gone) was not as much esteemed as some poets whom we know to have been more filthy and more horrible than he? which, indeed, is the main complaint of Jonson himself. It will be rejoined, of course, that he was an altogether envious man; that he envied Shakspeare, girded at his York and Lancaster plays, at 'The Winter's Tale' and 'The Tempest,' in the prologue to 'Every Man in his Humour'; and, indeed, Jonson's writings, and those of many other playwrights, leave little doubt that stage rivalry called out the bitterest hatred and the basest vanity; and that, perhaps, Shakspeare's great soul was giving way to the pettiest passions, when in 'Hamlet' he had his fling at the 'aiery of children, little eyases, that cry out on the top of question, and are most tyrannically clapped for 't.' It may be that he was girding in return at Jonson, when he complained that 'their writer did them wrong to make them complain against their own succession,' i.e. against themselves, when 'grown to common players.' Be that as it may. Great Shakspeare may have been unjust to only less great Jonson, as Jonson was to Shakspeare: but Jonson certainly is not so in all his charges. Some of the faults which he attributes to Shakspeare are really faults.

At all events, we know that he was not unjust to the average of his contemporaries, by the evidence of the men's own plays. We know that the decadence of the stage of which he complains went on uninterruptedly after his time, and in the very direction which he pointed out.

On this point there can be no doubt; for these hodmen of poetry 'made a wall in our father's house, and the bricks are alive to testify unto this day.' So that we cannot do better than give a few samples thereof, at least samples decent enough for modern readers, and let us begin, not with a hodman, but with Jonson himself.

Now, Ben Jonson is worthy of our love and respect, for he was a very great genius, immaculate or not; 'Rare Ben,' with all his faults. One can never look without affection on the magnificent manhood of that rich free forehead, even though one may sigh over the petulance and pride which brood upon the lip and eyebrow,

'Dowered with the hate of hate, the scorn of scorn,  
The love of love.'

A Michael Angelo who could laugh, which that Italian one, one fancies, never could. One ought to have, too, a sort of delicacy about saying much against him; for he is dead, and can make, for the time being at least, no rejoinder. There are dead men whom one is

not much ashamed to 'upset' after their death, because one would not have been much afraid of doing so when they were alive. But 'Rare Ben' had terrible teeth, and used them too. A man would have thought twice ere he snapt at him living, and therefore it seems somewhat a cowardly trick to bark securely at his ghost. Nevertheless it is no unfair question to ask—Do not his own words justify the Puritan complaints? But if so, why does he rail at the Puritans for making their complaints? His answer would have been that they railed in ignorance, not merely at low art, as we call it now, but at high art and all art. Be it so. Here was their fault, if fault it was in those days. For to discriminate between high art and low art they must have seen both. And for Jonson's wrath to be fair and just he must have shown them both. Let us see what the pure drama is like which he wishes to substitute for the foul drama of his contemporaries; and, to bring the matter nearer home, let us take one of the plays in which he hits deliberately at the Puritans, namely the 'Alchemist,' said to have been first acted in 1610 'by the king's majesty's servants.' Look, then, at this well-known play, and take Jonson at his word. Allow that Ananias and Tribulation Wholesome are, as they very probably are, fair portraits of a class among the sectaries of the day: but bear in mind, too, that if this be allowed, the other characters shall be held as fair portraits also. Otherwise, all must be held to be caricature; and then the onslaught on the Puritans vanishes into nothing, or worse. Now in either case, Ananias and Tribulation are the best men in the play. They palter with their consciences, no doubt: but they have consciences, which no one else in the play has, except poor Surly; and he, be it remembered, comes to shame, is made a laughing-stock, and 'cheats himself,' as he complains at last, 'by that same foolish vice of honesty': while in all the rest what have we but every form of human baseness? Lovell, the master, if he is to be considered a negative character as doing no wrong, has, at all events, no more recorded of him than the noble act of marrying by deceit a young widow for the sake of her money, the philosopher's stone, by the bye, and highest object of most of the seventeenth century dramatists. If most of the rascals meet with due disgrace, none of them is punished; and the greatest rascal of all, who, when escape is impossible, turns traitor, and after deserving the cart and pillory a dozen times for his last and most utter baseness, is rewarded by full pardon, and the honour of addressing the audience at the play's end in the most smug and self-satisfied tone, and of 'putting himself on you that are my country,' not doubting, it seems, that there were among them a fair majority who would think him a very smart fellow, worthy of all imitation.

Now is this play a moral or an immoral one? Of its coarseness we say nothing. We should not endure it, of course, nowadays; and on that point something must be said hereafter: but if we were to endure plain speaking as the only method of properly exposing vice, should we endure the moral which, instead of punishing vice, rewards it?

And, meanwhile, what sort of a general state of society among the Anti-Puritan party does the play sketch? What but a background of profligacy and frivolity?

A proof, indeed, of the general downward tendencies of the age may be found in the writings of Ben Jonson himself. Howsoever pure and lofty the ideal which he laid down for himself (and no doubt honestly) in the Preface to 'Volpone,' he found it impossible to keep up to it. Nine years afterwards we find him, in his 'Bartholomew Fair,' catering to the low tastes of James the First in ribaldry at which, if one must needs laugh—as who that was not more than man could help doing over that scene between Rabbi Busy and the puppets?—shallow and untrue as the gist of the humour is, one feels the next moment as if one had been indulging in unholy mirth at the expense of some grand old Noah who has come to shame in his cups.

But lower still does Jonson fall in that Masque of the 'Gipsies Metamorphosed,' presented to the king in 1621, when Jonson was forty-seven; old enough, one would have thought, to know better. It is not merely the insincere and all but blasphemous adulation which is shocking,—that was but the fashion of the times: but the treating these gipsies and beggars, and their 'thieves' Latin' dialect, their filthiness and cunning, ignorance and recklessness, merely as themes for immoral and inhuman laughter. Jonson was by no means the only poet of that day to whom the hordes of profligate and heathen nomads which infested England were only a comical phase of humanity, instead of being, as they would be now, objects of national shame and sorrow, of pity and love, which would call out in the attempt to redeem them the talents and energies of good men. But Jonson certainly sins more in this respect than any of his contemporaries. He takes a low pleasure in parading his intimate acquaintance with these poor creatures' foul slang and barbaric laws; and is, we should say, the natural father of that lowest form of all literature, which has since amused the herd, though in a form greatly purified, in the form of 'Beggars' Operas,' 'Dick Turpins,' and 'Jack Sheppards.' Everything which is objectionable in such modern publications as these was exhibited, in far grosser forms, by one of the greatest poets who ever lived, for the amusement of a king of England; and yet the world still is at a loss to know why sober and God-fearing men detested both the poet and the king.

And that Masque is all the more saddening exhibition of the degradation of a great soul, because in it, here and there, occur passages of the old sweetness and grandeur; *disjecta membra poetæ* such as these, which, even although addressed to James, are perfect:-

'3rd Gipsy.

Look how the winds upon the waves grow tame,

Take up land sounds upon their purple wings,  
And, catching each from other, bear the same  
To every angle of their sacred springs.  
So will we take his praise, and hurl his name  
About the globe, in thousand airy rings.'

Let us pass on. Why stay to look upon the fall of such a spirit?

