

CHAPTER I

*THE THEATRE**I. Introductory*

IT is not to be denied that the great mass of late eighteenth century plays make today but dull reading. Countless are the trivial farces where a fair Clarissa or a fairer Celia is about to be married to an odious Squire Badger or a detestable Sir George Trifle and where a faithful Townly or a fascinating Lovemore arrives disguised as serving-man or as country clown to rescue her from the hated toils. Countless are the artificial and absurd comic operas; countless the weary tragedies and the lachrymose comedies of the period. There are, on the other hand, not a few considerations which must give us to pause ere we rashly dismiss this era of dramatic activity from serious investigation. After all, much of the minor work of even the most glorious theatrical decades has been of poor quality. Hardly anyone but the most blindly enthusiastic can profess to see in the lesser Elizabethan comedy and tragedy elements of greatness, and in our own days, with all the revival in the theatre, there is a vast amount of trivial, inartistic and uninteresting work produced. A period of literature cannot be judged on the total mass of its activity alone. It may seem at first as if Sheridan and Goldsmith, the twin stars which shine in the darkness of this era, stand entirely alone, and, in so far as no other dramatist quite reached their brilliance, this supposition is true; but there are many beside those two who came near at least to their mastery of dramatic dialogue and of dramatic situation. Colman gave two excellent comedies to the theatre, as did Macklin, the actor. Mrs Inchbald was a capable writer of sentimental comedy. Murphy has a comic sense all his own, and Holcroft possesses a sterling quality which makes his dramas rank as capable, if not brilliant, productions.

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Mrs Cowley, Burgoyne, Foote, Kelly, Cumberland, Reynolds, Moore—in laughing comedy and in tearful comedy, in romantic tragedy and in domestic tragedy—all aided in providing for the stage genuine stock pieces, many of which have a more than ephemeral interest. It may be that few of these plays are consistently good, but most present at least some special scene or passage of dialogue which proves the existence yet of a true *vis comica* or of a genuine tragic spirit.

Over and beyond the presence of this, be it confessed all too rare, manifestation of dramatic excellence, this period of our drama has a paramount historical interest. This was the time when Dr Johnson's power, having risen to its height, was to wane rapidly under the increasing pressure of romantic sentiment. Chatterton, Percy and Macpherson were preparing the way for Blake and Burns, even as Blake and Burns were pioneers hacking a path for Wordsworth and Coleridge to pursue in their *Lyrical Ballads*. This was the time when murmurings of unrest fed by Rousseauesque theories of primitive virtue and of social corruption broke out into social ferment in France and aided in changing the atmosphere of literature throughout the entirety of Europe. Of these various movements in all their infinite ramifications and peculiar forms of expression much has been written, yet the movement of humanitarianism and of romance in the theatre has never been adequately dealt with. Sheridan and Goldsmith have had several biographers and many critics; a stray dramatist here and there has been politely favoured with a more or less scholarly study, but the larger development, the theatre as a whole, has remained unchronicled and unknown. It will be my endeavour here to present, in brief wise, some of the more important dramatic developments of these years, especially in so far as these developments harmonise with other literary activities of the period, and at the same time to throw some light on the minor and forgotten playwrights of the age.

A study of the dramatic literature of this period is complicated in various ways, and those complications are such

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as to increase with the passing on to later years. There is, first of all, the rapid establishment of the provincial theatres. It has been seen how, in the first half of the century, new playhouses were arising in Richmond, Bath, Tunbridge Wells and other fashionable localities. This tendency becomes deeply marked as we move onward from the year 1750. All over the country new audiences were springing into being, and bands of provincial actors emerged to form stock companies. The older strolling players still continued to trudge wearily from market-town to market-town, but the true days of strolling and of barn-acting were well-nigh over. Just as the performers of London had, nearly two centuries before, won for themselves a position of esteem, so these wandering "vagabonds" settled down to a life of comparative comfort and respectability¹. The importance of these new theatres is to be seen in the number of dramas produced originally, or produced only, on provincial stages. The scope of English drama is, consequently, being widened in these years, and even begins to pass beyond the shores of the British Islands. The first American play, a tragedy called *The Prince of Parthia* by one Thomas Godfrey, was printed in Philadelphia in the year 1765, a fore-runner of many other works written exclusively for trans-Atlantic stages. It is, of course, utterly impossible to deal here with the development of the American stage, which, naturally enough, for many years followed the

