

range of his art is as difficult as to express in words the essence of his genius. For though he has been copied ever since he wrote, neither his spirit nor his manner has descended in full to any of his copyists, whole schools of whom have missed elements of both. A Molière can only be judged in his relations to the history of comedy at large. He was indeed the inheritor of many forms and styles—remaining a stranger to those of Old Attic comedy only, rooted as it was in the political life of a free imperial city; though even the rich extravagance of Aristophanes's burlesque was not left wholly unreproduced by him. Molière is both a satirist and a humourist; he displays at times the sentiments of a loyal courtier, at others that gay spirit of opposition which is all but indispensable to a popular French wit. His comedies offer elaborate and subtle—even tender—pictures of human character in its eternal types, lively sketches of social follies and literary extravagances, and broad appeals to the ordinary sources of vulgar merriment. Light and perspicuous in construction, he is master of the delicate play of irony, the penetrating force of wit, and the expansive gaiety of frolicsome fun. Faithful to the canons of artistic taste, and under the safe guidance of true natural humour, his style suits itself to every species attempted by him. His morality is the reverse of rigid, but its aberrations are not those of prudence, nor its laws those of pretence; and wholly free as he was from the didactic aim which is foreign to all true dramatic representation, the services he rendered to his art are not the less services rendered to society, concerning which the laughter of true comedy tells the truth. He raised the comedy of character out of the lower sphere of caricature, and in his greatest creations subordinated to the highest ends of all dramatic composition the plots he so skilfully built, and the pictures of the manners he so faithfully reproduced.

Molière's contemporaries and successors.

Even among the French comic dramatists of this age there must have been many who "were not aware" that Molière was its greatest poet. For though he had made the true path luminous to them, their efforts were still often of a tentative kind, and one was reviving *Patelin* while another was translating the *Andria*. A more unique attempt was made in one of the very few really modern versions of an Aristophanic comedy, which deserves to be called an original copy—*Les Plaideurs* of Racine. The tragic poets Quinault and Campistron likewise wrote comedies, one<sup>1</sup> or more of which furnished materials to contemporary English dramatists, as did one of the felicitous plays in which Boursault (1638–1701) introduced Mercury and Æsop into the theatrical *salon*.<sup>2</sup> But if the mantle of Molière can be said to have fallen upon any of his contemporaries or successors, this honour must be ascribed to J. F. Regnard (1655–1709), who imitated the great master in both themes and characters,<sup>3</sup> while the skilfulness of his plots, and his gaiety of the treatment even of subjects tempting into the by-path of sentimental comedy,<sup>4</sup> entitle him to be regarded as a comic poet of original genius. In the next generation (that of Voltaire) this by-path threatened to become the chosen walk of comedy, though Gresset (1709–1777) still attempted comedy of character,<sup>5</sup> and the witty Piron (1689–1778) produced something like a new type in the hero, of his epigrammatic, but hardly dramatic, *Métromanie*. Marivaux (1688–1763), "the French

<sup>1</sup> Quinault, *L'Amour Indiscret* (Newcastle and Dryden's *Sir Martin Marcell*).

<sup>2</sup> *Le Mercure Galant*; *Ésop à la Ville*; *Ésop à la Cour* (Vanbrugh, *Æsop*).

<sup>3</sup> *Le Bal* (*M. de Pourceaugnac*); Geronte in *Le Légataire Universel* Argan in *Le Malade Imaginaire*; *La Critique du L.* (*La C. de l'École des Femmes*).

<sup>4</sup> *Le Joueur*; *Le Légataire Universel*.

<sup>5</sup> *Le Méchant*.

*Spectator*," whose minute analysis of the tender passion<sup>6</sup> excited the scorn of Voltaire, forms the connecting link between comedy and the mixed species of the sentimental or "tearful" domestic drama, which still retained the name, but no longer pursued the ends, of the comic art. The most effective and professedly didactic dramatic moralists of this school were Destouches<sup>7</sup> (1680–1754) and Nivelles de la Chaussée (1692–1754), in whose hands French comedy became a champion of the sanctity of marriage<sup>8</sup> and reproduced the sentiments—in one instance<sup>9</sup> even the characters—of Richardson.

Melpomene, humbly shod with the sock, and Thalia, dissolved in tears, had now entered into partnership. The species which varied as *comédie larmoyante* or as *tragédie bourgeoise*, and which ruled or was to rule supreme in so many dramatic literatures of Europe, more and more firmly established its hold on that of France. In the hands of Diderot (1713–1784) it sought to proclaim itself as an agent of social reform, and as an apostle of the gospel of philanthropy; but the execution of these works fell short of their aims;<sup>10</sup> it was, in Mme. de Staël's words, "the affectation of nature," not nature itself which they exhibited. Their author announced them as examples of a third dramatic form—the *genre sérieux*—which he declared to be the consummation of the dramatic art. Making war upon the frigid artificiality of classical tragedy, he banished verse from the new species. The effect of these plays was intended to spring from their truth to nature—a truth such as no spectator could mistake, and which should bring home its moral teachings to the business as well as the bosoms of all. The theatre was to become a real and realistic school of the principles of society and of the conduct of life—it was, in other words, to usurp functions with which it has no concern, and to essay the reformation of mankind. The idea was neither new nor just, but its speciousness will probably continue to commend it to many benevolent minds, whensoever and in whatsoever shape it is revived.

From this point the history of the French drama becomes that of a conflict between an enfeebled artistic school and a tendency which is hardly to be dignified by the name of a school at all. Beaumarchais (1732–1799), who for his early sentimental plays, in which he imitated Diderot, invented the appellation *drame*—so convenient in its vagueness that it became the accepted name of the hybrid species to which they belonged—in two works of a very different kind, the famous *Barbier de Séville* and the still more famous *Mariage de Figaro*, boldly carried comedy back into its old Spanish atmosphere of intrigue; but while surpassing all his predecessors in the skill with which he constructed his frivolous plots, he drew his characters with a lightness and sureness of touch peculiar to himself, animated his dialogue with an unparalleled brilliancy of wit, and seasoned action as well as dialogue with a political and social meaning, which caused his epigrams to become proverbs, and which marks his *Figaro* as a herald of the Revolution. Such plays as these were ill suited to the rule of the despot whose vigilance could not overlook their significance. The comedy of the empire is, in the hands of Collin d'Harleville, Picard, A. Duval, Étienne, and others; mainly a harmless comedy of manners; nor was the attempted innovation of N. Lemercier (1771–1840)—who was fain to invent a new species, that of historical comedy—more than a flattering self-delusion. The theatre had its share in all the movements and changes which ensued in

<sup>6</sup> *Le Jeu de l'Amour et du Hasard*; *Le Legs*; *La Surprise de l'Amour*; *Les Fausses Confidences*; *L'Épreuve*.

