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Allardyce Nicoll

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CHAPTER I

*THE THEATRE*I. *Introductory*

IF, in dealing with the drama of the Restoration period, it was noted that that subject, when compared with Elizabethan theatrical productivity, had been comparatively neglected, it may be said that the drama of the years which followed, from 1700 onwards to the middle of the nineteenth century, had been almost entirely forgotten by scholars and critics. Sir A. W. Ward, progressing further than most, brought his dramatic history to a close with the year 1714; Nettleton has hurried rapidly over these years of "decay" and of "disintegration"; Genest has presented a selection of dramatic performances from 1660 to 1830; a few individual writers have touched upon minor aspects of the theatre of the time; but no one has ever attempted to analyse in anything like fullness the whole dramatic productivity of the age, from *Cato* and *The Conscious Lovers* to the flimsiest of pantomimes and the silliest of Italian operas.

A period of decay and disintegration it was in many ways. Sentimentalism, during the first half of the eighteenth century, was steadily gathering way and banishing laughter from the stage. Classicism, imported from France, was slowly driving out the more natural expression of true emotion. Pantomime was usurping the attention of the playgoers and vitiating their taste for higher forms of comedy and of tragedy. Italian opera succeeded in breaking down the desire for more legitimate drama. In no wise can it be denied that, as we watch the drama progressing from 1610 to the end of the eighteenth century, we see in general only a retrograde movement, arrested at moments, in the early years by men such as Ford and Shirley, in the later by others such as Dryden and Otway and Congreve and Steele, but moving

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nevertheless relentlessly along the one inevitable path. The study of an art form in its decay is not a pleasant thing; and if this were all perhaps the greater oblivion that could fall on the dramatic productivity of those years the better.

The more we come to analyse this period of the drama, however, the more we come to realise that the retrograde movement so apparent on the surface was countered by a series of forward developments, never carried to artistic fulfilment in those years, but of boundless significance when we carry our gaze onwards to our own times. The drama certainly has seen a remarkable rebirth in the last years of the nineteenth century, but that rebirth is to be understood aright only when it is associated historically with the dramatic work of the preceding two centuries. Sentimentalism thus may have killed the comedy of Congreve for a time, but out of that sentimentalism grew the larger humanitarianism which followed, out of it too came an entirely new dramatic type, the *drame*. Classicism may have succeeded in stifling to a certain extent the freer expression of tragic passion, but in the very midst of the classical movement developed and flourished that strange species of tragedy, which was destined to pass over to France and later to Germany, influencing Diderot and Lessing and Kotzebue and Schiller, ultimately travelling to the north and giving rise there to Ibsen and Björnson and Strindberg. Fundamentally, Ibsen, the master of our present-day English dramatists, is the descendant of George Lillo, forgotten playwright of 1730. If, therefore, we do not find any startling masterpieces in this age, we discover many forms of dramatic art which show that the creative spirit was still alive in the theatre. *The Conscious Lovers* was in reality a new form of drama; and so was *The London Merchant*. Italian opera was a novelty in England, and the Italian *Commedia dell'arte* gave rise now to native English pantomime. *The Beggar's Opera* was a new discovery, how charming and how fascinating yet, may be realised by those who have had the pleasure of witnessing one or another of the recent thousand odd performances at the Lyric Theatre, Hammer-smith.

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Still a further note may be made concerning the study of drama in these years. Not only was the theatre then as always a sure index of public taste and of almost intangible literary and intellectual movements, but it was intimately in touch with nearly all the great men of letters of the time. It is true that Pope, disgusted with the reception of his one and only play, abandoned the playhouse, and that Swift remained purely the pamphleteer, the poet and the novelist, but apart from those the drama was eagerly patronised by almost all the men famous now for their poetry and their prose. Steele was the great populariser of the sentimental comedy; Addison with his *Cato* set up a landmark in the history of tragedy; Fielding was a prolific playwright before ever he even thought of *Joseph Andrews* or of *Tom Jones*; Thomson and Young both wrote tragedies for the stage. Even those men of letters of the time who did not actually pen plays were keenly interested in the playhouses. It was Swift who, according to rumour, gave Gay his idea for *The Beggar's Opera*. Only through a study of the stage of these years can we gain a true impression of the literary development and ideals of the early eighteenth century; even particular works, such as Pope's *The Dunciad*, cannot properly be appreciated until we enter into the mysteries of the daily repertoire of Drury Lane and of Lincoln's Inn Fields and of the Haymarket.