There is one point, nevertheless, which we may as well speak of here, and shortly; for spoken of it must be as delicately as is possible. The laugh raised at Zeal-for-the-land Busy's expense, in 'Bartholomew Fair,' turns on the Puritan dislike of seeing women's parts acted by boys. Jonson shirks the question by making poor Busy fall foul of puppets instead of live human beings: but the question is shirked nevertheless. What honest answer he could have given to the Puritans is hard to conceive. Prynne, in his 'Histriomastix,' may have pushed a little too far the argument drawn from the prohibition in the Mosaic law: yet one would fancy that the practice was forbidden by Moses' law, not arbitrarily, but because it was a bad practice, which did harm, as every antiquarian knows that it did; and that, therefore, Prynne was but reasonable in supposing that in his day a similar practice would produce a similar evil. Our firm conviction is that it did so, and that as to the matter of fact, Prynne was perfectly right; and that to make a boy a stage-player was pretty certainly to send him to the devil. Let any man of common sense imagine to himself the effect on a young boy's mind which would be produced by representing shamelessly before a public audience not merely the language, but the passions, of such women as occur in almost every play. We appeal to common sense—would any father allow his own children to personate, even in private, the basest of mankind? And yet we must beg pardon: for common sense, it is to be supposed, has decided against us, as long as parents allow their sons to act yearly at Westminster the stupid low art of Terence, while grave and reverend prelates and divines look on approving. The Westminster play has had no very purifying influence on the minds of the young gentlemen who personate heathen damsels; and we only ask, What must have been the effect of representing far fouler characters than Terence's on the minds of uneducated lads of the lower classes? Prynne and others hint at still darker abominations than the mere defilement of the conscience: we shall say nothing of them, but that, from collateral evidence, we believe every word they say; and that when pretty little Cupid's mother, in Jonson's Christmas masque, tells how 'She could have had money enough for him, had she been tempted, and have let him out by the week to the king's players,' and how 'Master Burbadge has been about and about with her for him, and old Mr. Hemings too,' she had better have tied a stone round the child's neck, and hove him over London Bridge, than have handed him over to thrifty Burbadge, that he might make out of his degradation

more money to buy land withal, and settle comfortably in his native town, on the fruits of others' sin. Honour to old Prynne, bitter and narrow as he was, for his passionate and eloquent appeals to the humanity and Christianity of England, in behalf of those poor children whom not a bishop on the bench interfered to save; but, while they were writing and persecuting in behalf of baptismal regeneration, left those to perish whom they declared so stoutly to be regenerate in baptism. Prynne used that argument too, and declared these stage-plays to be among the very 'pomps and vanities which Christians renounced at baptism.' He may or may not have been wrong in identifying them with the old heathen pantomimes and games of the circus, and in burying his adversaries under a mountain of quotations from the Fathers and the Romish divines (for Prynne's reading seems to have been quite enormous). Those very prelates could express reverence enough for the Fathers when they found aught in them which could be made to justify their own system, though perhaps it had really even less to do therewith than the Roman pantomimes had with the Globe Theatre: but the Church of England had retained in her Catechism the old Roman word 'pomps,' as one of the things which were to be renounced; and as 'pomps' confessedly meant at first those very spectacles of the heathen circus and theatre, Prynne could not be very illogical in believing that, as it had been retained, it was retained to testify against something, and probably against the thing in England most like the 'pomps' of heathen Rome. Meanwhile, let Churchmen decide whether of the two was the better Churchman—Prynne, who tried to make the baptismal covenant mean something, or Laud, who allowed such a play as 'The Ordinary' to be written by his especial protege, Cartwright, the Oxford scholar, and acted before him probably by Oxford scholars, certainly by christened boys. We do not pretend to pry into the counsels of the Most High; but if unfaithfulness to a high and holy trust, when combined with lofty professions and pretensions, does (as all history tells us that it does) draw down the vengeance of Almighty God, then we need look no further than this one neglect of the seventeenth century prelates (whether its cause was stupidity, insincerity, or fear of the monarchs to whose tyranny they pandered), to discover full reason why it pleased God to sweep them out awhile with the besom of destruction.

There is another feature in the plays of the seventeenth century, new, as far as we know, alike to English literature and manners; and that is, the apotheosis of Rakes. Let the faults of the Middle Age, or of the Tudors, have been what they may, that class of person was in their time simply an object of disgust. The word which then signified a Rake is, in the 'Morte d'Arthur' (temp. Ed. IV.), the foulest term of disgrace which can be cast upon a knight; whilst even up to the latter years of Elizabeth the contempt of parents and elders seems to have been thought a grievous sin. In Italy, even, fountain of all the abominations of the age, respect for the fifth commandment seems to have lingered after all the other nine had been

forgotten; we find Castiglione, in his 'Corteggiano' (about 1520), regretting the modest and respectful training of the generation which had preceded him; and to judge from facts, the Puritan method of education, stern as it was, was neither more nor less than the method which, a generation before, had been common to Romanist and to Protestant, Puritan and Churchman.

But with the Stuart era (perhaps at the end of Elizabeth's reign) fathers became gradually personages who are to be disobeyed, sucked of their money, fooled, even now and then robbed and beaten, by the young gentlemen of spirit; and the most Christian kings, James and Charles, with their queens and court, sit by to see ruffling and roystering, beating the watch and breaking windows, dicing, drinking, duelling, and profligacy (provided the victim be not a woman of gentle birth), set forth not merely as harmless amusements for young gentlemen, but (as in Beaumont and Fletcher's play of 'Monsieur Thomas') virtues without which a man is despicable. On this point, as on many others, those who have, for ecclesiastical reasons, tried to represent the first half of the seventeenth century as a golden age have been altogether unfair. There is no immorality of the court plays of Charles II.'s time which may not be found in those of Charles I.'s. Sedley and Etherege are not a whit worse, but only more stupid, than Fletcher or Shirley; and Monsieur Thomas is the spiritual father of all Angry lads, Rufflers, Blades, Bullies, Mohocks, Corinthians, and Dandies, down to the last drunken clerk who wrenched off a knocker, or robbed his master's till to pay his losses at a betting-office. True; we of this generation can hardly afford to throw stones. The scapegrace ideal of humanity has enjoyed high patronage within the last half century; and if Monsieur Thomas seemed lovely in the eyes of James and Charles, so did Jerry and Corinthian Tom in those of some of the first gentlemen of England. Better days, however, have dawned; 'Tom and Jerry,' instead of running three hundred nights, would be as little endured on the stage as 'Monsieur Thomas' would be; the heroes who aspire toward that ideal are now consigned by public opinion to Rhadamanthus and the treadmill; while if, like Monsieur Thomas, they knocked down their own father, they would, instead of winning a good wife, be 'cut' by braver and finer gentlemen than Monsieur Thomas himself: but what does this fact prove save that England has at last discovered that the Puritan opinion of this matter (as of some others) was the right one?

There is another aspect in which we must look at the Stuart patronage of profligate scapegraces on the stage. They would not have been endured on the stage had they not been very common off it; and if there had not been, too, in the hearts of spectators some lurking excuse for them: it requires no great penetration to see what that excuse must have been. If the Stuart age, aristocracy, and court were as perfect as some fancy them, such fellows would have been monstrous in it and inexcusable, probably impossible. But if it was (as it may be proved to have been) an utterly deboshed, insincere,

decrepit, and decaying age, then one cannot but look on Monsieur Thomas with something of sympathy as well as pity. Take him as he stands; he is a fellow of infinite kindness, wit, spirit, and courage, but with nothing on which to employ those powers. He would have done his work admirably in an earnest and enterprising age as a Hudson's Bay Company clerk, an Indian civilian, a captain of a man-of-war—anything where he could find a purpose and a work. Doubt it not. How many a Monsieur Thomas of our own days, whom a few years ago one had rashly fancied capable of nothing higher than coulisses and cigars, private theatricals and white kid gloves, has been not only fighting and working like a man, but meditating and writing homeward like a Christian, through the dull misery of those trenches at Sevastopol; and has found, amid the Crimean snows, that merciful fire of God, which could burn the chaff out of his heart and thaw the crust of cold frivolity into warm and earnest life. And even at such a youth's worst, reason and conscience alike forbid us to deal out to him the same measure as we do to the offences of the cool and hoary profligate, or to the darker and subtler spiritual sins of the false professor. But if the wrath of God be not unmistakably and practically revealed from heaven against youthful profligacy and disobedience in after sorrow and shame of some kind or other, against what sin is it revealed? It was not left for our age to discover that the wages of sin is death: but Charles, his players and his courtiers, refused to see what the very heathen had seen, and so had to be taught the truth over again by another and a more literal lesson; and what neither stage-plays nor sermons could teach them, sharp shot and cold steel did.

