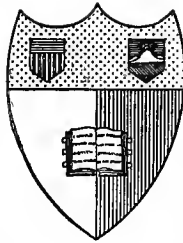


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THE PRESS AND THE STAGE

WILLIAM WINTER



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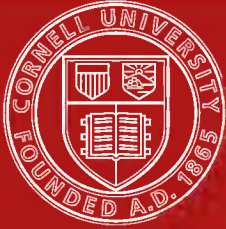
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THE PRESS AND THE STAGE

AN ORATION

BY

WILLIAM WINTER

*Delivered before the Goethe Society, at the Brunswick
Hotel, New York, January 28, 1889*

LOCKWOOD & COOMBES
NEW YORK

1889

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To

ALBERT M. PALMER

WHOSE WISH CAUSED IT TO BE WRITTEN
AND WHOSE FRIENDSHIP MADE IT WELCOME
THIS ORATION IS DEDICATED
WITH A GRATEFUL SENSE OF HIS SERVICES
TO THE AMERICAN STAGE
AND WITH CORDIAL RESPECT FOR HIS TALENTS
SCHOLARSHIP AND TASTE

PREFACE.

THIS Oration is a reply to Mr. Dion Boucicault and other censors of the American Newspaper in its relation to Dramatic Art. It was written in compliance with the request of an old friend, Mr. Albert M. Palmer, that I would participate in an amicable discussion of this subject at a meeting of the Goethe Society, of New York. The meeting was held in the Music Hall of the Brunswick Hotel, on Monday evening, January 28, 1889. Mr. Parke Godwin presided. Mr. Boucicault stated his case against the press, and this reply thereupon was spoken by me. Mr. Boucicault's oration, modified by the omission of his charges and insinuations aspersing the integrity of the press, was subsequently published in the North American Review (March, 1889). My response appeared in Harper's Weekly (March 23, 1889). This oration, as now reprinted, is precisely what it was when delivered, except that a few names of persons and titles of plays have been introduced into it, in addition to those then mentioned, and except that one section, the eleventh, has been added, to dispose of Mr. Boucicault's incidental aspersions and complaints. Those aspersions and complaints were printed by Mr. Boucicault in the North American Review as long ago as the autumn of 1879, and they have been nourished and cherished by him ever since. It seems a pity that they should not be lulled to rest.

In a letter addressed to me on January 1, 1889, in anticipation of our meeting and our public controversy as

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to the press and the stage, Mr. Boucicault made the following statement of his belief and opinion :

“ The position I assume is that the newspaper press has practically displaced the public in the exercise of judgment and the formation of the stage ; that in accepting this office it has incurred its responsibilities ; that this service of opinions to the public has paralyzed the freedom and strength of public judgment ; that actors seek to occupy high places by force of press advertisement ; that the journalist, as a rule, is incompetent as a specialist in dramatic affairs, and encourages a trivial kind of drama and buffoonery ; that the few journalists conspicuous by their capacity are too few to make head against this influence, and protest vainly, while the torrent of ribaldry and charlatanism sweeps into bathos, and imposture sits on the dramatic throne. And of this state of things no great drama, no great actor, can possibly come, and none has come—not one. Burslesque and society melodrama monopolize the stage. So since 1850 not a single work of any enduring life has been added to dramatic literature : the age is barren. These are a few of the results I attribute largely to the agency of the press.”

This arraignment of the press by Mr. Boucicault is a sufficiently comprehensive and specific if not a very novel expression of antipathy toward the character and influence of newspapers in their relation to the stage, and there are many who sympathize with it and who habitually denounce “ the critics.” Mr. Boucicault is a man of ability, experience, and extensive reputation, and he has many followers. His statement of belief and opinion accordingly may be heard as one of the current voices of censure, and may be accepted and considered as a representative utterance of discontent with a social power.

FORT HILL, STATEN ISLAND,
NEW YORK, March 3, 1889.

W. W.

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I.

IT seldom happens that any practical good results from controversy. "The pain of dispute," said Joubert, "exceeds by much its utility: all disputation makes the mind deaf." It is perfectly true that nothing in this world is ever settled until it is settled right. But adjustment is seldom accelerated by disputatious talk. The satirical poet of "Hudibras," writing in that immortal jingle which records so many truths with such felicity of language, has noticed that "a man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still." Time and experience modify and sometimes change our convictions; but nothing else, practically, modifies or changes them. "I have heard many speeches," said a member of the English Parliament, "that affected my feelings—never one that changed my vote." Those persons who believe that the public is always naturally right and the press always perversely wrong, or that whenever the public is wrong it is because the press has made it so, or that the stage is a celestial institution and the dramatic critic a pestilent ass, would continue to hold their belief, "though Nestor swear the jest be laughable." When the ordinary human mind is confronted with a perplexing subject, or baffled by a difficult problem, or lost for the consolation of a fixed belief, it is always

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pleasant to make a mental landing upon a distinct proposition. "If your sermon barrél should run low," was the advice of an old parson to a young beginner in the pulpit, "and you are hard up for a subject, pitch into the Pope!" In this period of civilization, in which certainly the newspaper plays an incessant, conspicuous, and active part, it is perfectly natural, when anything goes wrong or anybody is discontented, that the indignant censor should pitch into the press. It is the obvious alternative—the safe, easy, ordinary, conventional resort of the self-complacent moralist. No doubt he has his grievance. The press is far from perfect. I cannot think, however, that it sins much against the stage, or that it sins at all in the particular manner that has been indicated by Mr. Boucicault's indictment. Indeed, while I follow, with ever-increasing wonder, the airy, absolute, and oracular statements of this learned judge I cannot avoid a passing memory of Lord Melbourne's remark about the most eloquent of English historians. "I wish," said that wise, humorous, and able statesman, "I only wish that I could be as sure of *anything* as Tom Macaulay is of *everything*."

II.

ON March 4, 1841, a new comedy called "London Assurance" was produced in London, at Covent Garden, then managed by Madame Vestris. It was a comedy of the epigrammatic school. It preserved in a modern dress the tradition of Wycherley and Farquhar and Vanbrugh. Its persons were not of a lovable kind, but they were mostly sparkling persons and the play was richly charged with animal spirits, frolic audacity, pungent satire, and sensuous life. The author of it, a young

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man who had acted under the name of Leigh Morton, was a beginner in dramatic authorship and in acting and was then only on the threshold of his career. The play with which he thus launched himself upon the river of fame had a bounteous acceptance, was brilliantly successful—no authoritative voice in the press assailing it except that of George Henry Lewes*—and it has kept its place upon the stage from that day to this. Within the next two theatrical seasons this same young author (like Farquhar, a gay, careless, and brilliant Irishman; like Vanbrugh, a trained architect and civil engineer; and like Wycherley, a writer of sparkling epigram, a rover in the fields of French theatrical literature, and a consummate interpreter of artificial manners and sentimental intrigue) had produced the bright and tender comedy of “Old Heads and Young Hearts,” and the more dashing and dazzling comedy of “The Irish Heiress.” These were followed by “Alma Mater,” “Curiosities of Literature,” “Woman,” “Used Up,” “Lolah; or, The Wreck-Light,” and “Mother and Son.” In 1845 this writer had already taken a place among men not only of auspicious promise but of solid performance. In that year he perceived that the public taste in theatrical matters, recoiling from a protracted strain of tragedy, had undergone a change. Macready, the regnant spirit of that epoch in dramatic affairs, had tried his great ventures, had retired from management in the English capital, and had made his first visit to America. The field was clear, and it seemed not unlikely that the popular craving might be satisfied by melodrama. Yet melodrama of the earlier type—such as “The Miller and His Men” and “The

* Westminster Review, 1841.

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Foundling of the Forest," artificial in theme, wooden in character, and vapid in dialogue—could not any longer be deemed vital or be trusted to attract. This young author, quick to discern his opportunity and skilful to improve it, thereupon shaped the old melodramatic form entirely anew, introduced into it the comedy elements of human interest, truthful characterization, and brilliant dialogue, gave to it domestic sincerity and sweetness, without discarding its romantic color, and produced in rapid succession and with ever-increasing success "The Willow Copse," "The Corsican Brothers," "Faust and Margaret," and "The Vampire." These pieces, partly paraphrased but partly original and wholly original in their English form and treatment, gave new evidence of exceptional ability, and firmly established their maker's reputation. From that time onward, through a period of more than thirty years, his professional prosperity knew "no retiring ebb." Play after play followed from his pen and fortune after fortune was poured into his lap. Strong in the consciousness of natural power and in the wealth that soon began to accrue from its exercise, he presently struck a shattering blow at the pecuniary tyranny that had long been maintained by dramatic managers over dramatic authors. From 1861 to 1866 he steadily "advanced that war," till at last the victory perched upon his banners and it became a recognized and settled principle that "the play's the thing," and that the author of the play must be paid, and well paid, for his artistic creation. For "The Willow Copse" (and nobody who ever saw Mr. Charles W. Coudock as *Luke Fielding* can hear the name of that play without a thrill) its author had received only £100, while for his version of "The Corsican Brothers" he had received only £60. Buckstone had received only

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£100 for "Green Bushes," and Douglas Jerrold had received only £100 for "Black-eyed Susan." The revolutionary author to whom I refer, after he had made his gallant fight for the practical interest of dramatic authorship, received £6,500 for one play ("The Flying Scud") and £5,200 for another play ("After Dark"). I need not trace his line further. I speak of an author who has held the attention of the public for nearly fifty years, whose name is a household word equally in Melbourne, London, New York, and San Francisco. I speak of the author of "The Colleen Bawn," "The Octoroon," "The Long Strike," "Arrah-na-Pogue," "Kerry," "Daddy O'Dowd," "Belle Lamar," and "The Shaughraun." I speak of a brilliant actor and a consummate master of the art of dramatic writing, who for nearly half a century has received from the public, in every part of the English-speaking world, every possible practical tribute, and from the press which he now arraigns the most ample privilege and the widest, the kindest, the most liberal—I had almost said the most pusillanimous—consideration. I speak of a man who has had the opportunity (having conquered it by his talent and deserved it by his mental equipment) to use the stage exactly as he pleased, and upon whom more than upon any other single dramatic writer of our time rests the responsibility for its defective condition, whatever that defective condition may be.* Can any one seriously believe that a public which has paid to this dramatic author fully \$2,000,000 for his writing and his acting is wholly devoid of a practical appreciation of excellence? Can anyone seriously believe that a press which, while

* "I have seen a good deal of rubbish in the shape of drama; I have contributed not a little to it myself."—DION BOUCICAULT, in letter to the *Pall Mall Gazette*, London, January, 1869.

