

**THE PAST AND PRESENT  
STATE OF DRAMATIC  
ART AND LITERATURE**

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The past and present state of dramatic art and literature by Frederick Guest Tomlins

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THE  
PAST AND PRESENT STATE  
OF  
DRAMATIC ART  
AND  
LITERATURE;  
ADDRESSED TO  
AUTHORS, ACTORS, MANAGERS,  
AND  
THE ADMIRERS  
OF  
*The Old English Drama.*

"A monopoly, it is said, hath three incidents mischievous to the public. 1. The raising of the price. 2. The commodity will not be so good. 3. The impoverishing of poor artificers."—*Tomlin's Law Dictionary.*

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THE  
PAST AND PRESENT STATE  
OF  
DRAMATIC ART AND LITERATURE.

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THE present crisis in theatrical affairs, when one of the patent theatres is about to be abandoned by an enlightened manager, and the other has been converted alternately into a menagerie and singing booth, claims the serious attention of those who prize our peculiarly national and excellent drama. To redeem it from unmerited neglect—to revive and place it on a permanent basis with other branches of the Fine Arts, must be the desire of all who have a taste for the highest class of poetry. The actors who can represent, the authors who emulate, and the audience who desire to enjoy its excellence, are now called on to make a vigorous and unanimous effort to rescue it from utter destruction.

A careful study of the history of the high romantic English drama will prove that its present degradation is entirely owing to its having been converted into a monopoly one hundred and seventy-nine years since; and to prove this assertion, which will doubtless meet with many contradictions, it will only be necessary to show the state of the art previous and subsequent to that "untoward" event.

In the year 1587, when probably the first English play

*in blank verse* was performed at a public theatre,\* commenced a series of plays, that has given to the world an original species of literature of the most wonderful range and the most brilliant kind. Projected in an age of the highest intellectual vigour, and rich in genius of every kind, it manifested itself worthy of the period. Great in legislation, in philosophy, in poetry, that age was, if possible, greater in its drama.

It were mere verbiage to make any comparison with the plays produced in the sixty years extending from 1587 to 1647 (when an ordinance of Parliament put an end to dramatic representations), and those produced in the one hundred and seventy-nine years from the restoration to the present time. The former are now the admiration of the intellectual in all countries, and the latter have not among them one (with perhaps very modern exceptions), that will in another century be thought of but as a matter of antiquarian curiosity. The reason of this extraordinary difference may be traced to very simple causes: the chief of which will be found to be the facility afforded for their representation.

In these sixty years (which may be termed the golden age of the drama), plays might be performed on very easy terms. At first, persons actually in the pay or livery of the high officers of the state, or great noblemen, performed in the ample halls of their patrons' residences, or in the inn-yards of the best hostelries. In time, playing became a separate profession, and separate houses, of dimensions small compared to our present theatres, were constructed. The first of these appears to have been "The Theater" in Shoreditch, which was certainly in existence in 1576, and possibly some few years earlier, though probably not many. At these "publique houses," as they were termed, the professional players performed, being still in accordance with the

\* Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*. Collier's *His. D. Poetry*, vol. 3, p. 112.



remaining feudal habits of the time, nominally under the control, or in the service of some nobleman, whose servants they were styled, and whose license they sheltered themselves with. To this fortunate turn of circumstances, are we indebted for the magnificent drama we possess. By the number of theatres thus established, the widest scope was given to genius, and a vigorous and healthy competition was sustained.

Without the arbitrary establishment of any critical dogmas, the dramatists of this age adhered to similar principles in the construction of their dramas. To delineate human character and passion in the loftiest poetry and by the most searching wit, was the end at which all aimed, and in which all succeeded in a greater or less degree. To be a dramatist at this period, it was necessary to be a poet and a philosopher, or at least to delineate with poetic rapture, and observe and reason with philosophic acumen.