'But still the Puritans were barbarians for hating Art altogether.' The fact was, that they hated what art they saw in England, and that this was low art, bad art, growing ever lower and worse. If it be said that Shakspeare's is the very highest art, the answer is, that what they hated in him was not his high art, but his low art, the foul and horrible elements which he had in common with his brother play-writers. True, there is far less of these elements in Shakspeare than in any of his compeers: but they are there. And what the Puritans hated in him was exactly what we have to expunge before we can now represent his plays. If it be said that they ought to have discerned and appreciated the higher elements in him, so ought the rest of their generation. The Puritans were surely not bound to see in Shakspeare what his patrons and brother poets did not see. And it is surely a matter of fact that the deep spiritual knowledge which makes, and will make, Shakspeare's plays (and them alone of all the seventeenth century plays) a heritage for all men and all ages, quite escaped the insight of his contemporaries, who probably put him in the same rank which Webster, writing about 1612, has assigned to him.

'I have ever cherished a good opinion of other men's witty labours, especially of that full and heightened style of Master Chapman; the

laboured and understanding works of Mr. Jonson; the no less witty composesures of the both wittily excellent Mr. Beaumont and Mr. Fletcher; and lastly (without wrong last to be named), the right happy and copious industry of Shakspeare, Mr. Dekker, and Mr. Heywood.'

While Webster, then, one of the best poets of the time, sees nothing in Shakspeare beyond the same 'happy and copious industry' which he sees in Dekker and Heywood,—while Cartwright, perhaps the only young poet of real genius in Charles the First's reign, places Fletcher's name "Twixt Jonson's grave and Shakspeare's lighter sound," and tells him that

'Shakspeare to thee was dull, whose best wit lies  
I' th' ladies' questions, and the fool's replies.

Whose wit our nice times would obsceneness call.

Nature was all his art; thy vein was free  
As his, but without his scurrility;' 4

while even Milton, who, Puritan as he was, loved art with all his soul, only remarks on Shakspeare's marvellous lyrical sweetness, 'his native wood-notes wild'; what shame to the Puritans if they, too, did not discover the stork among the cranes?

An answer has often been given to arguments of this kind, which deserves a few moments' consideration. It is said, 'the grossness of the old play-writers was their misfortune, not their crime. It was the fashion of the age. It is not our fashion, certainly; but they meant no harm by it. The age was a free-spoken one; and perhaps none the worse for that.' Mr. Dyce, indeed, the editor of Webster's plays, seems inclined to exalt this habit into a virtue. After saying that the licentious and debauched are made 'as odious in representation as they would be if they were actually present'—an assertion which must be flatly denied, save in the case of Shakspeare, who seldom or never, to our remembrance, seems to forget that the wages of sin is death, and who, however coarse he may be, keeps stoutly on the side of virtue—Mr. Dyce goes on to say, that 'perhaps the language of the stage is purified in proportion as our morals are deteriorated; and we dread the mention of the vices which we are not ashamed to practise; while our forefathers, under the sway of a less fastidious but a more energetic principle of virtue, were careless of words, and only considerate of actions.'

To this clever piece of special pleading we can only answer that the fact is directly contrary; that there is a mass of unanimous evidence which cannot be controverted to prove that England, in the first half of the seventeenth century was far more immoral than in the nineteenth; that the proofs lie patent to any dispassionate reader:

but that these pages will not be defiled by the details of them.

Let it be said that coarseness was 'the fashion of the age.' The simple question is, was it a good fashion or a bad? It is said—with little or no proof—that in simple states of society much manly virtue and much female purity have often consisted with very broad language and very coarse manners. But what of that? Drunkards may very often be very honest and brave men. Does that make drunkenness no sin? Or will honesty and courage prevent a man's being the worse for hard drinking? If so, why have we given up coarseness of language? And why has it been the better rather than the worse part of the nation, the educated and religious rather than the ignorant and wicked, who have given it up? Why? Simply because this nation, and all other nations on the Continent, in proportion to their morality, have found out that coarseness of language is, to say the least, unfit and inexpedient; that if it be wrong to do certain things, it is also, on the whole, right not to talk of them; that even certain things which are right and blessed and holy lose their sanctity by being dragged cynically to the light of day, instead of being left in the mystery in which God has wisely shrouded them. On the whole, one is inclined to suspect the defence of coarseness as insincere. Certainly, in our day, it will not hold. If any one wishes to hear coarse language in 'good society' he can hear it, I am told, in Paris: but one questions whether Parisian society be now 'under the sway of a more energetic principle of virtue' than our own. The sum total of the matter seems to be, that England has found out that on this point again the old Puritans were right. And quaintly enough, the party in the English Church who hold the Puritans most in abhorrence are the most scrupulous now upon this very point; and, in their dread of contaminating the minds of youth, are carrying education, at school and college, to such a more than Puritan precision that with the most virtuous and benevolent intentions they are in danger of giving lads merely a conventional education,—a hot-house training which will render them incapable hereafter of facing either the temptations or the labour of the world. They themselves republished Massinger's 'Virgin Martyr,' because it was a pretty Popish story, probably written by a Papist—for there is every reason to believe that Massinger was one—setting forth how the heroine was attended all through by an angel in the form of a page, and how—not to mention the really beautiful ancient fiction about the fruits which Dorothea sends back from Paradise—Theophilus overcomes the devil by means of a cross composed of flowers. Massinger's account of Theophilus' conversation will, we fear, make those who know anything of that great crisis of the human spirit suspect that Massinger's experience thereof was but small: but the fact which is most noteworthy is this—that the 'Virgin Martyr' is actually one of the foulest plays known. Every pains has been taken to prove that the indecent scenes in the play were not written by Massinger, but by Dekker; on what grounds we know not. If Dekker assisted Massinger in the play, as he is said to have done, we

are aware of no canons of internal criticism which will enable us to decide, as boldly as Mr. Gifford does, that all the indecency is Dekker's, and all the poetry Massinger's. He confesses—as indeed he is forced to do—that 'Massinger himself is not free from dialogues of low wit and buffoonery'; and then, after calling the scenes in question 'detestable ribaldry, 'a loathsome sooterkin, engendered of filth and dulness,' recommends them to the reader's supreme scorn and contempt,—with which feelings the reader will doubtless regard them: but he will also, if he be a thinking man, draw from them the following conclusions: that even if they be Dekker's—of which there is no proof—Massinger was forced, in order to the success of his play, to pander to the public taste by allowing Dekker to interpolate these villainies; that the play which, above all others of the seventeenth century, contains the most supralunar rosepink of piety, devotion, and purity, also contains the stupidest abominations of any extant play; and lastly, that those who reprinted it as a sample of the Christianity of that past golden age of High-churchmanship, had to leave out one-third of the play, for fear of becoming amenable to the laws against abominable publications.

No one denies that there are nobler words than any that we have quoted, in Jonson, in Fletcher, or in Massinger; but there is hardly a play (perhaps none) of theirs in which the immoralities of which we complain do not exist,—few of which they do not form an integral part; and now, if this is the judgment which we have to pass on the morality of the greater poets, what must the lesser ones be like?

Look, then, at Webster's two masterpieces, 'Vittoria Corrombona' and the 'Duchess of Malfi.' A few words spent on them will surely not be wasted; for they are pretty generally agreed to be the two best tragedies written since Shakspeare's time.

The whole story of 'Vittoria Corrombona' is one of sin and horror. The subject-matter of the play is altogether made up of the fiercest and the basest passions. But the play is not a study of those passions from which we may gain a great insight into human nature. There is no trace—nor is there, again, in the 'Duchess of Malfi'—of that development of human souls for good or evil which is Shakspeare's especial power—the power which, far more than any accidental 'beauties,' makes his plays, to this day, the delight alike of the simple and the wise, while his contemporaries are all but forgotten. The highest aim of dramatic art is to exhibit the development of the human soul; to construct dramas in which the conclusion shall depend, not on the events, but on the characters; and in which the characters shall not be mere embodiments of a certain passion, or a certain 'humour': but persons, each unlike all others; each having a destiny of his own by virtue of his own peculiarities, and of his own will; and each proceeding toward that destiny as he shall conquer, or yield to, circumstances; unfolding his own strength and weakness before the eyes of the audience; and

that in such a way that, after his first introduction, they should be able (in proportion to their knowledge of human nature) to predict his conduct under those circumstances. This is indeed 'high art': but we find no more of it in Webster than in the rest. His characters, be they old or young, come on the stage ready-made, full grown, and stereotyped; and therefore, in general, they are not characters at all, but mere passions or humours in human form. Now and then he essays to draw a character: but it is analytically, by description, not synthetically and dramatically, by letting the man exhibit himself in action; and in the 'Duchess of Mall' he falls into the great mistake of telling, by Antonio's mouth, more about the Duke and the Cardinal than he afterwards makes them act. Very different is Shakspeare's method of giving, at the outset, some single delicate hint about his personages which will serve as a clue to their whole future conduct; thus 'showing the whole in each part,' and stamping each man with a personality, to a degree which no other dramatist has ever approached.