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not always unanimous in his praise, has celebrated every one of his achievements and recognized every particle of his merit—not only pouring forth its own incense with lavish prodigality, but freely opening its columns to his own epistolary elucidations of himself, which would fill a volume—is, in fact, the foe of genius and the despoiler of art? “Give me,” cried Dion Boucicault, on an occasion not far remote—“give me what every man yearns for more than fortune—the conviction that he has done some little good in his time.” Has Mr. Boucicault done no good in his time? Has his time been mistaken in recognizing any good in his career? Over and over again the public has honored Mr. Boucicault. Over and over again the press has declared that those Irish plays of his are the most superb things of their kind that have ever been written. Was that an error and a falsehood? Is the public verdict of admiration for Mr. Boucicault’s art a mere echo of the insincere or stupid opinion of a mendacious or ignorant press? Can Mr. Boucicault, remembering his record and his experience, maintain that the stage is degraded and the public judgment fettered and paralyzed only because a few incompetent reviewers of the theatre sometimes write trivial articles about it? Have the trivial articles ever debarred him from one atom of the success that he deserved? Never once. The late Lester Wallack told me that the most prosperous play ever produced in his theatre, after its removal to Thirteenth Street in 1861, was “The Shaughraun;” and besides its remunerative career in America, that piece was acted for one hundred and nineteen nights at the Adelphi, in London, in the season of 1875-76. Mr. Boucicault no doubt remembers that just before “The Shaughraun” was produced he proclaimed to me that a conspiracy of

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hostile critics had been formed against him to ruin it. But the public judgment about Mr. Boucicault's excellent play was not paralyzed. One practical critic, indeed, a pious Hibernian at Louisville, Kentucky, where they speak of a play as if it were a vaccination and question whether it will "take," indicated his censure of the amiable Conn by dropping a bad egg upon Mr. Boucicault in the wake scene, which probably he deemed sacrilegious ; but that was the full extent of the disapproval. And surely one bad egg, however well directed, and even though it fall as the portentous sequel to a conspiracy of dramatic critics, ought not to make a man misanthropical for life in his views of the American press.

"Tis but the fate of place,
And the rough brake that virtue must go through."

III.

THE public, it is alleged, takes its critical opinions from the press, and is mentally impaired, or fettered, or otherwise injured by that impartment. Now the illogical character of this assumption ought to be apparent, and I think is apparent, from the obvious fact that to a considerable extent the public *is* the press ; and surely it cannot be said to paralyze itself. The newspapers would not exist if the people did not like them and want them, and the people would not like them and want them if their own minds were not reflected in them. The public not only receives impressions, it also imparts them. All persons like to read what is written in the vein of their own conviction and preference, and they are usually intolerant of everything else. No one but a philosopher finds pleasure in reading the opinions of his adversary. "She cannot abide to be contradicted,"

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says Cuddie Headrigg, in the immortal novel of "Old Mortality," "and I think nobody likes it if he could help himself." * It is not upon exceptional cases, but upon general conditions, that the reflex institutions of society—of which the press is one—are established and are made to prosper. The late Dr. Brandreth, who for a long time conferred a searching influence upon this community through the happy medium of pills, was once heard to state, while gazing at the incessant procession of pedestrians in Broadway, the cardinal principle of his opulent and beneficent career. "Nine out of every ten of those people" (such were the golden words of the sapient doctor) "are fools, and my pills are not made for the tenth man." It is not meant that virtuous wisdom ought to prey, or does prey, on helpless folly; it is only stated that sagacious enterprise flourishes by meeting expectation. A newspaper, like a theatre, must mainly owe its continuance in life to the fact that it pleases many persons; and in order to please many persons it will—unconsciously perhaps—respond to their several tastes, reflect their various qualities, and reproduce their views. In a certain sense it is evolved out of the community that absorbs it, and therefore, partaking of the character of the community, while it may retain many merits and virtues, it will display itself as in some respects ignorant, trivial, narrow, and vulgar. The elder James Gordon Bennett, the founder of the *New York Herald*, once said, "I wish my paper never to be more than half a day in advance of public opinion on any subject whatever." I believe it never was. There is no use in making music for deaf-mutes: you will get neither

* "She has rather forgotten herself in speaking to my leddy, that canna weel bide to be contradickit (as I ken naebody likes it if they could help themselves), especially by her ain folk."—*Old Mortality*, Chapter viii.

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a hearing nor a response. If every speaker has his audience, so every audience has its speaker, and that is why there are so many newspapers. We should all read one paper, and one only, if we were all of one mind and if that one paper reflected it. As matters stand, society creates many journals, colors them, and is colored by them, and so perpetuates the attrition of its life. It is a reciprocal process. But with due qualification the press is not the cause of the mental condition of the public, but rather is one of its effects; and when you will condemn the press you do not go to the root of the disease unless you make a clear analysis and a lucid statement of what you will condemn it for. To arraign the newspapers for crippling the public judgment of the stage, when in fact the majority of them merely echo that judgment, is firing in the air. Besides, if we talk of judgment—of an intellectual process applied to matters of art—we talk of a faculty that is not possessed to any considerable extent by either the public or the press, never has been possessed by them, and probably never will be. Why should the prattle of a theatrical audience, which is absolutely vapid and innocuous when it is let loose in the lobby, be considered a potent mischief and a bane to the very people that uttered it, merely because it gets into print? Those who vacantly glance over it in their favorite newspaper the next morning have not in the meantime risen in the scale of intellectual being and become any wiser than they were when they uttered it the night before. Have you ever observed the talk of the average theatrical audience when the play is ended and the crowd is leaving the house? Have you ever meditated upon its inanity and its ignorance? I recall a fragment of conversation that I once heard as I was leaving the theatre after a performance of

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Hamlet by Edwin Booth. The interlocutors were a grave elderly gentleman and a richly dressed and fashionable young lady. "I once saw Mr. Macready in this piece," said the former. "Did you?" she answered; "what part did *he* play?"

Enlighten and elevate the coarse and silly public if you wish to reform the coarse and silly newspaper. You cannot in fact produce the slightest effect upon either of them, but at least you will be rational in your censure, and you will "free your mind" in the right direction.

IV.

YOU are told, if not directly yet by logical implication, that there was a time when the intelligent public exercised its prerogative of judgment upon the stage—a time when yet the incompetent press had not deprived that public of this great boon and privilege of theatrical criticism. This is a fine flight of fancy, but it is nothing more. In one form or another the press has dwelt sporadically and intermittently upon this earth for more than twenty-five hundred years—ever since, in fact, the *Acta Diurna* was published in Rome, 691 years B.C.* I have not made a close personal examination of those records, but if I were to do so I should confidently expect to find that Marcus Horatius Flaccus Cacoëthes Scribendi

* "The Romans not only had plenty of books, but they had a *manuscript daily newspaper*, the *Acta Diurna*, which seems to have been a record of the proceedings of the Senate. We do not know how it was written nor how it was published, but it was frequently mentioned by contemporary writers as the regular official medium for transmitting intelligence. It was sent to subscribers in distant cities, and was sometimes read to an assembled army. Cicero mentions the *Acta* as a sheet in which he expected to find the city news and gossip about marriages and divorces."—"The Invention of Printing," by THEODORE L. DE VINNE, p. 44.

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took an early opportunity of apprising the Roman public that "the want has long been felt of an able, independent, high-toned, fearless journal, which should advocate the best interests of the stage and conscientiously labor for the elevation of the drama, the decline of which has long been observed with so much anxiety and painful regret." That the press could at any period have existed without this holy purpose is inconceivable—a condition contrary not only to all we have read of historic fact but to all we know of human nature. Newspapers the world over, whatever else they may have neglected, have never neglected to toil for the redemption of the stage. History, perhaps, affords no finer or more touching example of unselfish zeal and long-suffering devotion than may be contemplated in the traditional and chronic solicitude of the journalist for the actor. To tell us that the press was ever regardless of the theatre, or that it ever refrained from admonishing, or directing, or "elevating" that institution, is simply to presume upon our innocent credulity. The misguiding preceptor who would tell us that would tell us anything, and we ought not to wonder at his temerity when he goes still further and assures us that the public has ever been enslaved by the newspaper as to its critical rights and faculties. No doctrine could have a more sapient sound or less sense. The question is one of fact, and it must I think be determined by individual observation and experience. As a matter of fact the public, in considering the stage, does not take its critical opinions from the press or from anything else. The success of an actor with the majority of spectators, and perhaps with all spectators, does not depend upon reason but upon feeling. It is not the intellectual attribute of the stage that attracts toward it so many even of intellectual persons; it is the sensuous element that at-

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tracts them. They are weary of the realm of thought ; they long for the realm of emotion, for actual, tangible, breathing life. If an actor is able to impress his hearers agreeably, if he can diffuse a personal charm, he will succeed, and this result he will accomplish even though in a technical sense his acting may be defective. All the newspaper censure in the world cannot invalidate the power of genius, the fascination of beauty, or the alluring grace of a sympathetic temperament ; while, on the other hand, all the newspaper applause in the world, although it may impart to the actor a certain temporary vogue and notoriety, cannot establish his reign in the public favor. That he must capture for himself, not so much by the merit of what he *does* as by the virtue of what he *is*, if he obtain it at all. Recognition is like love ; and of this it has been well and truly said—by the almost forgotten poet Alexander Smith :

“ Love gives itself—and, if not given,
No genius, beauty, worth, or wit,
No gold of earth, no gem of heaven
Is rich enough to purchase it.”

For while the power of thinking—the faculty of judgment, the clear, comprehensive, minute, intellectual vision—is very rare, the instinct that apprehends a benefaction through the feelings is almost universal. “ I do not like thee, Dr. Fell.” So it goes with that repellent physician, and we turn away from his presence and seek him no more. But of another it is written (by the poet Emerson) :

“ Surely he carries a talisman
Under his tongue !
Broad are his shoulders and strong,
And his eye is scornful,
Beautiful, and young.”

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Or, in the words of Shakespeare :

“ He hath a heavenly gift of prophecy,
And sundry blessings hang about his head,
That speak him full of grace.”