<sup>7</sup> *Le Dissipateur*; *Le Glorieux*, &c.

<sup>8</sup> *La Fausse Antipathie*; *Le Prêjugé à la Mode*; *Mitridate*.

<sup>9</sup> *Paméla*.

<sup>10</sup> *Le Fils Naturel ou les Épreuves de la Vertu*; *Le Père de Famille*.

The comedy of the Revolution and the First Empire.

France; but the impulse which gave rise to the revolution the drama itself was to undergo was not one of native origin. Those branches of the drama which belong specifically to the history of the opera, or which associate themselves with it, are here passed by. (See OPERA). Among them was the *vaudeville* (from Val de Vire in Calvados), which began as an interspersion of pantomime with the airs of popular songs, and which, after the Italian masks had been removed from it, was cultivated by Ponsard (1690–1765) and Marmontel (1723–1799). The latter,<sup>1</sup> as well as Rousseau,<sup>2</sup> likewise composed *opérettes*—a smaller kind of opera, at first of the pastoral sort; and these flexible species easily entered into combination. The melodrama proper, of which the invention is also attributed to Rousseau,<sup>3</sup> in its latter development became merely a drama accentuated by music, though usually in little need of any accentuation.

The stage.

The chief home of the regular drama, however, demanded efforts of another kind. At the Théâtre Français, or Comédie Française, whose history as that of a single company of actors had begun in 1680, the party-strife of the times made itself audible; and the most prominent tragic poet of the Revolution, M. J. de Chénier (1764–1811), a disciple of Voltaire in dramatic poetry as well as in political philosophy, wrote for the national stage the historical drama—with a political moral<sup>4</sup>—in which in the memorable year 1789 Talma achieved his first complete triumph. But the victorious Revolution proclaimed among other liberties that of the theatres in Paris, of which soon not less than 50 were open. In 1807 the empire restricted the number to 9, and reinstated the Théâtre Français in sole possession (or nearly such) of the right of performing the classic drama. No writer of note was, however, tempted or inspired by the rewards and other encouragements offered by Napoleon to produce such a classic tragedy as the emperor would have willingly stamped out of the earth. The tragedies of C. Delavigne (1794–1844) represent the transition from the expiring efforts of the classical to the ambitious beginnings of the romantic school of the French drama. Of this it must suffice to say that it derives some of its characteristics from the general movement of romanticism which in various ways and at various points of time transformed nearly every modern European literature, others from the rhetorical tendency which is a French national feature. Victor Hugo was its conquering founder; A. Dumas the elder (1803–1870) its middleman. The marvellous energy and poetic genius of the former, always in extremes, was nowhere more signally so than in the drama; the latter was a Briareus, working with many hands besides his own. The name of A. de Vigny (1799–1863), "George Sand" (1804–1876), A. de Musset (1810–1857), whose dramatic "proverbes" and other pieces of a similar kind have a delicate flavour all their own, and perhaps that of P. Mérimée (1803–1870), who invented not only Spanish dramas but a Spanish dramatist,<sup>5</sup> may be all with more or less precision classed in the romantic school, which in its turn has come to an end as a productive body of writers. It was not, however, the brief classical revival begun by F. Ponsard, and continued, in closer relation to modern ideas, both by him and by E. Augier, which overthrew the Romanticists. While the theatrical ability of E. Scribe (1791–1858) supplied a long series of productions attesting the rapid advance of the playwright's mastery over the secrets of his craft, and while the name of his competitors, with the aid of some of whom he held his own against the rest, is legion, the latest developments of the French drama

Transition to the romantic school.

The romantic school.

possess a social and often a moral interest of greater depth, while they are not inferior in technical skill to anything that has preceded them. After a fashion which would have startled even Diderot, the younger A. Dumas has undertaken to reform society by means of the stage; O. Feuillet and others have, with perhaps fewer prefaces, applied themselves to the solution of the same "problems;" and whatever style will best succeed with the public is the style of V. Sardou.

That the theatre will lose the hold it possesses over the intellectual and moral sympathies of nearly the whole of the educated, and of a great part of the uneducated population of France, seems hardly within the range of probability. But this is not tantamount to a prophecy that the creative activity of French dramatic literature is certain to endure. The art of acting is not dependent upon a contemporary literary productivity; Talma and Mdle. Mars (1779–1847) flourished in one of the most barren ages of the French literary drama; the authors and actors of the *sotties*, like those of the *Palais Royal* farces of our own day, could strike their roots in the lightest of soils. The constantly accumulating experience and the apparently inexhaustible fertility of the art of acting in France may ensure to it a future not less brilliant than its past; and the judicious policy of not leaving the leading theatres at the mercy of shifting fashion will at all events supply the possibility of maintaining a high histrionic standard. So long as the French nation continues to maintain its ascendancy over other nations in much that adorns and brightens social life, the predominant influence of the French theatre over the theatres of other nations is likewise assured. But in the end its own future must be ruled by that progress or decay of French dramatic literature. The history of that literature shows periods of marvellously rapid advance, of hardly less swift decline, and of frequent though fitful recovery. Its future may be equally varied; but it will not be less dependent on the conditions which in every people, ancient or modern, are indispensable to national vigour and vitality. Should the calamity—for it would be nothing less—befall modern civilization of a hopeless degeneration of the French drama, the fault will lie in the severance of self-consciousness from self-control; and, under other circumstances, but with even deeper regret, the story of the Roman theatre of the later Empire may have to be told again.

Among the nations of Germanic descent, but one—our own—succeeded under the influence of the Renaissance movement in transforming the last growths of the mediæval drama into the beginnings of a great and enduring national dramatic literature. This transformation connects itself with one of the greatest epochs of the national history, or, more properly speaking, forms part of it; the Elizabethan drama and the Elizabethan age are, it is no exaggeration to assert, equally inconceivable the one without the other.