¹ Many anecdotal works of the period deal incidentally with these provincial playhouses. Interesting side-lights on several, principally those of Norwich, Bath, York and Portsmouth, are given in Tate Wilkinson's *Memoirs of His Own Life* (York 1790) and *The Wandering Patentee* (1795). R. Crompton Rhodes has an interesting sketch of *The Theatre Royal, Birmingham, 1774-1924* (1924). A valuable real-life record of the fortunes of a strolling company is preserved in the British Museum Add. MS. 33,488, f. 5; on this and other documents see Colby, E., *A Supplement on Strollers* (*Mod. Lang. Assoc. Amer.* xxxix. No. 28), *Strolling Players of the XVIII Century* (*Notes and Queries*, ix. Aug. 27, 1921) and *The Inchbalds strolling into Glasgow* (*id.* Nov. 1923), as well as Graves, T. S., *Strolling Players in the XVIII Century* (*id.* July 7, 1923). Other information may be obtained in S. W. Ryley's *The Itinerant; or Memoirs of an Actor* (3 series, 1808, 1816-7, 1827), Thomas Holcroft's *Memoirs* (1816), *A Dissertation of the Country Stage* in *The European Magazine* for Sept. 1792 (xxii. 230) and John Bernard's *Retrospections of the Stage* (1830).

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main tendencies of London theatrical endeavour, but this American drama is, after all, drama in English, and as such must be kept in mind as the fortunes of the mother-drama are traced¹. Nor must we forget that, as years passed years, theatres began to arise in the English colonies. Before the century closed the manager of the theatre at Calcutta was sending home to order a set of eight scenes to be painted by London's best scenic artists².

Contact with the continent, moreover, was becoming with every decade more close, and as a consequence the prevalence of adaptation and of translation increased. If Paris had a successful comedy, it was sure to be brought out on the London stage, so that for a large part of our period we seem to see nothing but a tissue of scenes hastily appropriated from French dramas and as hastily welded together. Indeed, the field of French influence is probably much wider than we now view it, for no exact endeavour has been hitherto made to determine its precise scope. We know now, more or less exactly, what the dramatists of the Restoration period took from Molière, but we have but a vague conception of what their successors borrowed from Regnard and Des-touches, from Diderot and Favart. Other countries, too, were coming to have their influence on the development of the English theatre. With Metastasio and with Alfieri, Italy took a more important place in the international dramatic sphere, and these two writers, along with Goldoni, left their clear impress on several of our authors. Germany, also, was gradually becoming a force to reckon with. Lessing's *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* proved the most brilliant piece of dramatic criticism which the world had seen since the speculations of Castelvetro and the Italian Renaissance critics. His own plays, and the plays of Goethe and of Schiller provided new models of artistic beauty. Kotzebue, less satisfactorily although more popularly, developed and

¹ For this subject see Quinn, A. H., *A History of the American Drama* (1923) and the bibliographies given in that volume.

² Odell, G. C. D., *Shakespeare from Betterton to Irving*, i. 444. An interesting account of *Early Halifax Theatres* is given by Mr A. R. Jewitt in *The Dalhousie Review* for 1925.

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enlarged the sphere of sentimental and humanitarian drama. It can occasion no surprise, therefore, that the last decade of the century saw the influx of a large number of these German dramas in literal and adapted forms. With that influx the whole orientation of the English stage was altered.

These facts, added to the unparalleled number of plays produced yearly, obviously make the study of the theatre of this period much more complex and difficult than that of the earlier eras. It is less easy to secure adequate detailed information on the plays and the playwrights, and less easy to discern and to present clearly the main tendencies of the time.