V.

I FEEL and understand (because I have struggled against it) the dejection that creeps upon the mind when the evening shadows begin to gather, when the winds of twilight whisper in the fading leaves, when the embers are dying on the hearth-stone and the night is coming down. How touchingly that great poet Tennyson has said it, in his noble testamentary sequel to “Locksley Hall :”

“ Poor old voice of eighty, crying after voices that have fled !
All I loved are vanished voices, all my steps are on the dead ;
All the world is ghost to me, and as the phantom disappears
Forward far, and far from here, is all the hope of eighty years.”

But no man should mistake his individual dejection for the failure of human progress. For him, indeed, little by little the lights are put out and the world grows dark. No doubt you remember those pathetic words with which Sir Walter Scott, when he came home to die in his beloved valley of the Tweed, greeted the gentle scenery of that sylvan retreat :

“ The quiet lake, the balmy air,
The hill, the stream, the tower, the tree—
Are these the same that once they were,
Or is the dreary change in me ? ”

The sun was shining gloriously upon the turrets of Abbotsford when I stood beneath them only a little

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while ago, and the ripple of the Tweed that sounded in his dying ears was as sweet and gay and careless as ever. The world goes on for others although it may cease for us; and we may be very sure that it is a better world for them than any vanished world of ours which now begins to seem so lovely because it is lost and gone. Whenever we listen to the voice of the Past, and hear again the old refreshing assurance that the Present is a failure, we ought I think to reflect that every Past was once a Present, and that each succeeding Present has resounded with the same wail of lamentation for the glories of departed days; and thus we shall perceive that the golden time exists just as much now as it ever did—and just as little.

Mr. Boucicault justifies the inference that he thinks the stage is in a deplorable state, and that the press—by depriving the public of its right and power of theatrical criticism—has placed it there. But if there was a time when the public still possessed and exercised that right and power, there must also have been a time when the press dealt with the stage in an altogether wiser and more reticent manner than it employs now. It is not surprising that persons who are not acquainted with the history of the stage in America should fall into errors of this fantastic kind; but it does seem remarkable that a veteran observer—one who combines in himself all the offices of author, actor, theatrical manager, journalist, and dramatic critic—should choose to adopt them; and it would be inexplicable but for what we know of the illusory tendency of reminiscent age. For, as a simple matter of fact, the stage is a much more powerful and prosperous institution to-day than ever it was before, at any period in the history of this country, while the treatment which it receives from the press—allowing

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equally for folly in the mass of popular newspapers and for whatever incompetence may exist in the select journals of the higher class—is, upon the whole, abler and more practical, helpful, and thorough than any that was ever accorded to it in “the palmy days.”

VI.

THE stage in America has existed about one hundred and fifty years. One of the causes which especially promoted its growth on this continent was the sudden and brilliant ascendancy obtained in London by David Garrick. That marvellous actor first arose prominently upon the scene in 1741, being then in the twenty-sixth year of his age, and in the following year he appeared with great renown at Drury Lane, of which theatre he became in 1747 the manager. His success was so prodigious that it soon overwhelmed the fortunes of every other theatrical notability of the time; and this force it was that dispersed the more ambitious players during a considerable period, driving them into the north, to York and Edinburgh, into Ireland, and even across the Atlantic into America. That admirable scholar Judge C. P. Daly, in a valuable paper that he read before the New York Historical Society many years ago, noted the existence of a building which was called “the Playhouse” in this city as early as 1733; but the earliest theatrical proceedings of which he could find any record were those of certain actors who came here from Philadelphia in 1750, two years before the historic advent of Hallam in that famous performance of “The Merchant of Venice,” September 5, 1752, at Williamsburg, Virginia, which has commonly been regarded as marking the formal advent of the acted drama in the Western World.

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The pioneer though should be deemed the founder, and the pioneer in this case was the Irish comedian John Moody, who came over from England to Jamaica in 1745, established a theatre there, and conducted it with prosperity for four years. Once on the adjacent islands it soon reached the mainland and long before the close of the eighteenth century it had become a recognized American institution. The student readily perceives however a sharp and signal contrast between its condition then and its circumstances now. In those days a narrow margin of land along the Atlantic sea-board was thinly settled with European colonists, some of them immigrants, others the descendants, born upon the soil, of immigrants who had come over at an earlier time. At its northern extremity this margin of land terminated in the colony of Massachusetts Bay, which then included much of the territory now comprised in the State of Maine. At its southern extremity so much of it as existed under British jurisdiction ended in the two Carolinas and Georgia. A Spanish settlement flourished in Florida and a French settlement in Louisiana. The breadth of the actually inhabited country was not at any point more than three hundred miles. In Canada the cities of Quebec and Montreal had been founded, and French settlements existed along the St. Lawrence River. The rest of the American continent was a wilderness. The English population of the Atlantic sea-board colonies was about one million persons. The principal towns were New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Albany, Baltimore, Annapolis, Williamsburg, and Charleston, and into each of these towns the theatre gradually made its way. The players from Jamaica (a manager named David Douglas having succeeded John Moody there in 1749) came across in

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1758, and gave performances in Philadelphia, Newport, Perth Amboy, Charleston, and Albany. During the war of Independence there was no theatre in America, the cessation of theatrical exhibitions having been enjoined by the Continental Congress; nor were dramatic performances given here, except by parties of English military in the garrison towns. After the war had ended the actors came back. The West Indian company had continued to act in Jamaica, and capital players, such as Wignell, Henry, and Lewis Hallam the younger, had joined it, and this troop now returned to New York as "the old American company," thus during a number of years keeping the current of theatrical activity in continuous flow. Down to 1792, although the stream ran with some bickering, no serious jar occurred in the harmony of its music. New York was the centre and there was but one important theatre within its limits. In 1792 Wignell broke away, and in 1794, at Philadelphia, he opened the Chestnut Street Theatre—long the most splendid play-house in America, and the scene of many brilliant and memorable exploits. The Park was its rival in New York, and presently it had another rival in the Boston Theatre, at Boston; but that was all. When the present century came in it found two or three companies of actors oscillating by means of a stage-coach between two or three sparsely populated, incommodious, and radically provincial towns. As the century proceeded the hand of adventurous industry began to uproot the wilderness and to sow new cities on the plain, bearing westward the banner of the republic, beneath which marched "the wrinkled front" of war and the civilizing arts of peace. As material prosperity was increased, the stage, though slowly, advanced to a better and better estate. Actors

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of authentic power, such as William Twaits, Francis Blissett, Mary Duff, Henry J. Finn, George Frederick Cooke, Edmund Kean, Junius Brutus Booth, and Edwin Forrest, appeared and prospered. Strolling companies sailed down the Ohio and the Mississippi upon flat-boats, shooting birds and beasts upon the banks, for food, as they glided along the forest-fringed waterways of the continent. Gilfert, Hamblin, and Wallack appeared in the East, Sol Smith in the West, Caldwell in the South. Confronted with obstacles, impeded by hardship, oppressed by bigotry, but stanch and resolute through all manner of obloquy and distress, the dramatic art—which advances with human development because it is a part of human nature—moved steadily on in its upward course. In due time came the steamboat, the railway, and the telegraph. New States were admitted to the Union, and a vast population, thronging from the Old World and teeming in the New, swarmed over the prairies, burst through the gorges of the Rocky Mountains, and poured itself down their golden slopes to the Pacific coast. In one stanza of his noble poem commemorative of Daniel Webster and contrastive of the youth with the age of that illustrious American, the poet Holmes has epitomized this vision of superb national growth :

“ His land was but a barren strip,
Black with the strife that made it free :
He lived to see its banners dip
Their fringes in the Western sea.”

If Wignell, or Henry, or Powell, or Dunlap, or any other dramatic chieftain of “ the palmy days ” could revisit the glimpses of the moon, what would his astonished ghost behold? There are at present in the United States

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and Canada 3,410 theatrical towns—places, that is, in which theatrical performances are habitually given. Distributed through these towns there are 5,212 theatres, not every one an especially equipped theatre, but every one adapted for theatrical business and customarily used for it. The number of actors in this country is 2,527; the number of managers is 365; the number of stars and combinations that were, in 1888, on their professional travels through this land is 249; the number of persons directly and indirectly employed in the industry of the stage is not less than 50,000; and it is safe to say that the persons who continually derive pleasure in various forms, and often intellectual or emotional benefit, from the theatre may be numbered as millions.

VII.

HOW has the press treated this extensive and important and ever-growing institution, artistic and industrial, and how should the press treat it? Manifestly it is idle to declare, when a social institution is constantly growing better and not worse, that it suffers under the ill treatment of the press. For what signifies the attitude of the press when no harm ensues from it? The belief, indeed, may be urged that better plays would be written and better performances would be given if the newspapers would devote more attention to the stage and would make that attention of a more thorough and capable kind. But Art originates and expands, not from outward instillation but from inward impulse. An increase of attention to the stage and a change from vulgar frivolity to scholar-like gravity in the manner of treating it would in many papers create a public discontent and lead to the alienation of readers and of busi-

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ness. Furthermore even the intellectual and advanced press is under no obligation to give instruction in either the art of writing plays or the art of acting them. You do not go to a newspaper for tuition in the languages and mathematics ; you go to a school. The province of the press is, first, to make a complete and truthful record of the news of the day, keeping always within the limits of decency and discretion ; and, secondly, to comment on that news in a rational, able, and vivacious manner, and in that vein of reflection, whatever it may be, which it is believed will most conduce to the public good. With reference to the stage, its moral aspect, its intellectual quality, its spiritual drift, and its artistic and industrial prosperity are the proper objects of attention. Beyond this point the ministrations of the press are superfluous and may become injurious. Vanity is a principal agent in human affairs. Sheridan was undoubtedly right when he said that it ought to be numbered among the passions. Certainly it does not need encouragement. No doctrine could be more ignorant in its oversight of inspiration, or more destructive in its ignoble influence upon human character, than the doctrine that consideration for the praise of critics should be valued and trusted as a main-spring of production or of excellence in any form of art. It is only an insatiable greed of being in the public eye that would demand from the respectable press of America a greater prominence than the stage already occupies in its columns. That press has served the stage, and is constantly serving it, with ardent sympathy, with copious generosity, with thoughtful devotion, and—I need not say that I have other men in mind, and not myself, when I add—with entirely competent scholarship and talent. An actor must take himself very seriously indeed, and must cherish a most extraordinary and

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overweening estimate of the importance of his avocation, who at this late day, and in the face of the benefits that the stage receives from the press, can come forward with the dissatisfied inquiry of Laertes, "Must there no more be done?" What more would you have? Not Disraeli or Gladstone, with the weight of the British Empire upon his shoulders; not Daniel Webster, saving his country for ten years from the scourge of civil war, ever occupied even half the space in the newspaper press that has been allotted these many years to Edwin Booth or Henry Irving, or ever engrossed half the enthusiasm of affection, the conscientious thought, the tender sensibility, or the intellectual effort that have been lavished upon those admirable actors. But with many members of the stage it is an infirmity to overrate their profession—to regard it as an end and not as a means in human civilization. I have lived all my life with actors, and no man of my time, I venture to think, has shown himself more their friend; yet I am often amused at this histrionic weakness. The actor's idea of the stage is indicated not inaptly by a story told of old Peter Richings, who used to impersonate General Washington in a drama that ended with the apotheosis of that patriot, Peter as the hero being represented in a blaze of scenic glory, with Hail Columbia, played by Miss Caroline Richings, standing beside him. There came a night when two mischievous low comedians, wishful to gey the scene, crept into this picture just before the flats were drawn off to disclose it. But the vigilant eye of the Father of his Country promptly discovered them. "Get out of this," cried Peter, from his eminence in the empyrean; "this is HEAVEN; nobody is allowed here but Caroline and me."