It has been seen how already in the reign of Edward VI., the breath of a new age with its "new learning" had quickened the relatively inanimate species of the morality into the first *chronicle history* (still intermingled with remnants of the earlier species); and how at an even earlier date John Heywood's *interludes* had bridged the distance separating from only partially relieved abstractions the concrete directness of comedy proper. Soon afterwards, the study and imitation of the ancient classical drama were introduced into the English world of letters; and under their influence tragedy and comedy, which might otherwise have from the first coalesced, were in their early growths in our literature kept asunder, though not absolutely so. Already, in Queen Mary's reign, translation was found the readiest form of expression offering itself to literary scholar

ENGLISH DRAMA.

<sup>1</sup> *Zémire et Azor*; *Jeannot et Jeannette*.

<sup>2</sup> *Les Muses Galantes*; *Le Devin du Village*.

<sup>3</sup> *Pyramion*.

<sup>4</sup> *Charles IX. ou l'École des Rois*.

<sup>5</sup> *Théâtre de Clara Gnuil*.



Earliest  
tragedies.

ship, and Italian examples helped to commend Seneca, the most modern of the ancient tragedians, as a favourite author for such exercises. With the year of Elizabeth's accession began a series of translations of his plays by Jasper Heywood (John Heywood's son) and others; and to the direct influence of one of Seneca's tragedies<sup>1</sup> is to be ascribed the composition of the first tragedy proper in the English tongue, the *Gorboduc* (afterwards renamed *Ferrex and Porrex*) of T. Sackville, Lord Buckhurst, with whom T. Norton was joint author (1562). Though, unlike *Gorboduc*, classical in theme, and in some respects approaching nearer to the true conception of tragedy in their treatment of dramatic passion, the nearly contemporary *Apus and Virginia* (c. 1563) and Prestop's *Cambises King of Persia*, in the roughness of their form more closely resemble the old religious drama; of other tragedies on classical subjects we have only the names, except in the instance of Gascoigne's *Jocasta*, a free version of the *Phænissæ* of Euripides (1566), and of R. Edwards's *Damon and Pithias* (printed 1571), which calls itself a comedy, and is in fact a mixture of both species. Simultaneously with the influence, directly or indirectly exercised, of classical literature, that of Italian, both dramatic and narrative, asserted itself; early works from this source were the first *Romeo and Juliet* (not preserved, but apparently anterior in date even to *Gorboduc*), *Tancred and Gismunda* (1563?), and G. Whetstone's *Promos and Cassandra* (printed 1578), from which Shakespeare took the story of *Measure for Measure*.

Chronicle  
histories.

From the double danger which threatened our tragic drama in the days of its infancy—that it would congeal on the cold heights of classical themes, or dissolve its vigour in the glowing heat of a passion fiercer than that of the Italians (*Inglese Italianato è un diavolo incarnato*)—it was preserved, more than by any other cause, by its happy association with the traditions of the national history. The crude growth of the chronicle history proved strong enough to assert itself by the side of tragedy based on classical and Italian models; and in a series of works of more or less uncertain dates, a vein was worked from which Shakespeare was to draw the richest ore. Among these rude compositions, which intermixed the blank verse introduced by *Gorboduc* with prose, and freely mingled comic with tragic elements—works half-epic, half-dramatic, and popular in form as they were national in theme,—are the *Famous Victories of Henry V.*, acted before 1588, *The Troublesome Raigne of King John* (printed 1591), and the *True Chronicle History of King Lear* (acted 1593). A still further step in advance was taken in what really deserves the title of the *Tragedy of Sir Thomas More* (c. 1590), not so much on account of the relative nearness of the subject to the time of its treatment, as because of the tragic responsibility of character here already clearly worked out.

Such had been the beginnings of tragedy in England up to the time when the genius of dramatists worthy to be called the predecessors of Shakespeare, under the influences of a creative literary epoch, seized the form ready to their hands. The birth of comedy, at all times a process of less labour, had slightly preceded that of tragedy in the history of our drama. Isolated Latin comedies had been produced in the original or in English versions or reproductions as early as the reign of Henry VIII., and the morality and its descendant, the interlude, pointed the way towards nationalizing and popularizing types equally fitted to divert Roman and Italian and English audiences. Thus the earliest extant English comedy, N. Udall's *Ralph Roister Doister*, which cannot be dated later than 1551, may be

<sup>1</sup> *Thebais*.

described as a genuinely English adaptation of Plautus, while its successor, *Gammer Gurton's Needle*, printed 1575, and probably written by (Bishop) Still, has an original, and in consequence a sligher, though by no means unamusing, plot. In the main, however, our early English comedy, while occasionally introducing characters of genuinely native origin, and appealing to the traditional humours of Will Summer, the court-fool of Henry VIII.,<sup>2</sup> or Grim, the collier of Croydon,<sup>3</sup> was content to borrow its themes from Italian or classical sources; Ariosto's *I Suppositi* found a translator in Gascoigne<sup>4</sup> (1566), and the *Menæchmi* of Plautus translators or imitators in writers of rather later dates.<sup>5</sup> While on the one hand the mixture of tragic with comic motives was already leading in the direction of tragi-comedy, the precedent of the Italian pastoral drama encouraged the introduction of figures and stories from classical mythology; and the rapid and versatile influence of Italian comed seemed likely to continue to control the progress of the lighter branch of the English drama.

Out of such promises as these the glories of our drama were ripened by the warmth and light of the great Elizabethan age—of which the beginnings may fairly be reckoned from the third decennium of the reign to which it owes its name. The queen's steady love of dramatic entertainments could not of itself have led, though it undoubtedly contributed, to such a result. Against the attacks which a nascent puritanism was already directing against the stage by the hands of Northbrooke, the repentant playwright Gosson, Stubbes, and others, were to be set not only the barren favour of royalty, and the more direct patronage of great nobles, but the fact that literary authorities were already weighing the endeavours of the English drama in the balance of respectful criticism, and that in the abstract at least the claims of both tragedy and comedy were upheld by those who shrunk from the desipience of idle pastimes. As the popularity of the stage increased, the functions of playwright and actor, whether combined or not, began to hold out a reasonable promise of personal gain. Nor, above all, was that higher impulse, which leads men of talent and genius to attempt forms of art in harmony with the tastes and tendencies of their times, wanting to the group of writers who can be remembered by no nobler name than that of Shakespeare's predecessors.