But the truth is, the study of human nature is not Webster's aim. He has to arouse terror and pity, not thought, and he does it in his own way, by blood and fury, madmen and screech-owls, not without a rugged power. There are scenes of his, certainly, like that of Vittoria's trial, which have been praised for their delineation of character: but it is one thing to solve the problem, which Shakspeare has so handled in 'Lear,' 'Othello,' and 'Richard the Third,'—'Given a mixed character, to show how he may become criminal,' and to solve Webster's 'Given a ready-made criminal, to show how he commits his crimes.' To us the knowledge of character shown in Vittoria's trial scene is not an insight into Vittoria's essential heart and brain, but a general acquaintance with the conduct of all bold bad women when brought to bay. Poor Elia, who knew the world from books, and human nature principally from his own loving and gentle heart, talks of Vittoria's 'innocence—resembling boldness' 5—and 'seeming to see that matchless beauty of her face, which inspires such gay confidence in her,' and so forth.

Perfectly just and true, not of Vittoria merely, but of the average of bad young women in the presence of a police magistrate: yet amounting in all merely to this, that the strength of Webster's confest master-scene lies simply in intimate acquaintance with vicious nature in general. We will say no more on this matter, save to ask, Cui bono? Was the art of which this was the highest manifestation likely to be of much use to mankind, much less able to excuse its palpably disgusting and injurious accompaniments?

The 'Duchess of Malfi' is certainly in a purer and loftier strain: but in spite of the praise which has been lavished on her, we must take the liberty to doubt whether the poor Duchess is a 'person' at all. General goodness and beauty, intense though pure affection for a man below her in rank, and a will to carry out her purpose at all

hazards, are not enough to distinguish her from thousands of other women: but Webster has no such purpose. What he was thinking and writing of was not truth, but effect; not the Duchess, but her story; not her brothers, but their rage; not Antonio, her major-domo and husband, but his good and bad fortunes; and thus he has made Antonio merely insipid, the brothers merely unnatural, and the Duchess (in the critical moment of the play) merely forward. That curious scene, in which she acquaints Antonio with her love for him and makes him marry her, is, on the whole, painful. Webster himself seems to have felt that it was so; and, dreading lest he had gone too far, to have tried to redeem the Duchess at the end by making her break down in two exquisite lines of loving shame: but he has utterly forgotten to explain or justify her love by giving to Antonio (as Shakspeare would probably have done) such strong specialties of character as would compel, and therefore excuse, his mistress's affection. He has plenty of time to do this in the first scenes,—time which he wastes on irrelevant matter; and all that we gather from them is that Antonio is a worthy and thoughtful person. If he gives promise of being more, he utterly disappoints that promise afterwards. In the scene in which the Duchess tells her love, he is far smaller, rather than greater, than the Antonio of the opening scene: though (as there) altogether passive. He hears his mistress's declaration just as any other respectable youth might; is exceedingly astonished, and a good deal frightened; has to be talked out of his fears till one naturally expects a revulsion on the Duchess's part into something like scorn or shame (which might have given a good opportunity for calling out sudden strength in Antonio): but so busy is Webster with his business of drawing mere blind love, that he leaves Antonio to be a mere puppet, whose worthiness we are to believe in only from the Duchess's assurance to him that he is the perfection of all that a man should be; which, as all lovers are of the same opinion the day before the wedding, is not of much importance.

Neither in his subsequent misfortunes does Antonio make the least struggle to prove himself worthy of his mistress's affection. He is very resigned and loving, and so forth. To win renown by great deeds, and so prove his wife in the right to her brothers and all the world, never crosses his imagination. His highest aim (and that only at last) is slavishly to entreat pardon from his brothers-in-law for the mere offence of marrying their sister; and he dies by an improbable accident, the same pious and respectable insipidity which he has lived,—'ne valant pas la peine qui se donne pour lui.' The prison-scenes between the Duchess and her tormentors are painful enough, if to give pain be a dramatic virtue; and she appears in them really noble; and might have appeared far more so, had Webster taken half as much pains with her as he has with the madmen, ruffians, ghosts, and screech-owls in which his heart really delights. The only character really worked out so as to live and grow under his hand is Bosola, who, of course, is the villain of the piece, and being a rough fabric, is easily manufactured with rough tools.

Still, Webster has his wonderful touches here and there -

'Cariola. Hence, villains, tyrants, murderers! Alas  
What will you do with my lady? Call for help!  
Duchess. To whom? to our next neighbours? they are mad folk.  
Farewell, Cariola.  
I pray thee look thou giv'st my little boy  
Some syrup for his cold; and let the girl  
Say her prayers ere she sleep.—Now, what you please;  
What death?'

And so the play ends, as does 'Vittoria Corrombona,' with half a dozen murders coram populo, howls, despair, bedlam, and the shambles; putting the reader marvellously in mind of that well-known old book of the same era, 'Reynolds's God's Revenge,' in which, with all due pious horror and bombastic sermonising, the national appetite for abominations is duly fed with some fifty unreadable Spanish histories, French histories, Italian histories, and so forth, one or two of which, of course, are known to have furnished subjects for the playwrights of the day.

The next play-writer whom we are bound to notice is James Shirley, one of the many converts to Romanism which those days saw. He appears, up to the breaking out of the Civil War, to have been the Queen's favourite poet; and, according to Laugbaine, he was 'one of such incomparable parts that he was the chief of the second-rate poets, and by some has been thought even equal to Fletcher himself.'

We must entreat the reader's attention while we examine Shirley's 'Gamester.' Whether the examination be a pleasant business or not, it is somewhat important; 'for,' says Mr. Dyce, 'the following memorandum respecting it occurs in the office-book of the Master of the Records:- "On Thursday night, 6th of February, 1633, 'The Gamester' was acted at Court, made by Sherley out of a plot of the king's, given him by mee, and well likte. The king sayd it was the best play he had seen for seven years."'

This is indeed important. We shall now have an opportunity of fairly testing at the same time the taste of the Royal Martyr and the average merit, at least in the opinion of the Caroline court, of the dramatists of that day.

The plot which Charles sent to Shirley as a fit subject for his muse is taken from one of those collections of Italian novels of which we have already had occasion to speak, and occurs in the second part of the 'Ducento Novelle' of Celio Malespini; and what it is we shall see forthwith.

The play opens with a scene between one Wilding and his ward Penelope, in which he attempts to seduce the young lady, in language

which has certainly the merit of honesty. She refuses him, but civilly enough; and on her departure Mrs. Wilding enters, who, it seems, is the object of her husband's loathing, though young, handsome, and in all respects charming enough. After a scene of stupid and brutal insults, he actually asks her to bring Penelope to him, at which she naturally goes out in anger; and Hazard, the gamester, enters,—a personage without a character, in any sense of the word. There is next some talk against duelling, sensible enough, which arises out of a bye-plot,—one Delamere having been wounded in a duel by one Beaumont, mortally as is supposed. This bye-plot runs through the play, giving an opportunity for bringing in a father of the usual play-house type,—a Sir Richard Hurry, who is, of course, as stupid, covetous, proud, and tyrannical and unfeeling, as play-house fathers were then bound to be: but it is a plot of the most commonplace form, turning on the stale trick of a man expecting to be hanged for killing some one who turns out after all to have recovered, and having no bearing whatsoever on the real plot, which is this,—Mrs. Wilding, in order to win back her husband's affections, persuades Penelope to seem to grant his suit; while Mrs. Wilding herself is in reality to supply her niece's place, and shame her husband into virtue. Wilding tells Hazard of the good fortune which he fancies is coming, in scenes of which one can only say, that if they are not written for the purpose of exciting the passions, it is hard to see why they were written at all. But, being with Hazard in a gambling-house at the very hour at which he is to meet Penelope, and having had a run of bad luck, he borrows a hundred pounds of Hazard, stays at the table to recover his losses, and sends Hazard to supply his place with the supposed Penelope. A few hours before Penelope and Hazard have met for the first time, and Penelope considers him, as she says to herself aside, 'a handsome gentleman.' He begins, of course, talking foully to her; and the lady, so far from being shocked at the freedom of her new acquaintance, pays him back in his own coin in such good earnest that she soon silences him in the battle of dirt-throwing. Of this sad scene it is difficult to say whether it indicates a lower standard of purity and courtesy in the poet, in the audience who endured it, or in the society of which it was, of course, intended to be a brilliant picture. If the cavaliers and damsels of Charles the First's day were in the habit of talking in that way to each other (and if they had not been, Shirley would not have dared to represent them as doing so), one cannot much wonder that the fire of God was needed to burn up (though, alas! only for a while) such a state of society; and that when needed the fire fell.