Have you ever considered the spectacle that is presented by the press of this country whenever the ap-

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proach of a new actor is announced? If I may lightly employ the sublime Miltonic figure, "far off his coming shines." First there is a rumor that he has been engaged. Then a regretful doubt is cast upon the rumor. Then the expeditious cable flashes over a scornful repudiation of the doubt, coupled with the cordial assurance that the engagement is really made. Then comes the sketch of his illustrious life, wherein are set forth all the glowing details of his great successes beyond the sea. A little later the opinions of the foreign press begin to mingle with the stream of local news. A few anecdotes, sentimental or humorous, illustrative of his fascinating character, come next and do not come amiss. Presently our diligent journals apprise us that he has eaten his farewell dinner and uttered with deep emotion his farewell speech, and that his barque is now actually upon the sea. The list of his theatrical company, the catalogue of his scenery, and the names of his plays and characters are next in order, and are duly supplied. The interval of the voyage is devoted to recapitulation and to a sympathetic portrayal of the views of his manager as to the expediency of raising the prices and of the lively excitement with which the ticket-sellers await his approach. No sooner does his ship cast anchor in our bay than a tug-boat streaming with banners and filled with newspaper reporters arrives at quarantine to "meet him and receive him," while not improbably a committee from the Lotos Club or the Lambs awaits him on the steamship pier to ask him to dinner. For several ensuing days the newspapers teem with what are called interviews—frightful compounds of platitude and triviality, through which their writers loom forth as prodigies of impertinent curiosity and vulgar insolence, while the honored stranger is indeed fortunate if, with

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all the laborious courtesy of his patient and wary replies, he escapes emblazonment as a preposterous ass. At length, sustained and cheered by the acclamation of a great multitude, he steps upon the scene and plays his part, and the next day every considerable newspaper in the land gives a column to his exploit. From that time onward his advance through the continent is a triumphal progress. The luxurious Pullman car whirls him from city to city. The stateliest mansions throw wide their doors for his reception. The brightest spirits of the club, the studio, and the boudoir throng around him with every proffer of hospitality that kindness can suggest or liberal prodigality provide. Statesmen are his companions. Fair ladies crown him with laurel. Poets embalm his great name in the amber of their verse. The boys buy his picture and "make up" on his model. The girls cannot live without his autograph. Nothing is left undone that by any possibility of chance can make him happy; and as he thus speeds onward in the glittering track of the occidental star the vigilant newspaper—the sleepless eye, the tireless hand, the ceaseless voice—faithful to the last, whether he buys a cravat, or plants a tree, or restores a monument, or endows a college, or loses a pocket-handkerchief, still follows his renowned footsteps and still keeps amply full the daily chronicle of his illustrious deeds.

These services might be done with better taste, but in themselves they are harmless. "Where virtue is these are more virtuous." They mark the prodigious benefit of publicity which the journalist confers upon the actor. But the benefaction of the press to the stage does not pause at publicity. In England they have had the newspaper continuously for two hundred and twenty-six years. In America we have had it continuously since

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1704. In 1860 the number of individual newspapers published in the United States had exceeded 40,000, and the annual issue of them amounted to 928,000,000 copies. At present the number is much larger, for within the period of one generation our population has increased from 31,000,000 to more than 60,000,000 of inhabitants, and each of our principal industries has been augmented in a corresponding degree. Almost every newspaper that is published gives some attention, more or less friendly and intelligent, to the subject of the stage. In London—the two theatres that monopolized theatrical industry in the time of Garrick having given place to the forty theatres that promote it in the time of Irving—there are sixty important newspapers that “make a feature” of theatrical news and criticism. In nine large cities of this republic—New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Buffalo, Chicago, Cincinnati, Detroit, St. Louis, and San Francisco—there are one hundred and sixteen important newspapers (by which is meant newspapers of probity, dignity, conscientious principle, and sensitive and responsible wealth) that devote a special department to the stage. The work of the American magazine in this direction has not been fully tabulated; but since 1840 more than one hundred articles, of standard literary authority and value, upon actors and the theatre have appeared in those publications, while in the list of authors who have written about the stage, and written with intent to strengthen and advance it, stand the eminent names of Henry N. Hudson, Gulian C. Verplanck, Henry W. Bellows, Richard Grant White, Henry Giles, Edwin P. Whipple, Thomas R. Gould, Charles T. Congdon, Howard Furness, Lawrence Barrett, Augustin Daly, Joseph Norton Ireland, and George William Curtis. And upon this roll of honor I should

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not hesitate to write, as competent expositors and salutary helpers of dramatic art, these other names, which are of past and present workers for the newspaper press of America: William Leggett, James Oakes, Charles C. B. Seymour, Fitz-James O'Brien, William Henry Hurlburt, Edward G. P. Wilkins, Curtis Guild, Charles A. Dana, J. R. Towse, Stephen Fiske, George W. Hows, John D. Stockton, Clarke Davis, Henry Sedley, H. E. Krehbiel, Henry Watterson, Theodore Hagen, A. W. Thaxter, Charles Fairbanks, W. W. Clapp, John A. Harrington, Edmund Remack, Henry Neill, Shelton Mackenzie, John R. G. Hassard, Benjamin E. Woolff, Henry A. Clapp, Elwyn A. Barron, T. C. De Leon, Edward Fuller, G. E. Montgomery, Frederick A. Schwab, George P. Goodale, Lawrence Hutton, Brander Matthews, Franklin File, Kate Field, A. E. Lancaster, and William Henderson.

VIII.

YOU are told that no "great" actor has appeared and that no "great" play has been written since 1850, and that this melancholy sterility is likewise due to the blighting influence of the newspaper press. The term "great" is a relative term and one that is not always used with discretion. Greatness, in any period and under any circumstances, has always been rare. It is of elemental birth and is independent alike of its time and its circumstances. Theorists who assure you, as the historian Froude has assured you, that Shakespeare was the result of his time, talk phantasy. He was the consequence of heredity—if you like, of Adam and Eve—but not of social conditions antecedent to the reign of Queen Elizabeth. The active existence of a circle of

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dramatic critics could neither have repressed his development nor caused it; nor would such a circle affect such a mind now, if such a mind were born. Neither is it environment that causes the production of great plays; it is inspiration, working upon a special faculty congenital in the author; and even this cannot be implicitly trusted. Not more than twenty out of Shakespeare's thirty-seven plays are great plays, or have survived as of any practical use to the stage at present; and out of more than six thousand plays that were published in England down to the close of the last century only about fifty are ever acted or ever should be acted now. Your great play is almost as exceptional as your great genius. Let us be content with good actors and good plays. I might remind the despondent Mr. Boucicault that since 1850—at which time several of them were unborn or were children, while the others were only on the threshold of professional life—he has seen the rise of Edwin Booth, Joseph Jefferson, Henry Irving, Walter Montgomery, Edward A. Sothorn, Edwin Adams, John McCullough, John L. Toole, Lawrence Barrett, H. J. Montague, George F. Rowe, W. J. Florence, John T. Raymond, James Lewis, Harry Beckett, John Drew, Charles R. Thorne, Jr., Frederick C. P. Robinson, W. J. LeMoyne, James H. Stoddart, George Clarke, Genevieve Ward, Kate Bateman, Ada Cavendish, Julia Dean, Madge Robertson Kendal, Marie Seebach, Helena Modjeska, Richard Mansfield, Mrs. John Wood, Laura Keene, Fanny Janauschek, Agnes Robertson, Ellen Terry, Adelaide Neilson, Mary Anderson, Clara Morris, Ada Rehan, Mary Taylor, Mrs. Bowers, Fanny Davenport, Rose Coghlan, Agnes Booth, and Lily Langtry, not to mention Adelina Patti and the other heroines of the lyric stage, which certainly is implicated in this

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discussion ; and I might declare, what certainly I think, that some of these names will be written in dramatic history with those that are noblest and brightest in the scroll of histrionic greatness. I might also affirm my belief that there are plays by Westland Marston, G. H. Miles, T. W. Robertson, Herman Merivale, James Alberty, Tom Taylor, W. S. Gilbert, W. G. Wills, George H. Boker, Bronson Howard, Augustin Daly, Steele Mackaye, William Young, John Brougham, and Dion Boucicault (all of which belong to this bereft period of the last forty years), which are as well entitled to be esteemed "great plays" as any that survive from the historic hands of Fenton, Hughes, Farquhar, Colman, Holcroft, Goldsmith, Douglas Jerrold, or Sheridan Knowles—excellent writers, no doubt, but writers to whose dramatic productions it was never in their own time deemed necessary to refer "with bated breath and whispering humbleness." But it is enough to indicate the good actors and the good plays that have arisen during this period, and to declare the simple truth, which cannot successfully be controverted, that every one of them has had the sympathy, the admiration, and the prospering favor of all reputable newspapers throughout America. The press critics have not written as Coleridge and as Lamb used to write ; but they have written quite well enough for the majority of their readers ; and it would be exceedingly difficult to specify a single instance in which a greater fulness of success could have been achieved as a consequence of any different style or measure of critical treatment. I cannot immediately remember all the good plays of our time that every respectable journal in this land has welcomed with praise and honor, but I will mention a few of them : "The Ticket-of-Leave Man," "Caste," "Our Boys," "Pique,"

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“The Two Orphans,” “Young Mrs. Winthrop,” “The Henrietta,” “The Man of Airlie,” “Divorce,” “False Shame,” “Forget-Me-Not,” “The Two Roses,” “The Favorite of Fortune,” “Jessie Brown,” “Dan’l Druce,” “Charles the First,” “All For Her,” “Enoch Arden,” “Victor Durand,” “Pendragon,” “Through the Dark,” “The White Pilgrim,” “Engaged,” and “Clancarty.”

