

**ESSAYS ON THE DRAMA
AND ON POPULAR
AMUSEMENTS**

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Essays on the drama and on popular amusements by William Bodham Donne

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WILLIAM BODHAM DONNE

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ON POPULAR AMUSEMENTS.

BY

WILLIAM BODHAM DONNE,

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ESSAYS ON THE DRAMA.

ATHENIAN COMEDY.*

M. Guizot's Essay upon the 'Life, Writings, and Age of Menander,' belongs to that order of 'studies' of classical antiquity in which Germany and France abound, but which are in little esteem at our own Universities. To this department the contributions of English scholars are few in number and inconsiderable in value. They have generally preferred the practical but somewhat dreary paths of pure philology, and left to foreigners the more attractive regions of biography and general criticism. Our periodical Journals occasionally present the reader with some excellent essays on ancient authors; but such lively and learned treatises as M. Guizot's are seldom, if ever, published under the auspices of the Pitt or the Clarendon press. We do not imagine our Bachelors and

* Reprinted from the 'Westminster Review.'

Ménandre; Etude Historique et Littéraire sur la Comédie et la Société Grecques. Par Guillaume Guizot. 8vo. Paris, 1855.

Masters of Arts to be less sensible than Continental scholars of the beauties of Classical Literature; but either they lack encouragement from the public, or are earlier engrossed by the cares of the world.

While the tragic drama and the Aristophanic comedy of the Athenians have attracted their due share of notice, both from those who amended their text, and those who entered into their dramatic or philosophical spirit, the new, or, as we may venture to phrase it, the Genteel Comedy of Athens, has elicited comparatively little attention. This partial neglect may be ascribed to two causes,—to the fragmentary condition in which the latest offspring of the Attic theatre has come down to us; and to the grander forms of imagination and art embodied in the elder drama. Through every disguise, through the change of creeds and ethical ideas, through the resisting medium of a dead language, through mutilation of parts and corruption of texts, through the mists of an extinct religion, and the veils of obsolete party feuds, the presence as of a great spirit standing before us is perceptible in the Athenian drama. Never was the indestructible life of Grecian genius more apparent than when, some years ago, Mendelssohn's 'Antigone' was produced on the London stage. The music alone was worthy of the story: the *libretto* was alternately tumid and feeble in its language; the actors were encumbered by the stilted sentiments put into their mouths, and baffled by the slow and sculpturesque evolutions and

situations of the plot; the choruses looked and sang like Minor Canons gone distracted; and the costume bore about as close a resemblance to the original theatrical garb as the Eglinton tournament bore to the lists of Ashby. Yet, through every disadvantage and deformity, Mendelssohn's music was not the only impressive portion of the performance. If it did not transport the spectator to "Athens or Thebes," it brought him at least within ken of an august Titanic power from whose countenance not even the decay and dishonours of the grave had effaced all its primal beauty. For from beyond the tomb, and from a distant shore, and through the glare and dissonance of a modern theatre, came authentic voices of passion, and gleams of grandeur and loveliness, that rolled back the mists of centuries, and revealed at least a portion of the original brightness. Uncrowned and deposed, the majesty of Sophocles was still right royal, and asserted its claim to the homage of the spectators.

The Aristophanic comedy has never been put to a similar trial; and, even with the aid of music, could hardly be rendered intelligible to a modern audience. The ethical principles of Tragedy are the property of mankind: they rest upon our fountal passions; they resolve themselves into extant results. If "the woes of old great houses" formed the staple of so many Athenian dramas, they have also furnished the plots of 'Lear' and 'Hamlet'; if fights fought long ago were rehearsed by the author of the 'Seven against Thebes'

and the 'Phœnissæ,' the wars of the Roses and the Barons no less filled the historical canvas of Shakespeare. The Nemesis in 'Macbeth' is not less appalling than the Nemesis of the 'Œdipus;' and the vaticinations of Margaret of Anjou "strike as cold" as those of Cassandra of Troy. But Comedy enjoys no similar privileges. Its life is the life of the present; it catches the Cynthia of the minute; its mirror, unlike Agrippa's, reflects only the spirit of its own age. The Lord Burleigh of 'The Critic' is a pleasant burlesque; but the historical Lord Burleigh is inadmissible in comedy. An Athenian playwright would have revelled in impersonations of Chatham's gout and flannels; of Pitt's crane's-neck; of Sheridan's ruby nose, and Fox's shrill tones and bushy eyebrows. The modern dramatist who should reproduce them, would not cause even the injudicious to laugh, and would be rewarded for his attempt by a general sibilation. We leave to Gilray and Leech this department of the "comic business" of politics; and, although our pantomimes occasionally indulge in allusions to the Commissioners of Sewers and Sabbath-Observance Bills, such matters are excluded from comedy and even from farce. Such was not the usage of "Eupolis, Cratinus, and Aristophanes;" nor did either the Government of the day or the public demand from them any such abstinence. The news of the moment was mostly the theme of their dramas; and the poet of the Old Comedy who should have