The rest of the story is equally bad. Hazard next day gives Wilding descriptions of his guilt, and while Wilding is in the height of self-reproach at having handed over his victim to another, his wife meets him and informs him that she herself and not Penelope has been the victim. Now comes the crisis of the plot, the conception which so delighted the taste of the Royal Martyr. Wilding finds himself,

as he expresses it, 'fitted with a pair of horns of his own making;' and his rage, shame, and base attempts to patch up his own dishonour by marrying Penelope to Hazard (even at the cost of disgorging the half of her portion, which he had intended to embezzle) furnish amusement to the audience to the end of the play; at last, on Hazard and Penelope coming in married, Wilding is informed that he has been deceived, and that his wife is unstained, having arranged with Hazard to keep up the delusion in order to frighten him into good behaviour; whereupon Mr. Wilding promises to be a good husband henceforth, and the play ends.

Throughout the whole of this farrago of improbable iniquity not a single personage has any mark of personal character, or even of any moral quality, save (in Mrs. Wilding's case) that of patience under injury. Hazard 'The Gamester' is chosen as the hero, for what reason it is impossible to say; he is a mere nonentity, doing nothing which may distinguish him from any other gamester and blackguard, save that he is, as we are told,

'A man careless  
Of wounds; and though he have not had the luck  
To kill so many as another, dares  
Fight with all them that have.'

He, nevertheless, being in want of money, takes a hundred pounds from a foolish old city merchant (city merchants are always fools in the seventeenth century) to let his nephew, young Barnacle, give him a box on the ear in a tavern, and (after the young cit has been transformed into an intolerable bully by the fame so acquired) takes another hundred pounds from the repentant uncle for kicking the youth back into his native state of peaceful cowardice. With the exception of some little humour in these scenes with young Barnacle, the whole play is thoroughly stupid. We look in vain for anything like a reflection, a sentiment, even a novel image. Its language, like its morality, is all but on a level with the laboured vulgarities of the 'Relapse' or the 'Provoked Wife,' save that (Shirley being a confessed copier of the great dramatists of the generation before him) there is enough of the manner of Fletcher and Ben Jonson kept up to hide, at first sight, the utter want of anything like their matter; and as one sickens at the rakish swagger and the artificial smartness of his coxcombs, one regrets the racy and unaffected blackguardism of the earlier poets' men.

This, forsooth, is the best comedy which Charles had heard for seven years, and the plot, which he himself furnished for the occasion, fitted to an English audience by a Romish convert.

And yet there is one dramatist of that fallen generation over whose memory one cannot but linger, fancying what he would have become, and wondering why so great a spirit was checked suddenly ere half

developed by a fever which carried him off, with several other Oxford worthies, in 1643, when he was at most thirty-two (and according to one account only twenty-eight) years old. Let which of the two dates be the true one, Cartwright must always rank among our wondrous youths by the side of Prince Henry, the Admirable Crichton, and others, of whom one's only doubt is, whether they were not too wondrous, too precociously complete for future development. We find Dr. Fell, some time Bishop of Oxford, saying that 'Cartwright was the utmost man could come to'; we read how his body was as handsome as his soul; how he was an expert linguist, not only in Greek and Latin, but in French and Italian, an excellent orator, admirable poet; how Aristotle was no less known to him than Cicero and Virgil, and his metaphysical lectures preferred to those of all his predecessors, the Bishop of Lincoln only excepted; and his sermons as much admired as his other composes; and how one fitly applied to him that saying of Aristotle concerning OEschion the poet, that 'he could not tell what OEschion could not do.' We find pages on pages of high-flown epitaphs and sonnets on him, in which the exceeding bad taste of his admirers makes one inclined to doubt the taste of him whom they so bedaub with praise; and certainly, in spite of all due admiration for the Crichton of Oxford, one is unable to endorse Mr. Jasper Mayne's opinion, that

'In thee Ben Jonson still held Shakspeare's style';

or that he possest

'Lucan's bold heights match'd to staid Virgil's care,  
Martial's quick salt, joined to Musaeus' tongue.'

This superabundance of eulogy, when we remember the men and the age from which it comes, tempts one to form such a conception of Cartwright as, indeed, the portrait prefixed to his works (ed. 1651) gives us; the offspring of an over-educated and pedantic age, highly stored with everything but strength and simplicity; one in whom genius has been rather shaped (perhaps cramped) than developed: but genius was present, without a doubt, under whatsoever artificial trappings; and Ben Jonson spoke but truth when he said, 'My son Cartwright writes all like a man.' It is impossible to open a page of 'The Lady Errant,' 'The Royal Slave,' 'The Ordinary,' or 'Love's Convert,' without feeling at once that we have to do with a man of a very different stamp from any (Massinger perhaps alone excepted) who was writing between 1630 and 1640. The specific gravity of the poems, so to speak, is far greater than that of any of his contemporaries; everywhere is thought, fancy, force, varied learning. He is never weak or dull; though he fails often enough, is often enough wrong-headed, fantastical, affected, and has never laid bare the deeper arteries of humanity, for good or for evil. Neither is he altogether an original thinker; as one would expect, he has over-read himself: but then he has done so to good purpose. If he imitates,

he generally equals. The table of fare in 'The Ordinary' smacks of Rabelais or Aristophanes: but then it is worthy of either; and if one cannot help suspecting that 'The Ordinary' never would have been written had not Ben Jonson written 'The Alchemist,' one confesses that Ben Jonson need not have been ashamed to have written the play himself: although the plot, as all Cartwright's are, is somewhat confused and inconsequent. If he be Platonically sentimental in 'Love's Convert,' his sentiment is of the noblest and the purest; and the confest moral of the play is one which that age needed, if ever age on earth did.

"Tis the good man's office  
 To serve and reverence woman, as it is  
 The fire's to burn; for as our souls consist  
 Of sense and reason, so do yours, more noble,  
 Of sense and love, which doth as easily calm  
 All your desires, as reason quiets ours. .  
 Love, then, doth work in you, what Reason doth  
 In us; here only lies the difference, -  
 Ours wait the lingering steps of Age and Time;  
 But the woman's soul is ripe when it is young;  
 So that in us what we call learning, is  
 Divinity in you, whose operations,  
 Impatient of delay, do outstrip time.'

For the sake of such words, in the midst of an evil and adulterous generation, we will love young Cartwright, in spite of the suspicion that, addressed as the play is to Charles, and probably acted before his queen, the young rogue had been playing the courtier somewhat, and racking his brains for pretty sayings which would exhibit as a virtue that very uxoriousness of the poor king which at last cost him his head. The 'Royal Slave,' too, is a gallant play, right-hearted and lofty from beginning to end, though enacted in an impossible court-cloud-world, akin to that in which the classic heroes and heroines of Corneille and Racine call each other Monsieur and Madame.

As for his humour; he, alas! can be dirty like the rest, when necessary: but humour he has of the highest quality. 'The Ordinary' is full of it; and Moth, the Antiquary, though too much of a lay figure, and depending for his amusingness on his quaint antiquated language, is such a sketch as Mr. Dickens need not have been ashamed to draw.