IX.

JUDGES who believe with Mr. Boucicault that the press misguides and injures the public by its treatment of the stage must, logically, accept one of two alternatives. Either they think that dramatic criticism should cease altogether or they think that it should be abler and more abundant. The former expedient is visionary—for, as remarked by Mrs. Candour, “people will talk;” and the talk of people, whether in print or in private, seems to be an essential factor in carrying on the affairs of life. Some time ago, indeed, I read of a man, resident in the western part of New York, who had not spoken a single word for nine years, and who wrote upon a slate, when he was asked the reason of his silence, “I shall wait till I think of something good enough to say.” His example no doubt was wholesome, but to this ideal of more than Spartan fortitude the human race in America is at present unequal. The talk will flow on and the stage, like everything else, will be discussed; and at least its business will be prospered by the discussion. But with reference to the second alternative—better dramatic critics and more of them (which seems to be Mr. Boucicault’s doctrine)—while there is no objection to the aspiration as a war-cry, one would like

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to know some convincing reason for that sanguine belief in the efficacy of dramatic criticism. What does any observer suppose that it might accomplish, more than it has accomplished, or more than it does accomplish?

It is my desire neither to exaggerate nor to depreciate the influence of dramatic criticism, but I have never been able quite to understand the superlative practical value of it, as proclaimed by many persons. To my mind the newspaper article on the stage never settles anything. If well written it may interest the reader's thoughts, excite his curiosity, increase or rectify his knowledge, and possibly suggest to him a beneficial line of reflection or study. That is all. Newspaper commendation may accelerate the success of a play already recognized as good, and newspaper ridicule may hasten the obsequies of a play already so bad that its failure is inevitable. But criticism establishes no man's rank, fixes no man's opinion, dissuades no man from the bent of his humor. The actor whom it praises may nevertheless pass away and no place be found for him. The actor whom it "slates" does not expire, neither does he repair to the woods. Far more likely he goes to Boston and writes a reply. In the early days of "The Black Crook," when it had become known to me, from the police, that one form of vice had been much increased, through the influence of that spectacle, in the neighborhood of Niblo's Theatre, I thought it was my duty (as the dramatic reviewer for the *New York Tribune*) to denounce that exhibition; and I did denounce it, "in good set terms." The consequence was an immediate and enormous increase in the public attendance, and my friend Henry D. Palmer, one of the managers of the "Crook," addressed to me these grateful and ex-

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pressive words : " Go on, my boy ; this is exactly what we want." Since then I have been reticent with fulminations in the presumed interest of public morality. At the present moment two amiable and handsome young people (Mr. Kyrle Bellew and Mrs. Cora Potter) are disporting at a neighboring theatre as Shakespeare's *Antony* and *Cleopatra*. A more futile performance, in every possible point of view, probably was never given ; and I believe the critical tribunals of the town have mostly stated this truth—in some cases with considerable virulence. Yet this performance draws crowded houses, and no doubt it will continue to draw them, here and all over the country. Many other elements enter into this subject aside from the question of dramatic art. The critic of the stage should do his duty, but he will be wise not to magnify his office, and he certainly becomes comical when he plumes himself upon the practical results of his ministration. I know that he exists in the midst of tribulations. He must pass almost every night of his life in a hot theatre, breathing the bad air and commingling with a miscellaneous multitude ennobled by the sacred muniment of liberty but largely unaccustomed to the use of soap. He must frequently and resignedly contemplate red and green and yellow nightmares of scenery that would cause the patient omnibus-horse to lie down in his tracks and expire. He must often and calmly listen to the voice of the national catarrh, in comparison with which the aquatic fog-horn or the ear-piercing fife is a soothing sound of peace. He must blandly respond to the patent-leather smile of the effusive theatrical agent, who hopes that he is very well but inwardly wishes him in Tophet. He must clasp the clammy hand and hear the baleful question of the gibbering " first-night " lunatic, who exists for the sole purpose

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of inquiring : " What do you think of this ? " He must preserve the coolness and composure of a marble statue, when every nerve in his system is tingling with the anxious sense of responsibility, haste, and doubt ; and he must perform the delicate and difficult duty of critical comment upon the personality of the most sensitive people in the world under a pressure of adverse conditions such as would paralyze any intellect not specially trained to the task. And when he has done his work, and done it to the best of his ability and conscience, he must be able placidly to reflect that his motives are impugned, that his integrity is flouted, that his character is traduced, and that his name is bemired, by every filthy scribbler in the blackguard section of the press and of the stage, with as little compunction as though he were the " common cry of curs." These trials however need not turn his brain. He should not suppose, as he often does, that an attentive universe waits trembling on his nod. He should not flatter himself with the delusion that he can make or unmake the reputation of other men. It often happens that his articles are not read at all ; and when they are read it is quite as likely that they will incite antipathy as it is that they will win assent. He should not imagine that he is Apollo standing by a tripod, or Brutus sending his son to the block. He is, in reality—if we consider the probable effect of his words upon the mind of the public in general—firing a pop-gun. He is writing a newspaper article about a theatrical performance : but both the performance and the article will be forgotten on the day after to-morrow. He should not forget that an actor whom he dislikes may nevertheless be a good actor, and that an actor whom he admires may nevertheless be a bad one. Human judgment is finite and it ought always

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to be charitable ; * and the stage, which is the mirror of human life, affords ample room for an honest difference of opinion. There is no reason in the world, furthermore, why the dramatic critic, merely because he happens to hold that office, should straightway imbibe a hideous hatred of all other unfortunate beings who chance to labor in the same field. He would be much better employed in writing those wise and true and beautiful dramatic criticisms which he thinks ought to be written than he is when uttering querulous and bitter and nasty complaint and invective because they are not, as he considers, written by his contemporaries in his own line. Let him improve his own opportunity and leave others to their devices. All the good that he can really accomplish is done when he sets the passing aspects of the stage instructively, agreeably, and suggestively before the public mind, and keeps them there. He is not required to manage the theatres or to regulate the people who are trying to earn a living by means of the stage. It is no essential part of his province to instruct actors as to their business—to point out that *Charles Surface* should appear with a shaven face, or that *Lord Ogleby* should wear shoe-buckles. The efforts of dramatic artists are to be met where those efforts impinge upon the public mind—at those points where acting becomes a subject of public interest by exerting an influence upon the mental condition of the people. The primal obligation of the critic is that of sympathetic and judicious favor. The most important part of his function is the perception and proclamation of excellence. To a man of fine intelligence and gentle feeling nothing in the

* "It seems curious that persons connected with the drama and writing the history of dramatic performers should indulge themselves in the exposition of the errors of the actors so profusely."—FENNELL.

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world is so delightful as a free impulse to the appreciation of nobleness in human capacity and beauty in human life. When he feels this and can act upon it then indeed criticism becomes a blessing. Justice is exalted, strengthened, and honored by the judicious praise of merit. Homage rendered to worth is at once the sign of advanced civilization and an influence to advance it still further. "To be useful to as many as possible," says the wise thinker Walter Savage Landor, "is the especial duty of the critic, and his utility can only be attained by rectitude and precision." The newspaper article accomplishes all that should be expected of it when it arouses and pleases and benefits the reader, clarifying his views, and helping him to look with a sympathetic and serene vision upon the pleasures and pains, the joys and sorrows, the ennobling splendors and the solemn admonitions of the realm of art.

X.

AS I glance thus at the duties and infirmities of the average dramatic critic I seem to hear the pensive voice of my vigilant Hibernian adversary murmuring to me, in the words of *Sir Anthony Absolute*, "You are a truly moderate and polite arguer, for almost every third word you say is on my side of the question." But the structural weakness in Mr. Boucicault's indictment against the press is that he confounds the lower press with the higher; holds the latter responsible for the defects and iniquities of the former; and arraigns the whole press for a fault that largely affects only a part of it, and really is original in his own self-elected client, the miscellaneous public. The commonplace, vapid, ribald,

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vulgar newspapers which properly offend Mr. Boucicault, by their incompetent and boorish treatment of art, would not exist if there were not commonplace, vapid, ribald, and vulgar people, in great numbers, to read them and support them. To introduce learning, taste, and thought into the theatrical notices published by those newspapers would only be to astonish or puzzle or disgust their readers. Learning, taste, and thought are not objects of desire with the riff-raff population that wants to hear of Kyrle Bellew's lunatic lover, or Lillian Russell's tights, or Sadie Martinot's dresses. It does not signify what such people think about art, or what such papers say about it—if they say anything. They are out of the question. It is with the higher press and the higher press alone that we should concern ourselves in this inquiry; and I think that censors like Mr. Boucicault are either unacquainted with the work of the higher press in the service of the stage, or that they undervalue it. They might indeed urge, with some show of truth, that the higher press has not yet entirely freed itself from the belittling influence of the coarse and ignorant multitude. Whenever a good newspaper disappoints or offends the finer intelligence and sensibility of the community you will find that the reason of it is resident in some form of subserviency to popular caprice. The conscientious enthusiast and the blatant demagogue are alike in this—that they both magnify the mob. There is scarcely a newspaper in the United States that is absolutely free from a practical remembrance of the doctrine of Mr. Jefferson Brick: "We air a great people, sir, and we must be cracked up." Flattery of the people is a cardinal principle of the time. Instead of being told of their faults and admonished to surmount their obstructive vulgarity and inordinate con-

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ceit they are constantly assured that the world never before saw such wonderful and lovely beings—that the crow sings as sweetly as the nightingale, and—by practical surrender to their folly—that a coarse and low curiosity is as well entitled to be gratified as an honorable instinct or a noble aspiration. “A man’s a man for a’ that.” He is—and often a most offensive man. The American press, like almost everything else in the Republic, suffers under an excess of Democracy. It is possible to have too much of a good thing. The nauseating frivolity of many of the publications that are made about the stage arises from the indirect operation of this power. Mr. Boucicault’s dissatisfaction is natural, but his censure should be clearly defined and it should descend upon the real offender. He is just, furthermore, in deploring that the task of writing dramatic criticism should so often be entrusted to extremely young and incapable persons. Youth commonly assumes omniscience, and in youth we mistake our exuberant delight in our own sensations for the thrill that should be caused by the actor: we supply the feeling, and we imagine that the actor has imparted it. I do not, however, believe in age merely as age. It is the youthful spirit in age that makes it potent, and if that spirit be only preserved (as it is in the evergreen alacrity of Mr. Boucicault), time imparts to it a beneficence that nothing else can give. Goethe’s words, as usual, cover the whole ground: “At last, after great preparation, he disclosed to me that true experience is just precisely when one experiences what an experienced man must experience in experiencing his experience.”

