

**DUNBAR, THE KING'S  
ADVOCATE: A  
TRAGIC EPISODE  
IN THE REFORMATION**

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Dunbar, the King's Advocate: A Tragic Episode in the Reformation by Charles Waddie

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**CHARLES WADDIE**

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# DUNBAR

The King's Advocate

*A TRAGIC EPISODE IN THE  
REFORMATION.*

BY

*THISTLEDOWN.*

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1884

## A FEW WORDS ON DRAMATIC POETRY.

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THE student of English literature, if he be a Scotsman, must be struck with, and not a little humiliated at, the poor part his countrymen have played in the greatest of all arts—the dramatic. Were the Scots a poor-witted people, with no artistic talent, their lack of dramatic instinct would not be remarkable; but it is only bare justice to a country that has done so much with so small a population, to say that there is not another in Europe their superior in artistic genius. A little acquaintance with the history of Scotland will explain the reason of this poverty in dramatic poetry, although it can give little comfort to the patriotic Scot, who, with a sigh, sees other countries pointing with pride to their great poets, whose noblest works are in the dramatic form.

At the time of Elizabeth and James, London had a population nearly as large as Edinburgh at the present day, while there was no town in Scotland that had more than twenty thousand. It is clear, then, that in so poor a country there was no room for the theatre to flourish. Thus while England was producing the plays of Marlowe, Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, Beaumont and Fletcher, and

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other great writers, the dramatic muse was silent in Scotland; and events which transpired during the struggle of the Covenanters identified the players and dramatic poets with the enemies of the national cause. The Presbyterian clergy imbibed a deep prejudice against the theatre, and they were not slow to declare it not only their enemy, but also the enemy of God.

An effort was made in 1736 to build a theatre in Edinburgh by Allan Ramsay, whose beautiful pastoral, *The Gentle Shepherd*, is almost the only work of genius in the dramatic form produced by a Scotsman, and in happier times a dramatic period might have been begun. But this the furious bigotry of the clergy forbade; they closed his theatre, and nearly ruined the careful poet. Twenty years after, Home produced his tragedy of *Douglas*; and again the implacable animosity of the clergy broke forth, his only reward being to be driven from his profession; while Thomson, who knew them better, spared them the trouble by retreating in time. In our own day the London stage is an echo of Paris, and the Edinburgh an echo of London; what, then, must it be when it is the echo of an echo? One hangs his head with shame to think that the most intellectual city in the world produces only one original drama in the year, and that a pantomime, whose literary merits are beneath contempt.

We fear it will be a vain task to try to stem the current of prejudice that clouds some minds in Scotland against the theatre, who identify it with other temples of dissipation; but the strangest of all notions that could enter

the mind of man is the supposition that the theatre is opposed to religion. If these censors of the stage were capable of understanding an argument, it would strike them as strange that the theatre was never condemned by our Lord or His Apostles; nor can they find shelter in the belief that there were no theatres in those ancient times, for every city of importance had its large state endowed theatre, where the Greek and Latin poets produced a constant stream of new plays. It is also as certain as anything human can be, that St Paul was an attender of the theatre, for he does not disdain to quote in his epistle to the Corinthians, from the tragic poets of Greece, words that many an unconscious divine has preached from, and declared to be the Word of God. It was also in the theatre that the town-clerk of Ephesus admonished the people over the tumult stirred up by Demetrius. It has even been held by some that the book of Revelation was originally composed in the dramatic form, but as to the truth of this we have not learning enough to determine.

Certain critics have taken it upon themselves to lay down strict rules for the guidance of the dramatist in the prosecution of his art. But these, while they have restrained the smaller poets, have been treated with contempt by those whose genius has placed them in the first rank. The French, Italian, and Latin stage have each followed the models of Greece; while the English, Spanish, and German theatres have allowed a wider latitude as to time and place, and experience has proven to them that it instructs and delights their audience.



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But while this is so, good taste will point out some well-defined limits beyond which the true artist will never stray. *First*, as to time, while it is absurd to crowd the incidents of a five act play into twenty-four hours, it is too great a call upon the imagination of an audience to spread the scenes over a whole lifetime. A few weeks or months will suffice to give a natural turn to the action of the play, for there should be no physical alteration in the appearance of the characters, beyond what the change in their fortunes should make natural; a youth should not grow old within the three hours' business of a play. *Second*, as to place, it seems to us to be unnatural, and therefore inartistic, to roam over the whole world with your scenes, for it is impossible for a thinking audience to follow an author as he skips from Siberia to Peru. *Third*, as to subordination of character, it is of the last importance that this should be attended to, for it is contrary to experience for the servant to use the same language as his master in any other sense than aping his phrases. This must be attended to, although the servant may be the cleverer man of the two. *Fourth*, as to the subject of plays and the time at which the action is supposed to take place, that will depend upon whether it is a serious or comic performance. If serious—a tragedy, for example—the scene had better be placed sixty or seventy years back, for fear the elevation of the language should jar upon our every-day experience. In pure comedy again, the present is the only time; but in either case, as little acquaintance with the criminal law as possible should be made. Criminals are neither

agreeable nor natural characters, but are the mere accidentals of life, and should never have a place in any work pretending to literary grace.

This brings us to the much-vexed question of the morality of the characters and scenes in a play. How should the dramatist act? He must go into the world and paint men and women as he finds them. The theatre is not a school of ethics; it makes no pretence to be a place for the teaching of morality to girls and boys. Dramatic poetry is the intellectual food of full-grown men and women, and as such must be true to nature. We must not paint a world as we would like it to be, but as it is. Now, as a general principle, virtue ought to triumph and vice be depressed; or, as the phrase goes, poetical justice ought to be served out to the characters. But it is not true that the virtuous are always attractive and interesting, or that the vicious are repulsive. A very little acquaintance with the world impresses us with the melancholy fact that many good men are far from being attractive in their manners, while some worthless scamps make the most agreeable of companions. A play where the virtuous are held up to ridicule and the vicious are made attractive and triumphant is equally inartistic and immoral; but the reverse picture, while it would not be immoral, would be equally false and ridiculous: wisdom, guiding the artist in his pictures, will steer between these two extremes, but he must be fearless and true. The novelist can describe his characters in his own language, but the dramatist has to go more directly to work and make his characters display themselves—the profligate

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must speak and act like a profligate, and that in spite of the tender ears of the censors of the stage. Coarseness and indecency ought to be avoided, but where it is indispensable for the proper finishing of the picture the true artist will not fail to make use of them. Shakespeare never drew a finer character than Falstaff, but what would he be without his coarse indecent expressions? The namby-pamby plays of our day have driven natural character from the stage, while the idiotic burlesque and ridiculous melodrama have degraded the literature of the theatre to a point never known before.

Would it not be of real service to art if the well-instructed critic would give some encouragement to those authors who try to write a better class of plays than is common on our stage now? Works of genius must of necessity be few and far between, but something better than the nonsense imported from France should surely be possible. A man may even presume to write a poor tragedy without being deserving of being held up to ridicule.