

**THE THEATRE IN ITS
RELATION
TO THE STATE**

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The theatre in its relation to the state by Sir Henry Irving

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SIR HENRY IRVING

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By SIR HENRY IRVING



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The Theatre in its Relation to the State.



IN a well-organized community^x everything has its purpose and its place; and the whirligig of time gives, in the average, to each its proper value and importance. Thus the record of any specific institution is in miniature the life, or, at least, the reflex of the life, of the community. So it is that, as a nation grows in power, it must grow in wisdom, or else the garden of its prosperity must lack those flowers of advancement and security which have their roots in content and which are watered by hope. ^x

Now in a university,—whose educational process should be as truthful in

quality as it is wide in range,—when we discuss any matter, we must do so with an equal mind. We must, when considering abstract propositions,—no matter how their working out may be hedged in with practical difficulties,—recognize the principles of the greatest and the final utility. Remember that, if premises are correct and argument be exact, what ought to be is the sure forerunner of what is. The wise and noble words of Polonius, in his exordium to his son setting forth to battle with the world, have a larger significance than may be taken in a play, or even regarding the narrow environment of the father's view:—

“ To thine own self be true ;
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man.”

I have been compelled to lay stress on exactness, because I am about to deal with a theme which is now and

again subject to violent and unreasoning attacks, chiefly from a class of persons with whom morality has the proportions of an exact science, and to whom toleration should be a final goal of intellectual ambition. Lessons of history should give to thinking people ground for thought. "It is the germ of the future which we seek in the past"; and, if I venture to call your attention to a few isolated matters of recorded history, without pretending for an instant to connect them in any way, I trust that you will not take me as even attempting to suggest an historical narrative, but only as illustrating my theme with indisputable facts.

The same word, "theatre," having been used continuously as designating places of amusement and illustration from ancient to modern times, and under conditions of infinitely varying width, so as to render impossible comparison as to aim, scope, or effort, must

of course be held responsible for much of the prejudice which exists in many places. What, for instance, can be held, in the moral aspect of the case, to be in common between the theatre of pagan Rome — where blood and lust and extravagant pandering to the worse vices of humanity were the memorable features — and the Elizabethan “theatre,” where the grave simplicity of the general audience was marked by the exceptional laughter of “some quantity of barren spectators”? Or, further, what has it in common with those well-regulated theatres of to-day, supported in some of the most enlightened of foreign countries in part by State, and maintained among English-speaking peoples by purely individual effort? Nay, further still, what is there in common with the lecture-halls of universities, of colleges and teaching institutions, which still bear the generic name of “theatre”? For all practical pur-