II. *The Audience*

These main tendencies are, as always, to be related to the typical audiences in the theatres of London. Spectators in provincial theatres may have differed considerably from their metropolitan counterparts, but after all the provincial theatres merely followed the ruling tastes of London. Not until a full century had elapsed did there appear a definite school of dramatic writing outside of London, and even then it appeared only in the capital of a nation fundamentally separated, both in literary tradition and in outlook upon life, from the English.

No decided period of cleavage can be traced between the audiences of the early and those of the late eighteenth century; yet slowly the main features of the typical body of spectators was changing during those years. In spite of the recurring riots, in spite of rowdyism during and after the performance of plays, the playgoers of 1770 were quieter and less uproarious than their predecessors of 1730. Their tastes are reflected in the highly decorous comic operas of the age, in the more than decorous sentimental comedies and even in the moral melodramas which provided something of all worlds from spectacular show to poetic justice.

Disturbances, certainly, still broke this equitable calm. Five years after the opening of our period, we are confronted with the famous "Chinese Festival" riot of Nov. 8,

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1755¹. Barely four years had elapsed when another riot, on Oct. 31, 1759, broke out in the "Footmen's Gallery." Another is chronicled for Jan. 25, 1763², the notorious "Half-Price" riot which succeeded in destroying all previous records. Nor were these deliberate outbreaks of rowdiness confined to particular years. All through this period we learn of episodes which could not occur nowadays in any of our theatres. "Conversing about dramatic literature," Reynolds informs us,

Sheridan furnished us with some particulars relative to the first night's performance of *The Rivals*. During the violent opposition in the fifth act, an apple hitting Lee, who performed Sir Lucius O'Trigger, he stepped forward, and with a genuine rich brogue, angrily cried out,

"By the pow'r's, is it *personal*?—is it me, or the matter?"³

Among the Covent Garden newspaper cuttings in the British Museum is one from a paper of 1762, which gives some faint hint of what was happening regularly:

Thursday night there was a great riot at Covent Garden play-house, without the least plea or pretence whatever, occasioned by the gentry in the upper gallery calling for a hornpipe, though

¹ For an account of this see Genest, J., *Some Account of the English Stage*, iv. 442-3, Fitzgerald, P., *A New History of the English Stage*, ii. 193-5 and *The Monthly Mirror*, Jan. 1802, pp. 43 ff. *The Dancers Damn'd; or, The Devil to Pay at the Old House* (1755) was a pamphlet occasioned by the disturbances.

² See *Theatrical Disquisitions: or a Review of the late Riot at Drury-Lane Theatre, on the 25th. and 26th. of January, with an Impartial Examen of the Profession and Professors of the Drama; Some few Hints on the Prerogative of an Audience, and, a Short Appendix, relative to the more flagrant Disturbance committed at Covent-Garden Theatre, on Thursday the 24th. of February. By a Lady* (1763). This pamphlet was followed by a number of others, notable among which are *Fitzgig, or the Modern Quixote, a Tale: relative to the late Disturbances* (1763), *An Appeal to the Public on behalf of the Managers* (1763), *An Historical and Succinct Account of the late Riots* (1763) and *Three Original Letters to a Friend in the Country, or the Cause and Manner of the late Riot. . . . By an Old Man of the Town* (1763). These all refer to the famous "half-price" riot led by one Fitzpatrick. Having forced Garrick at Drury Lane to admit their claims, the rioters then made a massed attack on Covent Garden. See also B. Victor's *The History of the Theatres of London and Dublin* (1761-71), iii. 45-6 and Walpole's *Letters* (ed. Toynbee), v. 289, 291.

³ *The Life and Times of Frederick Reynolds. Written by Himself* (1827), ii. 227-8.

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nothing of the sort was expressed in the bills. They went so far as to throw a quart bottle and two pint bottles upon the stage, which happily did no mischief, but might have been productive of a great deal¹.