The 'Royal Slave' seems to have been considered, both by the Court and by his contemporaries, his masterpiece. And justly so; yet our pleasure at Charles's having shown, for once, good taste, is somewhat marred by Langbaine's story, that the good acting of the Oxford scholars, 'stately scenes, and richness of the Persian habits,' had as much to do with the success of the play as its 'stately style,' and 'the excellency of the songs, which were set by that admirable

composer, Mr. Henry James.' True it is, that the songs are excellent, as are all Cartwright's; for grace, simplicity, and sweetness, equal to any (save Shakspeare's) which the seventeenth century produced: but curiously enough, his lyric faculty seems to have exhausted itself in these half-dozen songs. His minor poems are utterly worthless, out Cowleying Cowley in frigid and fantastic conceits; and his varied addresses to the king and queen are as bombastic and stupid and artificial as anything which bedizened the reigns of Charles II. or his brother.

Are we to gather from this fact that Cartwright was not really an original genius, but only a magnificent imitator; that he could write plays well, because others had written them well already, but only for that reason; and that for the same reason, when he attempted detached lyrics and addresses, he could only follow the abominable models which he saw around him? We know not; for surely in Jonson and Shakspeare's minor poems he might have found simpler and sweeter types; and even in those of Fletcher, who appears, from his own account, to have been his especial pattern. Shakspeare however, as we have seen, he looked down on; as did the rest of his generation.

Cartwright, as an Oxford scholar, is of course a worshipper of Charles, and a hater of Puritans. We do not wish to raise a prejudice against so young a man by quoting any of the ridiculous, and often somewhat abject, rant with which he addresses their majesties on their return from Scotland, on the queen's delivery, on the birth of the Duke of York, and so forth; for in that he did but copy the tone of grave divines and pious prelates; but he, unfortunately for his fame, is given (as young geniuses are sometimes) to prophecy; and two of his prophecies, at least, have hardly been fulfilled. He was somewhat mistaken when, on the birth of the Duke of York, he informed the world that

'The state is now past fear; and all that we  
Need wish besides is perpetuity';

and after indulging in various explanations of the reason why 'Nature' showed no prodigies at the birth of the future patron of Judge Jeffreys, which, if he did not believe them, are lies, and if he did, are very like blasphemies, declares that the infant is

'A son of Mirth,  
Of Peace and Friendship; 'tis a quiet birth.'

Nor, again, if spirits in the other world have knowledge of human affairs, can Mr. Cartwright be now altogether satisfied with his rogue's augury as to the capacities of the New England Puritans, when he intends to pick pockets in the New World, having made the Old too hot to hold him -

'They are good silly people; souls that will  
Be cheated without trouble: one eye is  
Put out with zeal, th' other with ignorance,  
And yet they think they're eagles.'

Whatsoever were the faults of the Pilgrim Fathers (and they were many), silliness was certainly not among them. But such was the court fashion. Any insult, however shallow, ribald, and doggrel (and all these terms are just of the mock-Puritan ballad which Sir Christopher sings in 'The Ordinary,' just after an epithalamium so graceful and melodious, though a little warm in tone, as to be really out of place in such a fellow's mouth), passes current against men who were abroad the founders of the United States, and the forefathers of the acutest and most enterprising nation on earth; and who at home proved themselves, by terrible fact, not only the physically stronger party, but the more cunning. But so it was fated to be. A deep mist of conceit, fed by the shallow breath of parasites, players, and pedants, wrapt that unhappy court in blind security, till 'the breaking was as the swelling out of a high wall, which cometh suddenly in an instant.'

'But, after all, what Poetry and Art there was in that day, good or bad, all belonged to the Royalists.

All? There are those who think that, if mere conceitism be a part of poetry, Quarles is as great a poet as Cowley or George Herbert, Vaughan or Withers. On this question, and on the real worth of the seventeenth century lyrists, a great deal has to be said hereafter. Meanwhile, there are those, too, who believe John Bunyan, considered simply as an artist, to be the greatest dramatic author whom England has seen since Shakspeare; and there linger, too, in the libraries and the ears of men, words of one John Milton. He was no rigid hater of the beautiful, merely because it was heathen and Popish; no more, indeed, were many highly-educated and highly-born gentlemen of the Long Parliament: no more was Cromwell himself, whose delight was (if we may trust that double renegade Waller) to talk over with him the worthies of Rome and Greece, and who is said to have preserved for the nation Raphael's cartoons and Andrea Mantegna's triumph when Charles's pictures were sold. But Milton had steeped his whole soul in romance. He had felt the beauty and glory of the chivalrous Middle Age as deeply as Shakspeare himself: he had as much classical lore as any Oxford pedant. He felt to his heart's core (for he sang of it, and had he not felt it he would only have written of it) the magnificence and worth of really high art, of the drama when it was worthy of man and of itself.

'Of gorgeous tragedy,  
Presenting Thebes' or Pelops' line,  
Or the Tale of Troy divine,  
Or what, though rare, of later age,

Ennobled hath the buskin'd stage.'

No poet, perhaps, shows wider and truer sympathy with every form of the really beautiful in art, nature, and history: and yet he was a Puritan.

Yes, Milton was a Puritan; one who, instead of trusting himself and his hopes of the universe to second-hand hearsays, systems, and traditions, had looked God's Word and his own soul in the face, and determined to act on that which he had found. And therefore it is that to open his works at any stray page, after these effeminate Carolists, is like falling asleep in a stifling city drawing-room, amid Rococo French furniture, not without untidy traces of last night's ball, and awaking in an Alpine valley, amid the scent of sweet cyclamens and pine boughs, to the music of trickling rivulets and shouting hunters, beneath the dark cathedral aisles of mighty trees, and here and there, above them and beyond, the spotless peaks of everlasting snow; while far beneath your feet -

'The hemisphere of earth, in clearest ken,  
Stretched to the amplest reach of prospect, lies.'

Take any—the most hackneyed passage of 'Comus,' the 'Allegro,' the 'Penseroso,' the 'Paradise Lost,' and see the freshness, the sweetness, the simplicity which is strangely combined with the pomp, the self-restraint, the earnestness of every word; take him even, as an experimentum crucis, when he trenches upon ground heathen and questionable, and tries the court poets at their own weapons -

'Or whether (as some sager sing),  
The frolic wind that breathes the spring,  
Zephyr, with Aurora playing,  
As he met her once a-Maying,  
There on beds of violets blue,  
And fresh-blown roses washed in dew—'

but why quote what all the world knows?—where shall we find such real mirth, ease, sweetness, dance and song of words in anything written for five and twenty years before him? True, he was no great dramatist. He never tried to be one; but there was no one in his generation who could have written either 'Comus' or 'Samson Agonistes.' And if, as is commonly believed, and as his countenance seems to indicate, he was deficient in humour, so were his contemporaries, with the sole exception of Cartwright. Witty he could be, and bitter; but he did not live in a really humorous age: and if he has none of the rollicking fun of the foxhound puppy, at least he has none of the obscene gibber of the ape.