The lives of all of these are, of course, in part contemporary with the life of Shakespeare himself; nor was there any substantial difference in the circumstances under which most of them, and he, led their lives as dramatic authors. A distinction was manifestly kept up between poets and playwrights. Of the contempt entertained for the actor's profession some fell to the share of the dramatist; "even Lodge," says Dr Ingleby, "who had indeed never trod the stage, but had written several plays, and had no reason to be ashamed of his antecedents, speaks of the vocation of the play-maker as sharing the odium attaching to the actor." Among the dramatists themselves good fellowship and literary partnership only at times asserted themselves as stronger than the tendency to mutual jealousy and abuse; of all chapters of dramatic history, the annals of the early Elizabethan stage perhaps least resemble those of Arcadia.

Moreover, the theatre had hardly found its strength as a powerful element in the national life, when it was involved in a bitter controversy, with which it had originally no connection, on behalf of an ally whose sympathy with it can only have been of a very limited

<sup>2</sup> *Misogonus*. <sup>3</sup> *The History of the Collier*. <sup>4</sup> *The Suppositi*.  
<sup>5</sup> *A Historie of Error* (1), 1577; *The Menæchmi taken out of Plautus* (pr. 1595).

kind. The Marprelate controversy in 1589 led to a stoppage of stage plays which proved only temporary; but the general result of the attempt to make the stage a vehicle of political abuse and invective was beyond a doubt to coarsen and degrade both plays and players. The true remedy was at last applied, when from about the year 1594 the chief London actors became divided into two great rival companies—the Lord Chamberlain's and the Lord Admiral's—which alone received licences. Instead of half-a-dozen or more companies whose jealousies communicated themselves to the playwrights belonging to them, there were now, besides the Children of the Chapel, two established bodies of actors, directed by steady and, in the full sense of the word, respectable men. To the Lord Chamberlain's Company, which, after being settled at "the Theater," moved to the Globe on the Bankside in 1599, Shakespeare and Richard Burbadge, the greatest of the Elizabethan actors, belonged; the Lord Admiral's was managed by Philip Henslowe, the author of the *Diary*, and Edward Alleyn, the founder of Dulwich College, and was ultimately, in 1600, settled at the Fortune. In these and other houses were performed the plays of our Elizabethan dramatists, with few adventitious aids, the performance being crowded into a brief afternoon, when it is obvious that only the idler sections of the population could attend. No woman might appear at a playhouse unless masked; on the stage, down to the Restoration, women's parts continued to be acted by boys.

It is futile to take no account of such outward circumstances as these and many which cannot here be noted in surveying the progress of the literature of the Elizabethan drama. No dramatic literature which has any claim to rank beside it—not that of Athens nor those of modern Italy and Spain, nor those of France and Germany in their classic periods—had to contend against such odds; a mighty inherent strength alone ensured to it the vitality which it so triumphantly asserted, and which enabled it to run so unequalled a course.

Among Shakespeare's predecessors John Lyly (1554–1606), whose plays were all written for the Children of the Chapel and the Children of St Paul's, holds a position apart in our dramatic literature. The euphuism, to which his famous romance gave its name, likewise distinguishes his mythological,<sup>1</sup> quasi-historical,<sup>2</sup> allegorical,<sup>3</sup> and satirical<sup>4</sup> comedies. But his real service to the progress of our drama is to be sought neither in his choice of subjects nor in his imagery—though to his fondness for fairylore and for the whole phantasmagoria of legend, classical as well as romantic, his contemporaries, and Shakespeare in particular, were indebted for a stimulative precedent. It lies in his adoption of Gascoigne's innovation of writing plays in prose; and in his having, though under the fetters of an affected and vicious style, given the first example of brisk and vivacious dialogue—an example to which even such successors as Shakespeare and Jonson were indebted. Thomas Kyd (d. c. 1594), the author of the *Spanish Tragedy*, possesses some of the characteristics, but none of the genius, of the greatest tragic dramatist who preceded Shakespeare. No sligher tribute than this is assuredly the due of Christopher Marlowe (1564–1593), whose violent end prematurely closed a poetic career of dazzling brilliancy. His earliest play, *Tamburlaine the Great*, in which the use of blank verse was introduced upon the English public stage, while full of the "high astounding terms" of an extravagant and often bombastic diction, is already marked by the passion which was this poet's most characteristic feature, and which was to find ex-

pression so luxuriant in his *Doctor Faustus* and so surpassingly violent in his *Jew of Malta*. His master-piece, *Edward II.*, is a tragedy of singular pathos and of a dramatic power unapproached by any of his contemporaries. George Peele (1552–1596–7) was a far more versatile writer even as a dramatist; but though his plays contain passages of exquisite beauty, not one of them is worthy to be ranked by the side of Marlowe's *Edward II.*, compared with which, if indeed not absolutely, Peele's *Chronicle of Edward I.* still stands on the level of the species to which its title and character alike assign it. His finest play is undoubtedly *David and Bethsabe*, which resembles *Edward I.* in construction, but far surpasses it in beauty of language and versification, besides treating its subject with greatly superior dignity. If the difference between Peele and Shakespeare is still in many respects besides that of genius an immeasurable one, we seem to come into something like a Shakespearian atmosphere in more than one passage of the plays of the unfortunate Robert Greene (1561–1592),<sup>5</sup> Greene perhaps in nothing more enduringly than in his notorious enmity to Shakespeare himself. His genius, which shone most brightly in plays treating English life and scenes, was in the main free from the pedantry which occasionally besets the flight of Peele's and even of Marlowe's muse; and his most delightful work<sup>6</sup> at all events seems to breathe something of that indescribable freshness which we recognize, if not as a peculiarly Shakespearian characteristic, at least as one belonging to none but a truly national art. Thomas Lodge (c. 1558–1625), Thomas Nash the redoubtable pamphleteer (c. 1565–c. 1602), Henry Chettle (1564–c. 1667), who worked the chords of both pity<sup>7</sup> and terror<sup>8</sup> with equal vigour, and Anthony Munday (1553–1633), better remembered for his city pageants than for his plays, are among the other more generally known writers of the early Elizabethan drama, though not all of them can strictly speaking be called predecessors of Shakespeare.