Such a study can in no wise be dissociated from the actual history of the theatres themselves. In this respect, we note in this half century many changes which serve to mark it out from the period of the Restoration. The interest in drama now became more wide-spread. A new trading class had arisen and was taking its place alongside the older aristocracy. The Court no longer formed the entire focus of public attention, and with this fundamental alteration from Stuart days, numerous changes are to be witnessed in the theatre and in the plays written for the theatre. The whole of sentimentalism and of the bourgeois tragedy is, of course, to be associated with this rise of the middle classes, but the movement must be traced in greater detail if we are to

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appreciate it aright. New theatres, independent of the old patent houses, were springing up to accommodate the larger audience—the Queen’s Theatre in the Haymarket, the French House in the Haymarket, the Little Theatre in Lincoln’s Inn Fields, the Theatre Royal in Covent Garden, the two playhouses in Goodman’s Fields¹—and outside of London interest in the drama was penetrating rapidly. Tentatively provincial theatres began to emerge, being utilised by regular stock companies as well as by the touring players and the lesser strollers with their “drolls².” Bath had its theatre now, for which Mrs Centlivre wrote one of her comedies³, as had Tunbridge Wells, where was presented by the Duke of Richmond’s Servants about 1712 *Pastora: or, The Coy Shepherdess*, Norwich, Richmond⁴ and a number of other towns. Dublin, too, had its well-established theatre, vying with the playhouses in London, providing for those playhouses, sometimes actors⁵, sometimes dramas⁶. Interest in

¹ For notes on the theatres and the dramatic companies see Appendix A.

² That these drolls were still played, both in the provinces and in the theatrical booths at the London Fairs, is proved by the advertisements in the newspapers and by the collection of dramatic pieces called *The Stroler’s Pacquet Open’d* (1742). The old strolling companies still persisted, and new ones were springing into being. An interesting account of one of these is to be found in Mrs Charlotte Charke’s own *Narrative* of her life in which she describes her “various and surprizing vicissitudes of fortune, during nine years peregrination” (1755). That the older companies still were in being is proved by an advertisement for S. July 4, 1724, when a band of comedians travelling under a licence granted by Charles II promised to perform *The Recruiting Officer* at Epsom Wells.

³ *Love at a Venture* (New Theatre, Bath, acted by the Duke of Grafton’s Servants, and printed in 1706).

⁴ There seem to have been two or three theatres at Richmond. One was in existence in the early years of the eighteenth century. Another was built by Pinkethman in 1718. It was described in the *St James’s Evening Post* for T. June 3 of that year. In 1730 another playhouse was erected higher up the hill than Pinkethman’s and was occupied for a time at least by the L.I.F. players (see *The Daily Journal*, W. June 3, 1730).

⁵ For a number of those actors and actresses who started their theatrical careers in Ireland see W. R. Chetwood’s *A General History of the Stage* (Dublin 1749).

⁶ Coffey’s *The Beggar’s Wedding*, for example, seems first to have been acted in Dublin, and was later brought over to the Haymarket and Drury Lane.