Catcalls still continued to play their noisy part in the evening's entertainment, as is indicated in Holcroft's *The German Hotel* (C.G. 1790). Fancy is aroused, in Jerningham's *The Welch Heiress* (D.L. 1795), from his profound slumber induced through witnessing Phrensy's play, "by a thousand cat-calls²," while the prologue to Moore's *Gil Blas* (D.L. 1751) is "*Spoken by Mr. WOODWARD, in the Character of a Critic, with a Cat-call in his Hand.*" The prologue to Murphy's *The School for Guardians* (C.G. 1767) is spoken by an actress, in a supposedly extempore strain:

May I intrude upon your patience for a minute?
Ladies and gentlemen, before the opening of the play,
Just to excuse an accident, which, I hope has no mischief in it...
I hope you'll not be angry; but we've got no prologue for to night;
And so I thought it was best to come and tell ye all the truth
downright.

I went to Mr. Poet, and I spoke to him all I could,
But he said he had not leisure, tho' I know it's in his power if
he would.

"A prologue, ma'am," says he!—"Yes, Sir, a prologue if you
please."

And then I did so entreat the man, and beg, and pray, and tease.
I told him, "You know, Sir, what a miserable plight we all are in,
To frown upon the performers, when pit, box, and gallery begin;
Whu—go the cat-calls—dub—dub—dub—each dreadful critick's
stick

Prólog'—throw him over—won't ye ha some orange chips—
Prólógué—Cries o' London—Musick!

Several plays we know were damned by the wielders of these catcalls and of these critics' sticks. "It was said," declares Victor³, "that Party interfered to condemn...very undeservedly" Murphy's *No One's Enemy but his Own* (C.G. 1764) and *What We must all Come to* (C.G. 1764). Kelly's *A Word to the Wise* (D.L. 1770) met with a severe

¹ Quoted in Alwin Thaler's *Shakespeare to Sheridan* (1922), p. 145.

² ii. i.

³ iii. 66.

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fate. It was painfully dragged through a Saturday's performance, and was announced for the Monday following. At this, however, the author's opponents forced the actors to give out instead the play of *Cymbeline*. Bitter strife waged in the theatre during the early days of the ensuing week¹. The reason here was political, for Kelly had been accused of servile trading with the Government. "The first Night's Audience," Victor informs us, "were too conceited, and too wise, to hear one Word of additional Wisdom from this Performance; and therefore the Merits of the Play were not attended to; nor any thing taken into Consideration, but the private Conduct of the Author, who was charged by his Opponents, with being a *ministerial* PARTY WRITER!"² Andrews, in the preface to his musical comedy *The Baron Kinkoervankotsdorsprakingatchdern* (H.² 1781), speaks of "the very extraordinary circumstances which attended the hearing, or rather the not hearing of this piece." Supposed political references in the same author's *The Reparation* (D.L. 1784) caused disturbances³, and the footmen, both in London and in Edinburgh⁴, showed lustily their disapprobation of Townley's *High Life below Stairs* (D.L. 1759). Irish sentiment was aroused by Colman the Elder's *The Oxonian in Town* (C.G. 1767) which "was violently opposed by a Party, at whom the Satire of this Piece was supposed to be levelled⁵," while Mrs Lennox' *The Sister* (C.G. 1769) "was so ill treated by the Audience the first Night, that the Authoress had spirit enough to withdraw it from the Theatre⁶."

In spite of this, however, at least one writer could draw attention to a new fair-play given to the dramatists:

'Twas once the mode inglorious war to wage
With each bold Bard that durst attempt the Stage, }
And Prologues were but preludes to engage.

¹ See the long preface attributed to the pen of Dr Johnson.

² iii. 161.

³ See the *Biographia Dramatica*, iii. 201.

⁴ For the latter see Victor, iii. 16-7.

⁵ Victor, iii. 117; see also the advertisement to the play.

⁶ Victor, *op. cit.* iii. 147.