The common characteristics of nearly all these dramatists were in accordance with those of the great age to which they belonged. Stirring times called for stirring themes, such as those of "Mahomet, Scipio, and Tamerlane;" and these again for a corresponding vigour of treatment. Neatness and symmetry of construction were neglected for fulness and variety of matter. Novelty and grandeur of subject seemed well matched by a swelling amplitude and often reckless extravagance of diction. As if from an inner necessity, the balance of rhymed couplets gave way to the impetuous march of blank-verse; "strong lines" were as inevitably called for as strong situations and strong characters. Distinct as the chief of these poets are from one another by the marks impressed upon both form and matter by individual genius, yet the stamp of the age is upon them all. Writing for the stage only, of which some of them possessed a personal experience, they acquired an instinctive insight into the laws of dramatic cause and effect, and infused a warm vitality into the dramatic literature which they produced, so to speak, for immediate consumption. On the other hand, the same cause made rapidity of workmanship indispensable to a successful playwright. How a play was produced, how many hands had been at work upon it, what loans and what spoliations had been made in the process, were considerations of less moment than the question whether it was produced, and whether it succeeded. His harness—frequently double or triple—was inseparable from the lusty Pegasus of the early English drama, and its genius toiled, to borrow the phrase of the Attic comedian, "like an Arcadian mercenary."

<sup>1</sup> *The Woman in the Moone; Sappho and Phao*.<sup>2</sup> *Alexander, Campaspe, and Diogenes*.<sup>3</sup> *Endimion; Mydas*.<sup>4</sup> *Gallathea*.<sup>5</sup> *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*.<sup>6</sup> *Patient Grisail* (with Dekker and Houghton).<sup>7</sup> *Hoffman, or A Revenge for a Father*.



This period of our drama, though it is far from being one of crude effort, could not therefore yet be one of full consummation. In tragedy the advance which had been made in the choice of great themes, in knitting closer the connection between the theatre and the national history, in vindicating to passion its right to adequate expression, was already enormous. In comedy the advance had been less decisive and less independent; much had been gained in reaching greater freedom of form and something in enlarging the range of subjects; but artificiality had proved a snare in the one direction, while the licence of the comic stage, upheld by favourite "clowns," such as Kemp or Tarleton, had not succumbed before more exacting demands. The way of escaping the dilemma had, however, been already recognized to lie in the construction of suitable plots, for which a full storehouse was open in the popular traditions preserved in national ballads, and in the growing literature of translated foreign fiction, or of native imitations of it. Meanwhile, the aberration of the comic stage to political and religious controversy, which it could never hope to treat with real freedom in a country provided with a strong monarchy and a dogmatic religion, seemed likely to extinguish the promise of the beginnings of English romantic comedy.

These were the circumstances under which the greatest of dramatists began to devote his genius to the theatre. Shakespeare's career as a writer of plays can have differed little in its beginnings from those of his contemporaries and rivals. Before or while he was proceeding from the re-touching and re-writing of the plays of others to original dramatic composition, the most gifted of those we have termed his predecessors had passed away. He had been decried as an actor before he was known as an author; and after living through days of darkness for the theatre, if not for himself, attained, before the close of the century, to the beginnings of his prosperity and the beginnings of his fame. But if we call him fortunate, it is not because of such rewards as these. As a poet Shakespeare was no doubt happy in his times, which intensified the national character, expanded the national mind, and were able to add their stimulus even to such a creative power as his. He was happy in the antecedents of the form of literature which commended itself to his choice, and in the opportunities which it offered in so many directions for an advance to heights yet undiscovered and unknown. What he actually accomplished was due to his genius, whose achievements are immeasurable like itself. His influence upon the progress of our national drama divides itself in very unequal proportions into a direct and an indirect one. To the former alone reference can here be made.

Already the first editors of Shakespeare's works in a collected form recognized so marked a distinction between his plays taken from English history and those treating other historical subjects (whether ancient or modern) that, while they included the latter among the tragedies at large, they grouped the former as *histories* by themselves. These *histories* are in their literary genesis a development of the *chronicle histories* of Shakespeare's predecessors and contemporaries, the taste for which had greatly increased towards the beginning of his own career as a dramatist, under influences naturally connecting themselves with the general current of national life and sentiment in this epoch. Though it cannot be assumed that Shakespeare composed his several dramas from English history in the sequence of the chronology of their themes, his genius gave to the entire series an inner harmony which has not unnaturally inspired commentators with the wish to prove it a symmetrically constructed whole. He thus brought this peculiarly national species to a perfection which made it difficult, if not impossible, for his later contemporaries and successors

to add to it more than an occasional supplement. None of them was found able or ready to take up the thread where Shakespeare had left it, after perfunctorily attaching the present to the past by a work (probably not all his own) which must be regarded as the end rather than the crown of the series of his *histories*.<sup>1</sup> But to furnish such supplements accorded little with the tastes and tendencies of the later Elizabethans; and with the exception of an isolated work,<sup>2</sup> the national historical drama in Shakespeare reached at once its perfection and its close. The ruder form of the old chronicle history for a time survived the advance made upon it; but the efforts in this field of T. Heywood,<sup>3</sup> S. Rowley,<sup>4</sup> and others are, from a literary point of view, anachronisms.

Of Shakespeare's other plays the several groups exercised a more direct influence upon the general progress of our dramatic literature. His Roman tragedies, though following their authorities with much the same fidelity as that of the English *histories*, even more effectively taught the great lesson of free dramatic treatment of historic themes, and thus pre-eminently became the perennial models of the modern historic drama. His tragedies on other themes, which necessarily admitted of a more absolute freedom of treatment, established themselves as the examples for all time of the highest kind of tragedy. Where else is exhibited with the same fulness the struggle between will and obstacle, character and circumstance? Where is mirrored with equal power and variety the working of those passions in the mastery of which over man lies his doom? Here, above all, Shakespeare as compared with his predecessors, as well as with his successors, "is that nature which they paint and draw." He threw open to modern tragedy a range of hitherto unknown breadth and depth and height, and emancipated the national drama in its noblest forms from limits to which it could never again restrict itself without a consciousness of having renounced its enfranchisement. Happily for the variety of his creative genius on the English stage, no divorce had been proclaimed between the serious and the comic, and no division of species had been established such as he himself ridicules as pedantic when it professes to be exhaustive. The comedies of Shakespeare accordingly refuse to be tabulated in deference to any method of classification deserving to be called precise; and several of them are comedies only according to a purely technical use of the term. In those in which the comic interest asserts itself to the instinct of reader or spectator as supreme, it is still of its nature incidental to the progress of the action; for it seems a just criticism (and one agreeing with what we can conclude as to Shakespeare's process of construction) that of all his comedies but one<sup>5</sup> is in both design and effect a comedy of character proper. Thus in this direction, while the unparalleled wealth of his invention renewed or created a whole gallery of types, he left much to be done by his successors; while the truest secrets of his comic art, which interweaves fancy with observation, draws wisdom from the lips of fools, and imbues with character what all other hands would have left shadowy, monstrous, or trivial, are among the things inimitable belonging to the individuality of his poetic genius.