After all, the great fact stands, that the only lasting poet of that generation was a Puritan; one who, if he did not write dramas in

sport, at least acted dramas in earnest. For drama means, etymologically, action and doing: and of the drama there are, and always will be, two kinds: one the representative, the other the actual; and for a world wherein there is no superabundance of good deeds, the latter will be always the better kind. It is good to represent heroic action in verse, and on the stage: it is good to 'purify,' as old Aristotle has it, 'the affections by pity and terror.' There is an ideal tragedy, and an ideal comedy also, which one can imagine as an integral part of the highest Christian civilisation. But when 'Christian' tragedy sinks below the standard of heathen Greek tragedy; when, instead of setting forth heroic deeds, it teaches the audience new possibilities of crime, and new excuses for those crimes; when, instead of purifying the affections by pity and terror, it confounds the moral sense by exciting pity and terror merely for the sake of excitement, careless whether they be well or ill directed: then it is of the devil, and the sooner it returns to its father the better for mankind. When, again, comedy, instead of stirring a divine scorn of baseness, or even a kindly and indulgent smile at the weaknesses and oddities of humanity, learns to make a mock of sin,—to find excuses for the popular frailties which it pretends to expose,—then it also is of the devil, and to the devil let it go; while honest and earnest men, who have no such exceeding love of 'Art' that they must needs have bad art rather than none at all, do the duty which lies nearest them amid clean whitewash and honest prose. The whole theory of 'Art, its dignity and vocation,' seems to us at times questionable, if coarse facts are to be allowed to weigh (as we suppose they are) against delicate theories. If we are to judge by the example of Italy, the country which has been most of all devoted to the practice of 'Art,' then a nation is not necessarily free, strong, moral, or happy because it can 'represent' facts, or can understand how other people have represented them. We do not hesitate to go farther, and to say that the now past weakness of Germany was to be traced in a great degree to that pernicious habit of mind which made her educated men fancy it enough to represent noble thoughts and feelings, or to analyse the representations of them: while they did not bestir themselves, or dream that there was a moral need for bestirring themselves, toward putting these thoughts and feelings into practice. Goethe herein was indeed the type of a very large class of Germans: God grant that no generation may ever see such a type common in England; and that our race, remembering ever that the golden age of the English drama was one of private immorality, public hypocrisy, ecclesiastical pedantry, and regal tyranny, and ended in the temporary downfall of Church and Crown, may be more ready to do fine things than to write fine books; and act in their lives, as those old Puritans did, a drama which their descendants may be glad to put on paper for them long after they are dead.

For surely these Puritans were dramatic enough, poetic enough, picturesque enough. We do not speak of such fanatics as Balfour of

Burley, or any other extravagant person whom it may have suited Walter Scott to take as a typical personage. We speak of the average Puritan nobleman, gentleman, merchant, or farmer; and hold him to have been a picturesque and poetical man,—a man of higher imagination and deeper feeling than the average of court poets; and a man of sound taste also. What is to be said for his opinions about the stage has been seen already: but it seems to have escaped most persons' notice, that either all England is grown very foolish, or the Puritan opinions on several matters have been justified by time.

On the matter of the stage, the world has certainly come over to their way of thinking. Few highly educated men now think it worth while to go to see any play, and that exactly for the same reasons as the Puritans put forward; and still fewer highly educated men think it worth while to write plays: finding that since the grosser excitements of the imagination have become forbidden themes, there is really very little to write about.

But in the matter of dress and of manners, the Puritan triumph has been complete. Even their worst enemies have come over to their side, and the 'whirligig of time has brought about its revenge.'

Most of their canons of taste have become those of all England. High Churchmen, who still call them Roundheads and Cropped-ears, go about rounder-headed and closer cropt than they ever went. They held it more rational to cut the hair to a comfortable length than to wear effeminate curls down the back. We cut ours much shorter than they ever did. They held (with the Spaniards, then the finest gentlemen in the world) that sad, i.e. dark colours, above all black, were the fittest for all stately and earnest gentlemen. We all, from the Tractarian to the Anythingarian, are exactly of the same opinion. They held that lace, perfumes, and jewellery on a man were marks of unmanly foppishness and vanity. So hold the finest gentlemen in England now. They thought it equally absurd and sinful for a man to carry his income on his back, and bedizen himself out in reds, blues, and greens, ribbons, knots, slashes, and treble quadruple daedalian ruffs, built up on iron and timber, which have more arches in them for pride than London Bridge for use. We, if we met such a ruffed and ruffled worthy as used to swagger by dozens up and down Paul's Walk, not knowing how to get a dinner, much less to pay his tailor, should look on him as firstly a fool, and secondly a swindler: while if we met an old Puritan, we should consider him a man gracefully and picturesquely drest, but withal in the most perfect sobriety of good taste; and when we discovered (as we probably should), over and above, that the harlequin cavalier had a box of salve and a pair of dice in one pocket, a pack of cards and a few pawnbroker's duplicates in the other; that his thoughts were altogether of citizens' wives and their too easy virtue; and that he could not open his mouth without a dozen oaths: then we should consider the Puritan (even though he did quote Scripture somewhat through his nose) as the

gentleman; and the courtier as a most offensive specimen of the 'snob triumphant,' glorying in his shame. The picture is not ours, nor even the Puritan's. It is Bishop Hall's, Bishop Earle's, it is Beaumont's, Fletcher's, Jonson's, Shakspeare's,—the picture which every dramatist, as well as satirist, has drawn of the 'gallant' of the seventeenth century. No one can read those writers honestly without seeing that the Puritan, and not the Cavalier conception of what a British gentleman should be, is the one accepted by the whole nation at this day.

In applying the same canon to the dress of women they were wrong. As in other matters, they had hold of one pole of a double truth, and erred in applying it exclusively to all cases. But there are two things to be said for them; first, that the dress of that day was palpably an incentive to the profligacy of that day, and therefore had to be protested against; while in these more moral times ornaments and fashions may be harmlessly used which then could not be used without harm. Next, it is undeniable that sober dressing is more and more becoming the fashion among well-bred women; and that among them, too, the Puritan canons are gaining ground.

We have just said that the Puritans held too exclusively to one pole of a double truth. They did so, no doubt, in their hatred of the drama. Their belief that human relations were, if not exactly sinful, at least altogether carnal and unspiritual, prevented their conceiving the possibility of any truly Christian drama; and led them at times into strange and sad errors, like that New England ukase of Cotton Mather's, who is said to have punished the woman who should kiss her infant on the Sabbath day. Yet their extravagances on this point were but the honest revulsion from other extravagances on the opposite side. If the undistinguishing and immoral Autotheism of the playwrights, and the luxury and heathendom of the higher classes, first in Italy and then in England, were the natural revolt of the human mind against the Manichaeism of monkery: then the severity and exclusiveness of Puritanism was a natural and necessary revolt against that luxury and immorality; a protest for man's God-given superiority over nature, against that Naturalism which threatened to end in sheer animalism. While Italian prelates have found an apologist in Mr. Roscoe, and English playwrights in Mr. Gifford, the old Puritans, who felt and asserted, however extravagantly, that there was an eternal law which was above all Borgias and Machiavels, Stuarts and Fletchers, have surely a right to a fair trial. If they went too far in their contempt for humanity, certainly no one interfered to set them right. The Anglicans of that time, who held intrinsically the same anthropologic notions, and yet wanted the courage and sincerity to carry them out as honestly, neither could nor would throw any light upon the controversy; and the only class who sided with the poor playwrights in asserting that there were more things in man, and more excuses for man, than were dreamt of in Prynne's philosophy, were the Jesuit Casuists, who, by a fatal

perverseness, used all their little knowledge of human nature to the same undesirable purpose as the playwrights; namely, to prove how it was possible to commit every conceivable sinful action without sinning. No wonder that in an age in which courtiers and theatre-haunters were turning Romanists by the dozen, and the priest-ridden queen was the chief patroness of the theatre, the Puritans should have classed players and Jesuits in the same category, and deduced the parentage of both alike from the father of lies.