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the theatre penetrated even into Puritan Scotland; there, too, we find theatres arising and companies performing. Our sphere of study, therefore, is considerably wider than it could have been in the whole of the period from 1660 to 1700, and that enlarged sphere of study is due chiefly to the break away of drama from the Court atmosphere and the inclusion in the playhouse of other elements driven away from the drama in the days of Charles II. It is certainly true that for the first years of the period we hear the old complaints concerning the bad way of the playhouses and the paucity of spectators. We know in what a state the Drury Lane company was about 1700 through the secession of the Lincoln's Inn Fields actors. "About this Time," we are told, "the *English Theatre* was not only pestered with Tumblers, and Rope-Dancers from *France*, but likewise Dancing-Masters, and Dancing-Dogs; shoals of *Italian Squallers* were daily imported; and the *Drury-Lane Company* almost broke¹." The same complaint is made in the preface to Cibber's *The Lady's Last Stake* (H.^r 1707), and in *Farewel Folly* (D.L. 1705) we are informed that theatrical matters were "very grave at one House; and not very merry at the other²." The regular actors evidently suffered heavily in face of other counter-attractions, so that we are not surprised when we find that some of the People of Quality in 1707 felt themselves obliged to open a subscription to encourage the drama³. The Lincoln's Inn Fields theatre seems to have suffered in the early years of the century, and later in the twenties. In the verse satire entitled *The Players turn'd Academicks: or, A Description (in Merry Metre) Of their Translation from the Theatre in Little Lincolns-Inn-Fields, to the Tennis-Court in Oxford* (1703), an anonymous writer provides us with the information that "never was such wretched Acting seen by those who go under the Name of Her Majesty's Servants." This probably explains the notes in

¹ Curll, E., *The Life of That Eminent Comedian Robert Wilks, Esq;* (1733), p. 8.

² See for the alleged reason, *infra*, p. 38.

³ An account of this subscription is given in Cibber's *Apology* (ed. Lowe, ii. 4-5). The prologue written especially for this occasion by Dennis and supposed to be spoken by the spirit of Shakespeare is printed in *The Muses Mercury* for Jan. 1706-7.

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The Daily Courant advertisements for *The Libertine* (May 1, 1704) and *Don Quixote* (August 9, 1704): “not to dismiss tho’ the Audience should be small” and “we shall not dismiss, let the Audience be what it will.” The miserable straits into which this playhouse had fallen about 1719 is testified by many authors. The preface to Theobald’s *The Tragedy of King Richard the II* (L.² 1719) and that to Sewell’s *The Tragedy of Sir Walter Raleigh* (L.² 1719) show that the actors of this house were being neglected; in the same year a subscription was opened to enable them to carry on¹. That this subscription was necessary is proved by the remark of “Corinna” in her *Critical Remarks on the Four Taking Plays Of this Season* (1719) that *Sir Walter Raleigh* was acted at a playhouse which was the contempt of the town. As Gabriel Rennel in his *Tragi-Comical Reflections of a Moral and Political Tendency, occasioned By the Present State of the two Rival Theatres in Drury-Lane and Lincolns-Inn-Fields* (1725) puts it: “A Winter or two ago the *Theatre in Lincolns-Inn-Fields*, commonly called the *New-House*, was ready to expire under the severest Frowns of Fortune and the Town. The *Actors* were reduced to a more hungry and ragged Condition than a *Company of Country-Strollers*. They were *miserable* in more than one Sense, and were now almost as generally pitied as they once had been despised.... In short, every Body fled from a Set of People who looked like *real Ghosts*, and who *appeared* in such *frightful Shapes* as scared even *Parsons* and *Undertakers* from their House².” Some sort of a recovery seems to have been made³,

¹ The dedication to Lord Brooke of Leigh’s *Kensington-Gardens* (L.² 1719) speaks of “the noble Example you have shewn, in being the first Subscriber towards the Support of our Theatre.” Settle’s *The Lady’s Triumph* (L.² 1718) was dedicated to these subscribers. For some details concerning the takings at this house see B.M. Egerton MS. 2321–2322.

² pp. 7–8.