The influences of Shakespeare's diction and versification upon those of the English drama in general can hardly be over-rated, though it would be next to impossible to state them definitely. In these points, Shakespeare's manner as a writer was progressive; and this progress has been deemed sufficiently well traceable in his plays to be used as an aid in seeking to determine their chronological sequence. The

<sup>1</sup> Henry VIII.

<sup>2</sup> Ford, *Perkin Warbeck*.

<sup>3</sup> Edward IV.; *If You Know Not Me, &c.*

<sup>4</sup> Henry VIII.

<sup>5</sup> *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

general laws of this progress accord with those of the natural advance of creative genius; artificiality gives way to freedom, and freedom in its turn submits to a greater degree of regularity and care. In versification as in diction the earliest and the latest period of Shakespeare's dramatic writing are more easily recognizable than what lies between and may be called the normal period, the plays belonging to which in form most resemble one another, and are least affected by distinguishable peculiarities—such as the rhymes and intentionally euphuistic colouring of style which characterize the earliest, or the feminine endings of the lines and the more condensed manner of expression common to the latest plays. But such distinctions apart, there can be no doubt but that in verse and in prose alike, Shakespeare's style, so far as it admitted of reproduction, is itself to be regarded as the *norm* of that of the Elizabethan drama, that in it the prose form of English comedy possesses its first accepted model, and that in it the chosen metre of the English versified drama established itself as irremovable unless at the risk of an unnatural experiment.

It may seem paradoxical to assert that it is by their construction that Shakespeare's plays exerted the most palpable influence upon the English drama, as well as upon the modern drama of the Germanic nations in general, and upon such forms of the Romance drama as have been in more recent times based upon it. For it was not in construction that his greatest strength lay, or that the individuality of his genius could raise him above the conditions under which he worked in common with his immediate predecessors and contemporaries. Yet the fact that he reconciled these conditions with creations of matchless strength and of unequalled fidelity to the demands of nature and art, established them as the conditions of what a popular (and consequently often abused) term has instinctively come to designate as the Shakespearian drama. The great and irresistible demand on the part of Shakespeare's public was for incident—a demand which of itself necessitated a method of construction different from that of the Greek drama, or of those modelled more or less closely upon it. To no other reason is to be ascribed the circumstance that Shakespeare so constantly combined two actions in the course of a single play, not merely supplementing the one by means of the other as a bye or under-plot. In no respect is the progress of his technical skill as a dramatist more apparent,—an assertion which a comparison of plays clearly ascribable to successive periods of his life would satisfactorily establish.

His characters.

Should it, however, be sought to express in one word the greatest debt of the drama to Shakespeare, this word must be the same as that which expresses his supreme gift as a dramatist. It is in *characterization*—in the drawing of characters ranging through almost every type of humanity which furnishes a fit subject for the tragic or the comic art—that he remains absolutely unapproached; and it was in this direction that he pointed the way which the English drama could not henceforth desert without becoming untrue to itself. It may have been a mere error of judgment which afterwards held him to have been surpassed by others in particular fields of characterization (which, forsooth, regarded him as supremely excellent in male but not in female characters). But it was a sure sign of decay when our writers began to shrink from following him in the endeavour to make the drama a mirror of humanity, and when, in self-condemned arrogance, they thrust unreality back upon a stage which he had animated with the warm breath of life, where Juliet had blossomed like a flower of spring, and where Othello's noble nature had suffered and sinned.

By the numerous body of poets who, contemporary with Shakespeare or in the next generation, cultivated the wide

field of the national drama, every form commending itself to the tastes and sympathies of the national genius was essayed. None were neglected except those from which the spirit of English literature had been estranged by the Reformation, and those which had from the first been artificial importations of the Renaissance. The mystery could not here, as in Spain, produce such an aftergrowth as the *auto*, and the confines of the religious drama were only now and then tentatively touched.<sup>1</sup> The direct imitations of the classical drama were few and feeble; Chapman, while affecting some of its usages, made no serious attempt to reproduce its essentials; experiments like W. Alexander's (afterwards Earl of Stirling) *Monarchicke Tragedies*<sup>2</sup> (1603–1605) are the mere isolated efforts of a student, like Milton's *Samson Agonistes* at a later date (1677). At the opposite end of the dramatic scale, the light gaiety of the Italian and French force could not establish itself on the English popular stage without more solid adjuncts; the Englishman's festive digestion is robust, and he likes his amusements substantial. In the pastoral drama and the mask, however, many of our dramatists found special opportunities for the exercise of their lyrical gifts and of their inventive powers. The former could never become other than an exotic, so long as it retained the artificial character of its origin. Shakespeare had accordingly only blended elements derived from it into the action of his romantic comedies. In more or less isolated works Jonson, Fletcher, Daniel, Randolph, and others sought to rival Tasso and Guarini,—Jonson<sup>3</sup> coming nearest to nationalizing an essentially foreign growth by the fresh simplicity of his treatment, Fletcher<sup>4</sup> bearing away the palm for beauty of poetic execution. The mask was a more elastic kind of com-

The mask

<sup>1</sup> Massinger, *The Virgin Martyr*; Shirley, *St Patrick for Ireland*  
<sup>2</sup> *Darius; Cræsus; Julius Caesar; The Alexandrian Tragedy*,  
<sup>3</sup> *The Sad Shepherd*.

<sup>4</sup> *The Faithful Shepherdess*.



(1634) composed one of the loftiest and loveliest of English poems. *Comus* has been judged and condemned as a drama,—unjustly, for the dramatic qualities of a mask are not essential to the species. Nor need its history in England have here been referred to, were it not so inseparably connected with that of the Elizabethan drama. In later times the mask merged into the opera, or continued a humble life of its own apart from contact with higher literary effort. It is strange that our later poets should have done so little to restore to its nobler uses, and to invest with a new significance, a form of so proved a flexibility as the poetic mask.