But as for these Puritans having been merely the sour, narrow, inhuman persons they are vulgarly supposed to have been, credit Judaeus. There were sour and narrow men among them; so there were in the opposite party. No Puritan could have had less poetry in him, less taste, less feeling, than Laud himself. But is there no poetry save words? No drama save that which is presented on the stage? Is this glorious earth, and the souls of living men, mere prose, as long as 'carent vate sacro,' who will, forsooth, do them the honour to make poetry out of a little of them (and of how little!) by translating them into words, which he himself, just in proportion as he is a good poet, will confess to be clumsy, tawdry, ineffectual? Was there no poetry in these Puritans because they wrote no poetry? We do not mean now the unwritten tragedy of the battle-psalm and the charge; but simple idyllic poetry and quiet home-drama, love-poetry of the heart and the hearth, and the beauties of everyday human life. Take the most commonplace of them: was Zeal-for-Truth Thoresby, of Thoresby Rise in Deeping Fen, because his father had thought fit to give him an ugly and silly name, the less of a noble lad? Did his name prevent his being six feet high? Were his shoulders the less broad for it, his cheeks the less ruddy for it? He wore his flaxen hair of the same length that every one now wears theirs, instead of letting it hang half-way to his waist in essenced curls; but was he therefore the less of a true Viking's son, bold-hearted as his sea-roving ancestors who won the Danelagh by Canute's side, and settled there on Thoresby Rise, to grow wheat and breed horses, generation succeeding generation, in the old moated grange? He carried a Bible in his jack-boot: but did that prevent him, as Oliver rode past him with an approving smile on Naseby field, thinking himself a very handsome fellow, with his moustache and imperial, and bright red coat, and cuirass well polished, in spite of many a dint, as he sate his father's great black horse as gracefully and firmly as any long-locked and essenced cavalier in front of him? Or did it prevent him thinking, too, for a moment, with a throb of the heart, that sweet Cousin Patience far away at home, could she but see him, might have the same opinion of him as he had of himself? Was he the worse for the thought? He was certainly not the worse for checking it the next instant, with manly shame for letting such 'carnal vanities' rise in his heart while he was 'doing the Lord's work' in the teeth of death and hell: but was there no poetry in him then? No poetry in him, five minutes later, as the long rapier swung round his head, redder and redder at every sweep? We are befooled by names. Call him

Crusader instead of Roundhead, and he seems at once (granting him only sincerity, which he had, and that of a right awful kind) as complete a knight-errant as ever watched and prayed, ere putting on his spurs, in fantastic Gothic chapel, beneath 'storied windows richly dight.' Was there no poetry in him, either, half an hour afterwards, as he lay bleeding across the corpse of the gallant horse, waiting for his turn with the surgeon, and fumbled for the Bible in his boot, and tried to hum a psalm, and thought of Cousin Patience, and his father, and his mother, and how they would hear, at least, that he had played the man in Israel that day, and resisted unto blood, striving against sin and the Man of Sin?

And was there no poetry in him, too, as he came wearied along Thoresby dyke, in the quiet autumn eve, home to the house of his forefathers, and saw afar off the knot of tall poplars rising over the broad misty flat, and the one great abele tossing its sheets of silver in the dying gusts; and knew that they stood before his father's door? Who can tell all the pretty child-memories which flitted across his brain at that sight, and made him forget that he was a wounded cripple? There is the dyke where he and his brothers snared the great pike which stole the ducklings—how many years ago?—while pretty little Patience stood by trembling, and shrieked at each snap of the brute's wide jaws; and there, down that long dark lode, ruffling with crimson in the sunset breeze, he and his brothers skated home in triumph with Patience when his uncle died. What a day that was! when, in the clear bright winter noon, they laid the gate upon the ice, and tied the beef-bones under the four corners, and packed little Patience on it. How pretty she looked, though her eyes were red with weeping, as she peeped out from among the heap of blankets and horse-hides; and how merrily their long fen-runners whistled along the ice-lane, between the high banks of sighing reed, as they towed home their new treasure in triumph, at a pace like the race-horse's, to the dear old home among the poplar-trees. And now he was going home to meet her, after a mighty victory, a deliverance from heaven, second only in his eyes to that Red Sea one. Was there no poetry in his heart at that thought? Did not the glowing sunset, and the reed-beds which it transfigured before him into sheets of golden flame, seem tokens that the glory of God was going before him in his path? Did not the sweet clamour of the wild-fowl, gathering for one rich paeon ere they sank into rest, seem to him as God's bells chiming him home in triumph, with peels sweeter and bolder than those of Lincoln or Peterborough steeple-house? Did not the very lapwing, as she tumbled, softly wailing, before him, as she did years ago, seem to welcome the wanderer home in the name of heaven?

Fair Patience, too, though she was a Puritan; yet did not her cheek flush, her eye grow dim, like any other girl's, as she saw far off the red coat, like a sliding spark of fire, coming slowly along the strait fen-bank, and fled upstairs into her chamber to pray, half that it might be, half that it might not be he? Was there no happy

storm of human tears and human laughter when he entered the courtyard gate? Did not the old dog lick his Puritan hand as lovingly as if it had been a Cavalier's? Did not lads and lasses run out shouting? Did not the old yeoman father hug him, weep over him, hold him at arm's length, and hug him again, as heartily as any other John Bull, even though the next moment he called all to kneel down and thank Him who had sent his boy home again, after bestowing on him the grace to bind kings in chains and nobles with links of iron, and contend to death for the faith delivered to the saints? And did not Zeal-for-Truth look about as wistfully for Patience as any other man would have done, longing to see her, yet not daring even to ask for her? And when she came down at last, was she the less lovely in his eyes because she came, not flaunting with bare bosom, in tawdry finery and paint, but shrouded close in coif and pinner, hiding from all the world beauty which was there still, but was meant for one alone, and that only if God willed, in God's good time? And was there no faltering of their voices, no light in their eyes, no trembling pressure of their hands, which said more, and was more, ay, and more beautiful in the sight of Him who made them, than all Herrick's Dianemes, Waller's Saccharissas, flames, darts, posies, love-knots, anagrams, and the rest of the insincere cant of the court? What if Zeal-for-Truth had never strung two rhymes together in his life? Did not his heart go for inspiration to a loftier Helicon when it whispered to itself, 'My love, my dove, my undefiled, is but one,' than if he had filled pages with sonnets about Venuses and Cupids, lovesick shepherds and cruel nymphs?

And was there no poetry, true idyllic poetry, as of Longfellow's 'Evangeline' itself in that trip round the old farm next morning; when Zeal-for-Truth, after looking over every heifer, and peeping into every sty, would needs canter down by his father's side to the horse-fen, with his arm in a sling; while the partridges whirred up before them, and the lurchers flashed like gray snakes after the hare, and the colts came whinnying round, with staring eyes and streaming manes; and the two chatted on in the same sober businesslike English tone, alternately of 'The Lord's great dealings' by General Cromwell, the pride of all honest fen-men, and the price of troop-horses at the next Horncastle fair?

Poetry in those old Puritans? Why not? They were men of like passions with ourselves. They loved, they married, they brought up children; they feared, they sinned, they sorrowed, they fought—they conquered. There was poetry enough in them, be sure, though they acted it like men, instead of singing it like birds.

Footnotes:

- 1 The North British Review, No. XLIX.—1. 'Works of Beaumont and Fletcher.' London, 1679.—2. 'Works of Ben Jonson.' London, 1692—
3. 'Massinger's Plays.' Edited by William Gifford, Esq. London,

1813.–4. 'Works of John Webster.' Edited, etc., by Rev. Alexander Dyce. Pickering, London, 1830. 5. 'Works of James Shirley.' Edited by Rev. A. Dyce. Murray, 1833.–6. 'Works of T. Middleton.' Edited by the Rev. A. Dyce. Lumley, 1840.–7. 'Comedies,' etc. By Mr. William Cartwright. London, 1651.–8. 'Specimens of English Dramatic Poets.' By Charles Lamb. Longmans and Co., 1808–9. 'Histriomastix.' By W. Prynne, Utter-Barrister of Lincoln's Inn. London, 1633.–10. 'Northbrooke's Treatise against Plays,' etc. (Shakspeare Soc.), 1843.–11. 'The Works of Bishop Hall.' Oxford, 1839.–12. 'Marston's Satires.' London, 1600. 13. 'Jeremy Collier's Short View of the Profaneness, etc., of the English Stage.' London, 1730.–14. 'Langbaine's English Dramatists.' Oxford, 1691.–15. 'Companion to the Playhouse.' London, 1764.–16. 'Riccoboni's Account of the Theatres in Europe. 1741.

2 'The Third Blast of Retreat from Plays and Theatres.' Penned by a Play-poet.

3 This was written sixteen years ago. We have become since then more amenable to the influences of French civilisation.

4 What canon of cleanliness, now lost, did Cartwright possess, which enabled him to pronounce Fletcher, or indeed himself, purer than Shakspeare, and his times 'nicer' than those of James? To our generation, less experienced in the quantitative analysis of moral dirt, they will appear all equally foul.

5 C. Lamb, 'Specimens of English Dramatic Poets,' p. 229. From which specimens, be it remembered, he has had to expunge not only all the comic scenes, but generally the greater part of the plot itself, to make the book at all tolerable.