³ Whincop (p. 231) attributes this turn of affairs to the production of Fenton’s *Mariamne* in 1723. “And very happy,” he says, “it was for that House that this Play was brought thither, it giving a new Turn to its Affairs; for till *Mariamne* was performed there, the Stage at *Lincolns-Inn-Fields* had been so neglected, and the Actors in so little Esteem, that, except upon some extraordinary Occasions, they hardly received half Money enough to defray their Expences, nay, oftentimes acted to Audiences of five or six Pounds.”

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so that we find Fielding in *The Historical Register, For the Year 1736* (H.² 1737) commenting on the success of Lincoln's Inn Fields and attributing that success to the presence of mirrors there¹. Later still, however, towards the end of this period, Theophilus Cibber testifies in the preface to his adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* (H.² 1744) to the popularity of the Haymarket theatre and the consequent decline of the rest. He calls to mind especially "one filthy, foggy, dismal, dreary Night...when one of the Theatres-Royal debated, till very late, whether they should play or no. to a most scanty Company; and the other Theatre-Royal forbore to light the Candles, which the thin Appearance they had would hardly enable them to pay for, and so courteously dismissed the very few who through foul weather had come to see them²." These complaints appear again and again during the fifty years, but they are complaints which are, after all, eternal and hardly confined to one half-century. The fact remains that two and sometimes three theatres were running constantly in London, in place of the one and occasional two of Restoration times. No doubt the author of *A Proposal For the better Regulation of the Stage* (1732) was nearer the truth when he declared "'Tis very visible that this great *Metropolis* can support two Theatres, beside the *Opera*, in all the Elegancy, and Expencc of Entertainment³."

The tradesmen, moreover, who aided in the success of more theatres than the days of Charles II had known, did not confine themselves to being merely spectators. Coming into the theatres, they, like the courtiers of a former reign, started to write plays. These efforts of theirs, naturally, were both for the bad and for the good. Lillo brought a new world into the playhouse, but not all had the talents of Lillo. There are at least two outspoken prefaces of the period in which the respective authors declare that they had but scanty knowledge of the art which they were attempting. No doubt these two were but a couple representative of many less brave than they. In the Restoration age the bulk of the plays produced were written by a dozen men—Dryden, Shadwell,

¹ 1.² p. 78.³ p. 43.

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Settle, D'Urfey, Otway, Southerne, Tate, Congreve, Etherege and Wycherley are the chief. In the early eighteenth century we are startled at the number of one-play writers. There are, certainly, Fielding and Mrs Centlivre and Cibber who were prolific playwrights, but fully half of the dramas produced during this time were penned by men unassociated with literature and uneager for literary glory. There are twice as many individual dramatists in the one period as in the other, and more than four times the number of anonymous plays. Undoubtedly many of these unliterary authors aided at once in destroying the brilliance of the comedy of manners, and in introducing new motives and new themes destined to provide the basis for the modern stage.

II. *The Audience*

It must not be presumed, of course, that the audience, suddenly and in a few years, changed entirely its character, or that even in the last portion of this period the atmosphere of the theatres was middle class rather than aristocratic. If anything, the air of eighteenth century London was more "fashionable" than it had been before; and only too many of the richer middle class aped the manners and the vices of the People of Quality. All that can be said is that the body of spectators was larger than it had been, that the middle classes were growing in importance and power, and that the close connection between Court and theatre was for ever shattered.

There are, in this connection, two exceedingly interesting contemporary pronouncements, interesting not only because they show us the character of the audience, but because they reveal a consciousness in the minds of some critics at least of the change which had come over the theatres in the early years of the century. The first is in Dennis' *The Comical Gallant* (D.L. 1702), where he contrasts the audience of Charles II's time with that of his own day. The former spectators, he believes, were more intelligent; they were capable of judging for themselves on the merits of plays; now there were too many counter-attractions and too much

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business to be done to leave their minds free. What those counter-attractions and that business were is explained to us by Steele in *The Tatler*.