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*Then mourn'd the Muse, not story'd Woes alone,
Condemn'd, with tears unfeign'd, to weep her own.
Past are those hostile days: and Wits no more
One undistinguish'd fate with Fools deplore¹.*

It would seem from this that the old vice of the “First Nighters²” had passed away. Opposition to particular plays seems mainly to have arisen from political or social causes. Notwithstanding this quiescence of the livelier “bloods” eager to damn a new play, good or bad, the theatre had still somewhat a rough atmosphere, and playgoers were subjected to not a few discomforts. Reynolds has an account of a visit paid by him and his brother to Garrick’s farewell performance of *Hamlet*:

The riot and struggle for places can scarcely be imagined. . . . Though a side box close to where we sat, was completely filled, we beheld the door burst open, and an Irish gentleman attempt to make entry, *vi et armis*—“Shut the door, box-keeper!” loudly cried some of the party—“There’s room by the pow’rs!” cried the Irishman, and persisted in advancing. On this, a gentleman in the second row, rose, and exclaimed, “Turn out that blackguard!” “Oh, and is that your mode, honey?” coolly retorted the Irishman; “come, come out, my dear, and give me satisfaction, or I’ll pull your nose, faith, you coward, and *shillaly* you through the lobby!”

This public insult left the tenant in possession, no alternative; so he rushed out to accept the challenge; when, to the pit’s general amusement, the Irishman jumped into his place, and having deliberately seated and adjusted himself, he turned round, and cried,

“*I’ll talk to you after the play is over³.*”

Perhaps we may make allowances here for this exceptional occasion, but the same confusions, the same struggles were there even on ordinary nights. In Colman’s *Memoirs*⁴ we are told how, in the struggle to secure places in the gallery, a man once pitched forward into the pit, injuring himself severely; and the “gentle Elia” has left on record memories of his earliest years when he was wont to battle his way into the same portion of the house. Holcroft, in the preface to his

¹ Prologue by William Melmoth to Dodsley’s *Cleone* (C.G. 1758).

² See vol. ii, pp. 12–5, 17–9.

³ *The Life and Times of Frederick Reynolds*, i. 90–1.

⁴ i. 260.

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comedy *Seduction* (D.L. 1787) speaks of “the nightly intrusion of unhappy and improper persons” into the theatre, in a state of extreme drunkenness. In every part of the house there were uncomfortable conditions, so that the prologue to Mrs Cowley’s *The Town before You* (C.G. 1794) could point to the audience with the words:

Ah! ah! you’re here, and comfortably tight?
Well squeez’d and press’d, I see—from left to right.

In the main, however, it does not seem to have been disturbance of the more violent sort or active opposition which troubled the dramatists of the time. What we do hear again and again during this period are complaints concerning the painful lack of attention on the part of the audience. The epilogue by M. P. Andrews to Reynolds’ *The Dramatist* (C.G. 1789) chattily ridicules the “nightly Noise and Riot”:

What an overflowing House, methinks I see!
Here, Box-keeper, are these my Places? No,
Madam Van Bulk has taken all that Row;
Then I’ll go back—you can’t—you can, she fibs,
Keep down your Elbows, or you’ll break my Ribs;
Zounds, how you squeeze! Of what do you think one made is?
Is this your Wig? No, it’s that there Lady’s.
Then the Side-Boxes, what delightful Rows!
Peers, Poets, Nabobs, Jews, and ’Prentice Beaux.
Alderman *Cramp*, a gouty rich old Cit,
With his young Bride, so lovingly will sit;
While a gay Rake, who sees the happy Pair,
A Bliss so wonderful resolves to share;
He whispers, Madam, you’ve a charming Spouse,
So neat in Limb, and then so smooth in Brows.
Sir, I don’t understand you.—What say, Dove?
Nothing, my Duck—I’d only dropp’d my Glove.
To morrow, at the Fruit Shop, will you come?
At Twelve o’Clock—Lord, Sir, how you presume!
Who’s that scroudges? You shan’t shove my wife,
I shove her! A good Joke, upon my Life.
Leave him to me; how dare you thus to treat me?
I dare do anything, if you’ll but meet me.
Me, meet a Man! I shou’d’nt have thought of you;
At Twelve indeed! I can’t get out till Two.