XI.

THERE are a few petty and futile charges against the press, made by Mr. Boucicault and re-echoed by his adherents, upon which it seems essential to bestow a passing comment. Those charges declare that the press is unjust to the stage, because it publishes articles about the play on the morning after the play is produced ; that the critics disagree in opinion upon the play, and thus indicate that there is no standard of judgment ; that the publishers of newspapers fetter the writers for them, and prevent the expression of the truth ; and, in general, that the press is influenced by bribery. These allegations were made by Mr. Boucicault in his address to the Goethe Society, although they do not appear in the draft of it that was afterward printed in the *North American Review* ; and they had been made by him at an earlier time. They are either speciously misleading or distinctly and absolutely untrue.

The evening papers and the weekly papers constitute an important section of the press. The evening papers do not print their articles about a play until the afternoon of the day succeeding an evening performance ; the weekly papers print usually five or six days later. With reference to the morning newspapers it should be observed that the custom of going to press at an early hour has only recently been adopted by them and is not invariably enforced. In former times an interval of three hours usually occurred between the fall of the final curtain at the theatre and the moment when no more copy could be taken by the newspaper. Much may be done in three hours ; and even the hurried words of a

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writer who is competent to discuss a given subject at all are often preferable to the studied phrases of a writer who requires days of incubation before he can say anything. Furthermore a very little of the dramatic performance may sometimes suffice for the need of the newspaper: nobody should be required to eat a bad egg in order to ascertain that it is unfit to eat: and certainly it seldom happens that any dramatic performance is given which involves considerations of such colossal magnitude that they cannot be disposed of in three hours of practised labor. An expert in this avocation (and surely no one but an expert should be trusted in it) can write a satisfactory column, in any newspaper, within one hour and a half or at latest within two hours. It is hard work but it can be done and the imperative requirements of morning journalism sometimes exact the doing of it. When Mr. Boucicault's play of "Arrah-na-Pogue" was first produced in New York (at Niblo's Theatre, in August, 1865), the article about it that appeared in the *New York Times* the next morning, written by Charles C. B. Seymour, was written in my presence, after the fall of the last curtain. It nearly filled one column. It was written in exactly forty minutes—and it could not have been better (for it was an excellent article) if its author had worked on it for forty days. The competence of service depends upon the man who undertakes to render it. Mr. Boucicault has often favored the public with an expression of his contempt for newspaper writers. This is sad, but even this can be endured; and it seems just possible that upon this subject Mr. Boucicault is not the most competent of judges. Such English writers as George Augustus Sala, William Beatty-Kingston, Clement Scott, Joseph Hatton, Joseph Knight, Charles Dunphie, Percy Fitzgerald, William Archer, Austin

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Brereton, Moy Thomas, Edmund Yates, Walter Herries Pollock, Frank Marshall, Ernest A. Bendall, L. F. Austin; or such American writers as Henry E. Krehbiel, John Foord, Noah Brooks, Hart Lyman, D. D. Lloyd, Edwin Dithmar, A. C. Wheeler, John Cockerill, A. F. Bowers, William Laffan, Henry A. Clapp, Benjamin E. Woolff, Clarke Davis, Isaac H. Bromley, Stephen Fiske, and Henry Watterson would probably surprise Mr. Boucicault if he were ever to become acquainted with the feats of composition which they are obliged to perform, and do perform, night after night, in the service of the press. The vanity of actors may not be satisfied, but fortunately the better sense of the community is not controlled by the vanity of actors. Our journals are for our readers—most of whom (to their serious loss and injury, I think) do not visit the theatre at all—and our readers are contented when they receive an entertaining account of theatrical novelties, providing always that they receive it at once. It should be added that the custom of the morning papers, all over America, is to publish not only an immediate article about the new play or the new actor, but a second, a third, or a fourth article, at succeeding intervals of time. No man in any other profession or pursuit in the world gets the same amount of attention from the press that the actor gets. It is comic to find him complaining that he gets it too promptly or that he does not get enough of it.

It might indeed be wished that the press would somewhat relax its impetuosity of haste in the treatment not alone of this subject but of every other. Dignity, always a grace, is sometimes salutary as a virtue. American life will never become entirely rich and noble and essentially sound and right until it ceases to be feverish. At present we dwell amid strife and clamor—tolerating, among other

*What a
neglect
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theater*

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evils, a Babel of discordant and hideous noises which would deafen or destroy any people furnished with sensitive ears, and which, in individual cases, does render existence a torment—and our press not infrequently tumbles over its own feet in its frantic desire to speak the first word. “Don’t hurry, gentlemen,” said the great French surgeon, Nélaton, to his assistants, when about to perform an operation requiring instant skill and instant and absolute success in order to preserve a human life—“Don’t hurry; I have no time to lose.” This mood of reticence and composure however is to be commended to the press, not for the sake of the stage but for its own sake. An intellectual power should not be tied to the chariot-wheels of anybody’s art or business. The record of the passing day should invariably be made while the day is passing; but, with reference to the question of comment, I most earnestly wish that the press would assert, and practically maintain, its right to remain silent as well as its right to speak. As to the “gossip” which it habitually prints about the theatre and the actors, that has at last begun to sicken a considerable part of our community, and perhaps—as civilization advances among the multitude—this nuisance may be trusted to accomplish its own suppression by its own offensive imbecility and nauseous excess.

The statement that there is no standard of judgment because critics sometimes disagree in opinion (for it must be observed that they do not always disagree) has a fine sound but no meaning. Disagreement is not confined to critics and it does not imply a lack of standards. There is a dissentient voice always and everywhere, because each human being exists at a separate altitude in moral, spiritual, and intellectual development. Ruskin and Lowell are contemporary with O’Donovan Rossa. Tastes

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differ and there must always be conflict of thought as to ideals and as to their expression. But the standard is not affected. The truth remains—and statements derive their force not from being made but from being true. The dissonance of opinion is mostly temperamental and usually it is ephemeral. Things live that ought to live. "Nature is above art in that." The greatest names and the noblest works of which the world has any knowledge were all decried in their day by somebody. Greene sneered at Shakespeare and talked of "bombast" and "a Shake-scene"—which is paltry twaddle now. John Locke ranked Blackmore above Milton, and Edmund Waller thought the "Paradise Lost" a tedious composition—yet somehow the world reads Milton and does not read either Blackmore or Waller. There is an ancient tract in the Lambeth Palace Library in London—a publication, I believe, of the venerable bard's own time—that sneers at "the moral Gower" as "baggage;" but Gower is revered, among scholars, as the father of English poetry. Christopher North, writing in 1816, said of Edmund Kean, "He rants abominably and is no actor at all;" and Sir Walter Scott, referring to the same great man, described him as "a copper-laced, twopenny tearmouth, rendered mad by conceit and success;" and this was at the very time when William Hazlitt could say of him that "to see Edmund Kean at his best is one of the consolations of the human mind." Wilson and Scott were giants of intellect, and the censure of such authorities is not a slight thing; yet the renown of the great actor has only grown brighter in the lapse of time, and his name endures to our day without one stain upon its artistic glory. Critics may differ in feeling and in taste, but they finally concur as to the essential fact; and when

they do agree, as remarked by Mr. Puff in the farce, their unanimity is wonderful.

With reference to the charge of dishonesty on the part of the press, those who make that charge should take care to prove it. This they never do. During nearly thirty years of experience as a writer for the press I never yet encountered the least opposition from the publishers of newspapers as to the expression of judgment. Mr. Boucicault has been giving forth dark intimations any time within the last ten years as to his dexterity in having captured "a conspicuous critic" on the New York press with a "bait" which—to use his own elegant expression—"had a hook in it."* But this mysterious censor deals almost always in vague

* MR. BOUCICAULT'S HOOK.—Under this title the following paragraph, written by me, appeared in the *New York Tribune* on December 28, 1879: It is not very long since Mr. Boucicault made a public boast that he had bribed what he called "a conspicuous critic" on the New York press to puff some work of his own or himself. "The bait," said the eminent and exemplary dramatist, "had a hook in it." This dark and invidious statement, emanating from such an august source, has been quoted, with a pious zeal and a noble joy, in some of the provincial newspapers of the country—more credulous than discreet. How much importance should be attached to Mr. Boucicault's defamatory ebullitions may be gathered from a contrast of his recent statement with the following letter—an earlier production of the same sapient pen: "A sensation article appeared in a leading Brooklyn paper last week, relating my adventures with the New York press. The whole story, so far as I am concerned, is in every particular a hoax. But as some people might not have seen through it I feel called upon to say there is not a shadow of truth in any part of the fiction. *I never paid a farthing for a favor from the press, and I never will, and in candor I am bound to say that if I offered it I am sure it would be regarded as a gross insult.* I have received from time to time kind notices from the leading New York journals, but I cannot help feeling that on the whole they have treated me with less consideration than I am entitled to. But I have never endeavored, either here or in London, to overcome any hostility a journalist might please to entertain against me, knowing, as a journalist

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generality and innuendo. The "conspicuous critic" is never named. Perhaps the name is "Mrs. Harris." Against Mr. Boucicault's weapon of shameful insinuation however I place Mr. Boucicault's own words—written in one of those rare moments when he has chosen to be explicit. On Saturday, March 8, 1873, at the Clarendon Hotel, New York, Mr. Boucicault wrote and signed the following statement, which was duly published: "*I never paid a farthing for a favor from the press, and I never will, and in candor I am bound to say that if I offered it I am sure it would be regarded as a gross insult.*" Did Mr. Boucicault subsequently depart from the virtuous resolution expressed by him in those heroic lines? Has he, since then, tempted human frailty and suffered a shock to his sweet and noble ideal of human nature? It cannot be! These views of his, after all, must be merely tentative and hypothetical. For as late as April 9, 1879, I find him declaring, in the *Chicago Tribune*, a very different opinion of mankind in general and of the press-ridden and paralyzed theatrical audience in particular. These are his golden sentences:

"I never met with any community where vice was not detested and virtue beloved and cheered; where misfortune did not draw tears and sympathy; and where all that was good and kind and gentle in human nature was not readily and eagerly hailed with delight, and where everything that was bad was not received with

myself, that any attempt to do so would be fruitless. As to the gentlemen attacked by the Brooklyn papers, I am acquainted with only two of them, but I am certain that whatever has been written against me has been dictated by their conscientious convictions. I am, however, like *Horatio*, one of those whom fortune's buffets and rewards can take with equal thanks.