The annals of our drama proper in the period reaching from the closing years of Elizabeth to the outbreak of the great Revolution include, together with numerous names relatively insignificant, many illustrious in the history of our poetic literature. Among Shakespeare's contemporaries and successors there is, however, but one who by the energy of his genius, not less than by the circumstances of his literary career, stands in a position of undisputed primacy among his fellows. Ben Jonson (1573-1635), to whom in his latter days a whole generation of younger writers did homage as to their veteran chief, was alone in full truth the founder of a school or family of dramatists. Yet his pre-eminence did not (whatever he or his followers may have thought) extend to both branches of the regular drama. In tragedy he fell short of the highest success; the weight of his learning lay too heavily upon his efforts to draw from deeper sources than those which had sufficed for Shakespeare. Such as they are, his tragic works stand almost, though not quite, alone in this period as examples of sustained effort in historic tragedy proper. G. Chapman (1557 or 1559-1634) treated stirring themes, more especially from modern French history,<sup>2</sup> always with vigour, and at times with genuine effectiveness; but though rich in beauties of detail, he failed in this branch of the drama to follow Shakespeare even at a distance in the supreme art of fully developing a character by means of the action. Mention has already been made of Ford's isolated effort in the direction of historic tragedy and of those excursions into the still popular domain of the chronicle history by T. Heywood, Dekker, and others, which are to be regarded as nothing more than retrogressions. With the great body of the English dramatists of this and of the next period, tragedy had passed into a phase where its interest depended mainly upon plot and incident. The romantic tragedies and tragi-comedies which fill our literature in this period constitute together a growth of at first sight astonishing exuberance, and in mere externals of theme—ranging from Byzantium to ancient Britain, and from the Cæsars of ancient Rome to the tyrants of the Renaissance—of equally astonishing variety. The sources from which these subjects were derived had been constantly on the increase. Besides Italian, Spanish, and French fiction, original or translated, besides British legend in its Romance dress, and English fiction in its humbler or in its more ambitious and artificial forms, the contemporary foreign drama, especially the Spanish, offered opportunities for resort. To the English, as to the French and Italian drama, of both this and the following century, the prolific dramatists clustered round Lope de Vega and Calderon supplied a whole arsenal of plots, incidents, and situations—among others to Middleton, to Webster, and most signally to Beaumont and Fletcher. And in addition to these materials, a new field of resources was at hand since our dramatists had begun to regard events and episodes of English domestic life as fit subjects for tragic treatment.

<sup>1</sup> *Sejanus his Fall; Catiline his Conspiracy.*

<sup>2</sup> *Bussy d'Ambois; The Revenge of B. & A.; The Conspiracy of Byron; The Tragedy of B.; Chabot, Admiral of France (with Shirley).*

Domestic tragedy of this description was indeed no novelty on the English stage; Shakespeare himself may have touched, with his master-hand, more than one effort of this kind;<sup>3</sup> but T. Heywood (c. 1570-c. 1605) may be regarded as the first who achieved any work of considerable literary value of this class,<sup>4</sup> to which some of the plays of T. Dekker (c. 1570-c. 1640), T. Middleton, and others likewise more or less belong. Yet in contrast to this wide variety of sources, and consequent apparent variety of themes, the number of *motives* employed—at least as a rule—in the tragic drama of this period was comparatively small and limited. Hence it is that, notwithstanding the diversity of subjects among the tragic dramas of such writers as Marston, Webster, Fletcher, Ford, and Shirley, an impression of sameness is left upon us by a connected perusal of these works. Politic ambition, conjugal jealousy, absolute female devotion, unbridled masculine passion, such are the motives which constantly recur in the Decameron of our later Elizabethan drama. And this impression is heightened by the want of moderation, by the excess of passion, which these dramatists so habitually exhibit in the treatment of their favourite themes. All the tragic poets of this period are not equally amenable to this charge; in J. Webster<sup>5</sup> (d. c. 1650), master as he is of the effects of the horrible, and in J. Ford<sup>6</sup> (1586-c. 1640), surpassingly seductive in his sweetness, the monotony of exaggerated passion is broken by those marvellously sudden and subtle touches through which their tragic genius creates its most thrilling effects. Nor will the tendency to excess of passion, which F. Beaumont (1586-1616) and J. Fletcher (1576-1625) undoubtedly exhibit be confounded with their distinctive power of sustaining tenderly pathetic characters and situations in a degree unequalled by any of their contemporaries—a power seconded by a beauty of diction and softness of versification which for a time raised them to the highest pinnacle of popularity, and which entitles them in their conjunction, and Fletcher as an independent worker, to an enduring pre-eminence among their fellows. In their morals Beaumont and Fletcher are not above the level of their age. The manliness of sentiment which ennobles the rhetorical genius of P. Massinger (1584-1640), and the gift of poetic illustration which entitles J. Shirley (1595-1666) to be remembered as something besides the latest and the most fertile of this group of dramatists, have less direct bearing upon the general character of the tragic art of the period. The common features of the romantic tragedy of this age are sufficiently marked, but not capable of obscuring the distinctive features in its individual writers which it is the highest function of criticism to discover and establish.

In comedy, on the other hand, the genius and the insight of Jonson pointed the way to a steady and legitimate advance. His theory of "humours" (which found the most palpable expression in two of his earliest plays<sup>7</sup>), if translated into the ordinary language of dramatic art, signifies the paramount importance in the comic drama of the creation of distinctive human types. In the actual creation of these it was impossible that Jonson should excel Shakespeare; but in the consciousness with which he recognized and indicated the highest sphere of a comic dramatist's labours, he rendered to the drama a direct service which Shakespeare had left unperformed. By the rest of his contemporaries and his successors, some of whom (such as Brome) were content avowedly to follow in his footsteps, Jonson was only occasionally rivalled in individual