Elizabeth and her statesmen were too wisely liberal to seek to cramp with unnecessary legislation this order of things; and we find that in a population not a twentieth of the present, there were not less than ten theatres open at once, at all of which the high didactic drama could be, and was performed. It seems impossible to make any exact statement of the number of theatres existing during this period, or of the actors and authors connected with them. In 1586, however, there were said to be two hundred performers in London. And it must be remembered, that inferior actors frequently doubled and trebled their parts, so that the quantum for each company was about ten men, and two or three youths, to enact both male and female characters.

Of the vast number of plays produced in this sixty years, some idea may be gained from its being proved by the Manager Henslowe's note-book, that one hundred and ten new plays were produced by four companies (and those small ones) in six years; and in the following six years, one

hundred and sixty, either original or revived with additions. "A remarkable and unquestionable proof of the prolific talents of our old dramatists," as Mr. Collier justly observes, and a singular substantiation of the principle that free competition will alone produce excellence and quantity. There were also thirty popular writers in the pay of Henslowe at one time, not including the more generally known names of Shakspeare, Marlowe, Greene, Peele, Massinger, Beaumont, Fletcher, and many others.\* It also must be taken into account that not only were authors numerous, but they were equally prolific. Shakspeare left 37 known plays, Ben Jonson, 18 plays and 37 masques, Beaumont and Fletcher, 53 plays, Chapman wrote and assisted in 22, Chettle in 38, Munday in 15 (known), Middleton, 30, Massinger, 37, Ford, 20, Rowley, 20; Thomas Heywood in no less than the extraordinary number of 220, and Shirley (the last of the race), not less than 40. Besides these, there were numerous authors, as the previous list of thirty will in part show, whose works have only partially come down to us. Hundreds of plays were never printed, and of those which were, a great part have been irrecoverably lost. Even with the imperfect knowledge we can gain of this period, it may be safely stated that in this sixty years, more plays (certainly of five act

\* The following is the list given by Mr. Collier :

Anthony Munday.	Ben Jonson.
Henry Chettle.	Thomas Downton.
Michael Drayton.	William Rankins.
George Chapman.	Thomas Heywood.
Thomas Dekker.	Samuel Rowley.
William Haughton.	William Bird.
Robert Lee.	Edward Juby.
Robert Wilson.	William Boyle.
Richard Hathways.	William Pett.
Martin Slaughter.	William Hawkins.
Henry Porter.	Anthony Wadson.
John Day.	Wentworth Smith.
John Singer.	Charles Massey.
Thomas Middleton.	John Webster.
Thomas Robinson.	Robert Shaws.

plays) were produced than in the hundred and seventy-nine years since the Restoration.

All these dramas were acted; and that they had an opportunity of being so, is the sole cause of their production. Had the performance of the intellectual drama, as at present, been confined by law to two theatres, it would have been utterly impossible they should have been produced. Literature might have been earlier turned into the stream of novel-writing, or it might have been destroyed altogether; but it could not have displayed itself in the magnificent mode it has, and England would not have had the benefit nor the honour of possessing a series of classics as original as they are excellent. Had there not been a ready mart for their works—had they not had the stimulus of competition and the chance of success before them—no writers could have devoted themselves as they did to their works. Had there only been a possibility of two successful plays being produced in a season; had they been compelled to contend with the vagaries of monopolists; the rivalry of beasts: the interests of popular actors: had incompetent rank overborne them: had they had to wait seasons for the acceptance or even perusal of their dramas; and to compose not only to the peculiarities of actors, but to the debased taste of an audience vitiated by scenery and show; they would not, they could not, have left us what they have. They might have given us a different literature, or they might have merged in the mass as wool-combers, bricklayers, stewards, lawyers, parsons, or schoolmasters: but they never would have formed that illustrious congregation of poets, the dramatists of England.

It does not fall within the intent of this address to trace the history of the stage, but only to contrast its state before and after it was made a monopoly. Let us now view its state after this was effected.

By letters patent, dated 15 January, 1662, directed to