DION BOUCICAULT.

"CLARENDON HOTEL, Saturday, March 8, 1873."

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execration. And that is not from any religious motive, but simply because—as I honestly and sincerely believe—human nature, at the bottom, is good, gentle, and sympathetic, and is not what we are taught to believe—sinful and bad, and requiring the assistance of the Church.

“The stage has elicited one singular proof, moreover, of the moral condition of human nature—*the theatre is the only place where bodies of people go with minds unprejudiced*. They have not the prejudices with which a worshipper goes to church; they have not the bias that a citizen goes to a political meeting with. *The spectator in a theatre is free-minded, without inclination one way or the other*, and when he pays his money at the door it is so much security that he is prepared indeed to open his heart and his mind freely to any emotions that we may inflict upon him.”

Is it only within the last ten years that—as Mr. Boucicault now declares—“service of opinions to the public has paralyzed the freedom and strength of public judgment?”

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IT seems to me, finally, that the actor should not read contemporaneous dramatic criticism—least of all, that which relates to himself. If favorable, there is the danger that it may weaken his character by ministering to his vanity, already sufficiently inflamed by his life of constant appeal to the admiration of the public. If unfavorable, there is the possibility that it will restrict his freedom, and thus impair his usefulness by wounding his sensibility if not actually grieving his heart, and

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thus depressing his spirits and paralyzing his energy.* Whether favorable or unfavorable, it can do him little if any mental or spiritual good, seeing that the chance of his learning anything from it, or receiving from it any ennobling impulse or refreshment, anything to cheer or strengthen him or make him more a man, is exceedingly slight. His avocation doubtless is prospered by it through its stimulant though transient effect upon the public mind, but there is no good reason why he should permit its access to himself. In my literary life (if I may venture to use a personal illustration), which has extended over a period of thirty years, I have acted upon the precept now suggested. Within the last twenty years, as author and as editor, I have published many books, and they have been widely circulated, and, as the publishers inform me, copiously reviewed; yet during that time I have not read ten articles about them of any description whatever. In 1854, when as a youth I had the honor and the privilege often to sit by the fire-side of the poet Longfellow, and to enjoy the benefit of his affectionate good-will and his wise and kindly talk, I learned this lesson from his lips: "It is the province of the poet to give pleasure; it is the province of the critic to give pain. I never read adverse criticisms. Scores of articles are sent to me, about my works. If a review

* In regard to various pert, loquacious, and ill-conditioned writers who are continually pouring into the newspaper press of this period the trickling slime of their acrid animosity it may be said that probably they sometimes do succeed in momentarily wounding the sensitive feelings of persons who do not know them for what they are worth, or who have not grown indifferent to newspaper prattle. But in fact the success of the strongest of them never passes beyond the limit denoted in Dr. Johnson's excellent remark to the satirical Beauclerc: "You never open your mouth but with intention to give pain; and you have often given me pain, not from the power of what you said but from seeing your intention."

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is pleasant in tone at the beginning I read it through ; but if I perceive that the intention is to wound I drop the thing into my fire, and that is the end of it. In this way one avoids useless pain. Never read attacks on yourself and never answer them." That wise counsel was not lost on me, and it has never been forgotten. Pleasure, as the result of human praise, or pain, as the result of human censure, is possible only to the man who still retains illusions with regard to his fellow-men. I have learned my lesson,—and critical commentary, howsoever directed, has, to my individual taste, become exceedingly tiresome. I little thought in those days of golden drift and dream that I should ever be a toiler in the field of criticism. But, looking backward upon critical labors extending through many toilsome years, I can with a clear conscience declare that I have never assailed anything that I did not believe was an injury to art or to the public ; that I have never aimed a blow at reputation, or intentionally wounded a human heart, or said one word about anybody of which I was not at all times ready and eager to bear the personal responsibility. Often and often, remembering the words of my honored and beloved counsellor and friend—that "it is the province of the critic to give pain"—I have resolved that it should, on the contrary, be the business of my criticism to give pleasure if possible by affording just and kindly recognition, and to do good by stimulating public interest in noble things. My method has been to endeavor to augment public sympathy with actors, whenever I saw that actors were engaged in pure and high and worthy works. Criticism however should be written for the public and not for the artist ; and when I say that the artist is wise to leave it unread I do so because I conceive for him, in the conduct of his life, an

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ideal that far transcends all consideration of the press—an ideal that makes his own conscience to be his tribunal, his love of art to be his inspiring impulse and sustaining cheer, and his sense of well-doing to be his sufficient reward. Humble and gentle, certainly, the true servant of art will ever be. But let him also be self-reliant when the emergency comes, proud in his conscious power, and satisfied in the knowledge that he has done his best. “The only report of a duel,” said Lord Norbury, “should be the report of the pistols.” “In the reproof of chance,” says Shakespeare “lies the true proof of men.” Do not leave the question of excellence to be settled by commentators. Settle it yourself. Nothing can be more petty and puny than the custom of running after newspapers to catch an echo of everything you say and do. Appreciation, in the broad and grand sense of that word, is the one thing not to be expected, because it is the one thing that almost never comes. How many human souls do you really comprehend? How many do you suppose really comprehend you? Each of us is alone. But for each of us there is refuge, comfort, sympathy, hope, the divine blessing of beauty and the sublime power of patience in the service and the companionship of Art.

“For she can so inform
The mind that is within us, so impress
With quietness and beauty, and so feed
With lofty thoughts, that neither evil tongues,
Rash judgments, nor the sneers of selfish men,
Nor greetings where no kindness is, nor all
The dreary intercourse of common life
Shall e'er prevail against us, or disturb
Our cheerful faith that all which we behold
Is full of blessings.”

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I.

DRAMATIC CRITICISM IN THE PALMY DAYS.

In 1791 Anthony Pasquin—an inveterate blackguard, to be sure, but a close observer and a prominent theatrical critic of his time, in New York as well as in London—wrote this statement (in his “Life of John Edwin,” vol. ii., p. 39): “This is an age which blissfully receives dross for bullion and extravagance for truth.” Mr. Pasquin was writing about the stage when he made that remark—so that the decadence of the drama would appear to have been in full blast even in “the palmy days.” Yet that was the admirable period before the press had pre-empted the critical function and paralyzed the public judgment. A few specimens of American dramatic criticism as it was written about that time may here perhaps be advantageously cited. The following are occasional passages culled from the *Mirror of Taste and Dramatic Censor*, published in Philadelphia in 1810–1811:

“Mr. Robinson’s country boys and old men are excellent. His attempts at tragedy and genteel comedy will, we fear, never be successful. Mr. Young pleases us in all he undertakes. His conception is just and his gesticulation worthy of example. In Mr. Col-

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lins we see much of the *naïveté* of Suett and Blisset. He bids fair to be an excellent low comedian of a certain cast. Mrs. Twaits approaches very near excellency in several walks of the drama. Her figure is too petite to give effect to heroic character, but her voice is good and her stage business *soigné*. Mrs. Young is the most attractive actress. There is something in her manner which charms the eye, while the ear is at times offended. This is easily accounted for—she is very handsome—her countenance is the picture of innocence; her deportment modest and unaffected; but she wants study; and there is some little defects in her speech which we fear it will be difficult to remove. Mrs. Poe is a pleasing actress, with many striking defects. She should never attempt to sing. . . . Mr. Cooper's dying scene was well done. There was a fine practical imitation of the anguish of a wounded man, and in the writhing of the body when he received his wound, and in his manner of falling there was much effect: but in the subsequent part—in the actual dying, comparison would rather injure Mr. Cooper." [This was a notice of Cooper as *Richard III.* What follows is an intellectual tribute to Mrs. Mason as *Beatrice.*] "It must naturally be gratifying to us, and we confess that it makes us proud too, to find the public sentiment in unison with ours. That we are seldom at variance with it is a truth of which we are not ashamed to boast; and it is with no common exultation we state that, without the exception of a single individual, the opinion we have from the outset expressed of this admirable actress is the opinion of everyone, and there are many with whom we have conversed upon the subject. This comedy ('*Much Ado About Nothing*') is from the first to the last one uninterrupted tissue of wit and comic hu-

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mor. It is all Shakespeare. Like certain islands in the Eastern Sea it is illumined with a continual unintermitted series of coruscations of lightning." Elsewhere this same learned gentleman summarily remarks: "McKenzie's *Iago* was a very poor affair. Spiller's *Cassio* was not at all exceptionable. Jefferson's *Roderigo* liketh me not."

Upon a mental ebullition of that order there is but one comment to be made. My dear old friend Artemus Ward, in his paper on Shakespeare's Tomb, relates that "when the boys' kind teacher went to London to accept a position in the office of the Metropolitan Railway, little William was chosen by his fellow-pupils to deliver a farewell address. 'Go on, sir,' he said, 'in a glorious career. Be like a eagle and soar, and the soarer you get the more we shall all be gratified. That's so.' And," continues the amiable humorist, "my young readers who wish to know about Shakespeare better get these vallyble remarks framed."

II.