<sup>3</sup> *Arden of Feversham: A Yorkshire Tragedy.*

<sup>4</sup> *A Woman killed with Kindness.*

<sup>5</sup> *Vittoria Coromboni; The Duchess of Malfi.*

<sup>6</sup> *'Tis Pity She 's a Whore; The Broken Heart.*

<sup>7</sup> *Every Man in his Humour; Every Man out of his Humour.*

instances of comic creations; in the entirety of its achievements his genius as a comic dramatist remained unapproached. The favourite types of Jonsonian comedy, to which Dekker, J. Marston (1575-1624), and Chapman had, though to no large extent, added others of their own, were elaborated with incessant zeal and remarkable effect by their contemporaries and successors. It was after a very different fashion from that in which the Roman comedians reiterated the ordinary types of the New Attic comedy, that the inexhaustible *verve* of T. Middleton (1574-1624), the buoyant productivity of Fletcher, the observant humour of N. Field (c. 1590-c. 1640), and the artistic versatility of Shirley—not to mention many later and lesser names—mirrored in innumerable pictures of contemporary life the undying follies and foibles of mankind. As comedians of manners more than one of these surpassed the old master, not indeed in distinctness and correctness,—the fruits of the most painstaking genius that ever fitted a learned sock to the living realities of life,—but in a lightness which did not impair their sureness of touch; while in the construction of plots the access of abundant new materials, and the greater elasticity in treatment which is the result of accumulated experience, enabled them to maintain a steady progress. Thus our comic dramatic literature from Jonson to Shirley is unsurpassed as a comedy of manners, while as a comedy of character it at least defies comparison with any other national literary growth preceding or contemporaneous with it. Though the younger generation, of which W. Cartwright (1611 or 1615-1643) may be taken as an example, was unequal in originality or force to its predecessors, yet so little exhausted was the vitality of the species, that its traditions survived the *interregnum* of the Revolution, and connected themselves in some measure with later growths of English comedy.

The later Elizabethan stage.

The rivals against which in its closing period the old English drama had to contend have been already noticed. From the masks and triumphs at court and at the houses of the nobility, with their Olympuses and Parnassuses built by Inigo Jones, and filled with goddesses and nymphs clad in the gorgeous costumes designed by his inventive hand, to the city pageants and shows by land and water,—from the tilts and tournaments at Whitehall to the more philosophical devices at the Inns of Court and the academical plays at the universities,—down even to the brief but thrilling theatrical excitements of Bartholomew Fair and the "Ninevitical motions" of the puppets,—in all these ways the various sections of the theatrical public were tempted aside. Foreign performers—French and Spanish actors, and even French actresses—paid visits to London. But the national drama held its ground. The art of acting maintained itself at least on the level to which it had been brought by Shakespeare's associates and contemporaries, Burbadge and Heminge, Alleyn, Lewin, Taylor, and others "of the older sort." The profession of actor came to be more generally than of old separated from that of playwright, though they were still (as in the case of Field) occasionally combined. But this rather led to an increased appreciation of artistic merit in actors who valued the dignity of their own profession and whose co-operation the authors learnt to esteem as of independent significance. The stage was purged from the barbarism of the old school of clowns. Women's parts were still acted by boys, many of whom attained to considerable celebrity; and a practice was thus continued which placed the English theatre at a considerable disadvantage as compared with the Spanish (where it never obtained), and which probably to some extent reacted upon the licence of expression assumed by our dramatists. The arrangement of the stage, which facilitated a rapid succession of scenes without any necessity for their being organically connected with one another, re-

mained essentially the same as in Shakespeare's days, though the primitive expedients for indicating locality had begun to be occasionally exchanged for scenery more or less appropriate to the place of action. Costume was apparently cultivated with much greater care; and there is no reason to suppose that the English stage of this period had not gone as far as was expedient in a direction in which in feebler times so vast an amount of effort has come to be spent. The drama still depended in the main upon its literary essentials and upon the actor's art; but the system of prologues and epilogues, and of dedications to published plays, was more uniformly employed than it had been by Shakespeare as the conventional method of recommending authors and actors to the favour of individual patrons, and to that of their chief patron, the public.

Up to the outbreak of the Civil War the drama in all its forms continued to enjoy the favour or good-will of the court, although a close supervision was exercised over all attempts to make the stage the vehicle of political references or allusions. The regular official agent of this supervision was the Master of the Revels; but under James I. a special ordinance, in harmony with the king's ideas concerning the dignity of the throne, was passed "against representing any modern Christian king in plays on the stage." The theatre could hardly expect to be allowed a liberty of speech in reference to matters of state denied to the public at large; and occasional attempts to indulge in the freedom of criticism dear to the spirit of comedy met with more or less decisive repression and punishment.<sup>1</sup> But the sympathies of the dramatists were so entirely on the side of the court, that the real difficulties against which the theatre had to contend came from a directly opposite quarter. With the growth of Puritanism the feeling of hostility to the stage increased in a large part of the population, well represented by the civic authorities of the capital. This hostility found many ways of expressing itself. The attempts to suppress the Blackfriars theatre (1619, 1631, 1633) proved abortive; but the representation of stage plays continued to be prohibited on Sundays, and during the prevalence of the plague in London in 1637 was temporarily suspended altogether. The desire of the Puritans of the more pronounced type openly aimed at a permanent closing of the theatres. The war between them and the dramatists was accordingly of a life-and-death kind. On the one hand, the drama heaped its bitterest and often coarsest attacks upon whatever savoured of the Puritan spirit; gibes, taunts, caricatures in ridicule and aspersion of Puritans and Puritanism make up a great part of the comic literature of the later Elizabethan drama and of its aftergrowth in the reigns of the first two Stuarts. This feeling of hostility, to which Shakespeare was no stranger,<sup>2</sup> though he cannot be connected with the authorship of one of its earliest and coarsest expressions,<sup>3</sup> rose into a spirit of open defiance in some of the masterpieces of Ben Jonson;<sup>4</sup> and the comedies of his contemporaries and successors<sup>5</sup> abound in caricatured reproductions of the more common or more extravagant types of Puritan life. On the other hand, the moral defects, the looseness of tone, the mockery of ties sanctioned by law and consecrated by religion, the tendency to treat middle-class life as the hunting-ground for the amusements of the upper classes, which degraded so much of the dramatic literature

<sup>1</sup> Chapman, Marston (and Jonson), *Eastward Hoe* (1605); Middleton, *A Game at Chess* (1624); Shirley and Chapman, *The Bull* (1632); Massinger (?), *The Spanish Viceroy* (1634).

<sup>2</sup> *Twelfth Night.*

<sup>3</sup> *The Puritan, or The Widow of Walling Street*, by "W. S." (Wentworth Smith ?)

<sup>4</sup> *The Alchemist; Bartholomew Fair.*

<sup>5</sup> Chapman, *An Humorous Day's Mirth*; Marston, *The Dutch Courtesan*; Middleton, *The Family of Love.*