“The Place,” he says, “is very much altered since Mr. *Dryden* frequented it; where you used to see *Songs, Epigrams, and Satyrs*, in the Hands of every Man you met, you have now only a Pack of Cards; and instead of the Cavils about the Turn of the Expression, the Elegance of the Style, and the like, the Learned now dispute only about the Truth of the Game¹.”

The extent to which this passion for cards drew audiences away from the theatres is emphasised in the epilogue to Mrs Centlivre’s *The Gamester* (L.¹ 1705):

In vain we Labour to divert your Care,
No Song, nor Dance can Bribe your Presence here,
You fly this Place like an Infectious Air. }
To yonder happy Quarter of the Town,
You Croud; and your own Fav’rite Stage disown.

The audience, agreed all, had degenerated, and Steele was but voicing a general opinion when he indulged in bitter irony: “The Play of *The London Cuckolds* was acted this Evening before a suitable Audience, who were extremely well diverted with that Heap of Vice and Absurdity².”

These words show us fairly clearly the true state of things during the first years of the century. The audience was as dilettante, as little serious, as the audience of Dryden; it was at the same time more frivolous and not by any means so intelligent. Its mind was fluttered by trivial things, and the gaming tables, so satirised by Mrs Centlivre and by Colley Cibber, and only too much frequented by the latter, formed the centre of their thoughts. Still, the theatre was a meeting-place, a fashionable amusement rather than a place of art. Any outside thing could divert the attention of the spectators. Charles Shadwell considered himself lucky because his *The Fair Quaker of Deal* (D.L. 1710) was a success, “notwithstanding the Tryal in *Westminster Hall*, and the Rehearsal of the new Opera³.” Even gossip about new plays could destroy

¹ *The Tatler*, No. 1, April 8, 1709.

² *Id.* No. 8, April 26, 1709.

³ Preface.

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enthusiasm for others. Welsted's *The Dissembled Wanton* (L.² 1726), we are told by Whincop¹, "came out at the Time when the Town was big with Expectation of Mr. *Moor Smyth's* Play; but I believe, had Mr. *Welsted's* Comedy not appeared till after *The Rival Modes*, it would have had better Success." We know how in the last years of the seventeenth century, Farquhar's *A Trip to the Jubilee* (D.L. 1699) destroyed the career of other new plays; and as late as 1728 we find Fielding complaining that his *Love in Several Masques* (D.L. 1728) came out when *The Provok'd Husband* was playing and "contemporary with an Entertainment which engrosses the whole Talk and Admiration of the Town²." Many a writer felt the evils of this fashionable and would-be-fashionable audience, and not only one echoes the words of Chaves in *The Cares of Love* (L.¹ 1705):

*What foolish Frenzy does our Bard possess?
To write a Play, yet hope from you success?
To bring old Customs on our Modern Stage,
When nought but Farce and Song can please the Age?*

Good plays, thought this writer, might go down with a rough audience, as in Shakespeare's time, but now,

*The homely Treat of Nature ne'er will hit;
That's too Mechanic, and too obsolete
To please Our finer Taste of Box and Pit... }
Old Shakespear's Genius Now is laid aside,
And Johnson's Artful Scenes in vain are try'd;
Otway and Wycherley, tho' Bards Divine,
Whose Nervous Passion, Wit and Humour shine,
To empty Benches to Our Cost we Play.*

The fashionable vices, the fashionable dilettanteism, and the fashionable thoughtlessness were largely responsible for that "ridiculous *Corruption* of our *Theatrical Entertainments*³," for "our present *Polite Taste*, when nothing will go down but *BALLAD-Operas* and Mr. LUN's *Buffoonery*⁴." Steele's

¹ p. 301.

² Preface. The entertainment probably was Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*, which had been produced nearly a fortnight previously.

³ Curll, E., *The Life of That Eminent Comedian Robert Wilks, Esq.* (1733), preface, p. vii.

⁴ *Id.* p. 11.