MR. BOUCICAULT AND HIS CRITICS.

The subjoined article, written by me, appeared in the New York *Tribune*, October 14, 1879:

The case of Mr. Boucicault, always a sad one, has now become absolutely pathetic. For many years, as the public is aware, this afflicted gentleman has "kept the noiseless tenor of his way," walking modestly in the paths of virtue and reticence, and bearing without a murmur "the spurns that patient merit of the unworthy takes." No such example of Christian resignation indeed had ever occurred in the history of mankind since

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the days of Saint Lawrence on the Gridiron ; and it was long ago well understood that if there is on earth a suffering martyr—one compact of goodness, gentleness, mildness, patience, and devotion—that “entire and perfect chrysolite” of holy worth and celestial magnanimity is Mr. Boucicault. His sufferings at the hands of his fellow-creatures ever since he wrote “London Assurance” have in fact been prodigious and only equalled by the patient sweetness of his steadfast resignation ; and all the time he has been doing good deeds and never uttering one word of remonstrance. Strength has been vouchsafed to him to bear up under the weight of two or three large fortunes, and he has found in some part of his soul “a drop of patience” to endure several hundredweight of laurels ; and even the pernicious propensity of French dramatic authors to convey his works into their absurd language has never proved too much for his nervous resources. He never had a quarrel in his life ; never committed a fault ; never erred in judgment or taste ; never called anybody by a bad name ; and in forty years never wrote a letter to the complaint column of a newspaper. There is something so beautiful and admirable in this spectacle of self-abnegation and injured virtue that neither Marius among the ruins of Carthage nor Cincinnatus at the plough nor the Count of Jones forgiving Mr. Sothern need evermore be mentioned as types of grandeur. Mr. Boucicault has eclipsed them.

It has frequently been said however that “there is a limit beyond which” and “that the worm will turn.” Mr. Boucicault’s tortures have recently “so huddled on his back” that his condition has become perfectly pitiable and that he really cannot submit any longer to such an outrageous fate. He actually finds himself now the centre of “a conspiracy of impostors,” and thereupon he

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will "resist both as a citizen and a man" the "reign of terror" which has been inaugurated over him by the "mendacious highwaymen," "literary tramps," "cut-purses," and "assassins" of the press. This he will not do "in any aggressive mood or offensive manner." His language shall be as mild as Mr. Tupper's precepts and as wholesome as ass's milk. He is "heartily sorry" if he offends anybody; but his soul is in arms, and there is blood in both his eyes, and he has got a check in his pocket which bears "the indorsement of a conspicuous critic" and he will proceed to "strike till the last armed foe expires," in "defence of the public" and for the sacred cause of "sensitive natures" like his own, and "hopeful lives," like those of "Rescued" and "Contempt of Court." To this end he has put on war-paint of a very hideous and frightful description and armed himself with a copy of *The North American Review*, which certainly is heavy enough to kill if ever it should hit; and thus equipped, like Pyrrhus in the play, "now is he total gules." It is a tremendous transformation. "The lamb," says Miss Hardcastle, "has been outrageous this half-hour." In fact he has turned himself into the raging lion—and the consequences cannot fail to be awful.

Where precisely the blow will fall conjecture cannot determine. But *The North American Review* is poised in the air and ready to descend, and undoubtedly there will be a funeral. The "conspicuous critic" who indorsed Mr. Boucicault's check will probably be the first corpse. He has remained a considerable time unburied, for Mr. Boucicault has been singing sage requiem over his remains for several years now, and it really is quite time that the burial rites were concluded. At all events Mr. Boucicault should send round the camphor. Then after the "conspicuous critic" is disposed of a small piece of

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nitro-glycerine might be dropped on the inconspicuous, and that would strew the plain with Mr. Boucicault's dead and gracefully lead in the golden age of dramatic criticism. No "newspaper critic" Mr. Boucicault declares ever did know anything about the drama or ever was honest in the discussion of that vast and overwhelming subject. Critics are simply ignorant and venal beasts. These are Mr. Boucicault's "sincere convictions" and in waving his receptive ear across the literature, art, and journalism of Europe and America for the last half century he has heard but one voice upon the subject—and that was the voice of entire concurrence with these views. Where such unanimity of opinion exists it seems singular that Mr. Boucicault suddenly should feel so bad—but somebody has evidently hurt his feelings. It must be the man that took "the hook." A hundred dollars is what old Shingle might call "a good deal of money," and when that enormous sum vanished, in such a very unexpected manner, the eminent dramatist might well have turned a pale pea-green. It is a good thing that Mr. Boucicault has at last been moved. There must be no more "oysters" in the dramatic criticism of the nineteenth century. The style of our gifted contemporary *The New York Herald*, that some time since reviewed Milman's "Fazio" as a fresh translation from the French, is more to his taste. When that auspicious system is adopted he will smile again.

III.

THE AMERICAN DRAMA.

The subjoined article, written by me in *Harper's Weekly*, February 2, 1889, may appropriately be in-

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cluded in this book, since it relates to the condition and advancement of dramatic art in America :

It is probable that the truth as to the American drama may be found in that capacious and old-established nutshell with which we are all so familiar that we seldom look into it. Hundreds of plays have been written in the United States since Thomas Godfrey of Philadelphia (1759), the author of "The Prince of Parthia," presented himself as the pioneer in that branch of productive industry, and scores of them have been acted. Dunlap, the first historian of the American stage [1832], recorded two hundred and seventy-four of them, written by more than one hundred authors ; and James Rees, in his "Dramatic Authors of America" (1845), mentions many more. Since then, as is shown by the copyright records at Washington, the increase in the number of American plays has been prodigious. In this respect America relatively keeps abreast of England. There the fecundity of the play-maker has been inordinate. At the close of the last century about six thousand plays had been published in that country—only about fifty of which are ever acted now—and the product since that time must have been immense, many pieces remaining in manuscript. Lord Byron while he was one of the directors of Drury Lane Theatre in 1815-16 caused the literary archives of that theatre to be searched and several hundreds of manuscript plays to be examined, in the hope that he might find a good one ; but his search proved fruitless, as he himself has recorded with characteristic humor.

In every important theatre of the United States there is a similar accumulation of theatrical compositions, presumably worthless. The usual phalanx of neglected dramatic authors is on its march in this country as well

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as abroad, and at the same time we do not lack successful and prosperous dramatists. A considerable list of good American plays might be furnished, and the array of American dramatic authors, past and present, is by no means to be despised, since it includes, among others, such representative writers as David Paul Brown, R. M. Bird, N. H. Bannister, Robert T. Conrad, William Dunlap, Charles J. Ingersoll, Anna Cora Mowatt, Epes Sargent, N. P. Willis, Cornelius Matthews, John Howard Payne, G. H. Miles, George H. Boker, Augustin Daly, Bronson Howard, Charles Gayler, B. E. Woolf, H. G. Carlton, Bartley Campbell, Steele Mackaye, Edgar Fawcett, W. H. Gillette, D. D. Lloyd, Brander Matthews, Dion Boucicault, G. F. Rowe, C. W. Tayleure, A. W. Young, Lester Wallack, John Brougham, W. D. Howells, Edward Harrigan, and Mark Twain. America, considering her brief period of experience, has been in this respect sufficiently fertile, and those judges who declare that there is no American drama (by which is meant a body of dramatic compositions written by persons who live in America) speak without knowledge, and therefore without authority.

“ When Bishop Berkeley said there was no matter,
And proved it, 'twas no matter what he said.”

Plays may be divided into two classes. Ben Jonson noticed, with reference to Shakespeare, that “ he was not for a day but for all time.” There are plays that must endure forever, because they are the copious, ample, puissant, beautiful, and, above all, inspired expression of elemental and universal human nature; and there are plays that cannot survive their own period, because they are only the expression of something local, ephemeral, and temporary. Tom D'Urfey wrote plays

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by the score in good King William's time, and they are as completely gone now as the dust of the old scribbler himself mouldering in his forgotten grave in St. James's church-yard in Piccadilly. Dryden's plays are forgotten, and Dryden was a man of genius—which he misused when he devoted it to this species of work. T. B. De Walden, who was working in New York about twenty-five years ago [1865], made a hundred plays, and they are all in the famous alms-bag of oblivion. There is the same difference—or a kindred one—between sterling plays and incidental plays that there is between literature and journalism. The one is permanent, the other evanescent. And this is why the great plays in existence, and even the really good plays, are comparatively few. The piece that is meant merely for the hour may, like a mustard plaster, be pungent and effective while the hour lasts, but that is the end of it. Sordid in its nature, and usually perfunctory in its character and style, it possesses no intrinsic vitality; and when it ceases to be apposite it ceases altogether. Nor is evanescence alone the fatal taint of the incidental drama. Artificial because insincere and labored mechanism combines with triviality to render such works speedily superfluous. The rewards of the stage being substantial, many persons will write for the stage, because they want to get money. But the desire for money is one thing, and the faculty of dramatic expression is another. Even when a good device for a local hit is selected, the talent for working it out in any but a bald utilitarian manner is usually wanting.

The common idea of a play seems to be—and seems always largely to have been—that it consists of a series of dialogues diversified by a drop curtain whenever the speakers get out of breath. Few writers, even of the

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high order of Thackeray, Tennyson, and Longfellow, possess the faculty of telling a story by means of action—of showing human life, not in narrative, but in movement. Mr. Boucicault and Mr. Daly may be named as contemporary American dramatists who conspicuously possess this faculty. In five of Mr. Boucicault's plays—"The Octoroon," "Jessie Brown," "The Parish Clerk," "The Long Strike," and "Belle Lamar"—may be found examples of this faculty as fine as any in the language. The telegraph incident in "The Long Strike"—speaking as to its technical dramatic value—is as fine as the incident of the knocking at the gate in "Macbeth." This faculty is not to be obtained by offering a reward for it, nor can it be cultivated into a mind that does not possess it. The dramatist, like the poet, is born, not made. Good plays will be written in America, not because there is a demand for them, but because persons will from time to time be born whose native impulse propels them in that direction. There must be inspiration back of all true and permanent art, dramatic or otherwise, and art is universal: there is nothing national about it. Its field is humanity, and it takes in all the world; nor does anything else afford the refuge that is provided by it from all troubles and all the vicissitudes of life. Let us make our art noble, and we need not trouble ourselves about the exclusively American imprint.

