

**THE STAGE: ADDRESS DELIVERED
BY MRS. HENRY IRVING AT THE
PERRY BARR INSTITUTE, NEAR
BIRMINGHAM ON MARCH 6TH,
1878**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649341696

The Stage: Address delivered by Mrs. Henry Irving at the perry barr incitute, near Birmingham on March 6th, 1878 by Mrs. Henry Irving

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

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THE STAGE.

ADDRESS

DELIVERED BY

MR. HENRY IRVING

AT THE

PERRY BARR INSTITUTE, NEAR BIRMINGHAM,

ON

MARCH 6th. 1878.



*Any profit derived from the sale of this Pamphlet will be appropriated to
the Building Fund of the Perry Barr Institute.*

LONDON:

WILLIAM RIDGWAY, 169, PICCADILLY, W.

1878.

Price Sixpence.

Malone A. 251.

ADDRESS.

STANDING here, as I do, in succession to distinguished men with whom it would be arrogance to compare myself, it is natural that a feeling of affectionate reverence should come over me for the art to which my life has been devoted. To it I owe all. To it, not least of all, I owe the honour of speaking to you to-day. It were strange if I could forget, or at such moment prefer any other theme than the immemorial and perpetual association of the stage with the noblest instincts and occupations of the human mind.

If I talked to you of poetry, must I not remember how to the measure of its lofty music the theatre has in almost all ages set the grandest of dramatic conceptions? If I dilated upon literature, must I not recall that of all the amusements by which men in various states of society have solaced their leisure and refreshed their energies, the acting of plays is the one that has never yet, even for a day, been divorced from literary taste and skill? If I discoursed of patriotism, I could not but reflect how grandly the boards have been

trod by personifications of heroic love of country. There is no subject of human thought that by common consent is deemed ennobling that has not ere now, and from period to period, been illustrated in the bright vesture, and received expression from the glowing language of theatrical representation. What should I do then, an actor privileged to address such an institution as yours, but magnify my proper office, and, if necessary, vindicate my art from imputations and detraction?

To efficiency in the art of acting, there should come a congregation of fine qualities. There should be considerable though not always systematic culture. There should be delicate instincts of taste cultivated, consciously or unconsciously, to a degree of extreme and subtle nicety. There should be a power at once refined and strong, of both perceiving and expressing to others the significance of language, so that neither shades nor masses of meaning—so to speak—may be either lost or exaggerated. Above all, there should be a sincere and abounding sympathy with all that is good and great and inspiring. That sympathy, most certainly, must be under the control and manipulation of art, but it must be none the less real and generous, and the artist who is a mere artist will stop short of the highest moral effects of his craft.

Yet the profession of which this is true has lived, and not merely in Puritan countries or countries

where what religion there is is Puritan, has lived with many under a moral ban. There are reasons for this—reasons based in the tendencies of art-life, in the forbidding tenacity of sanctimonious prejudices, and in the lower exigencies of an art which is also a costly and risky enterprise, nightly dependent on the favour and the money of the public. But the principal reason is one which certainly does not entitle the world to judge harshly of the players.

If those who live to please must please to live, their power of sustaining the taste and tone of their patrons is sharply and narrowly limited by the very conditions of their existence and their work. Tracing the history of the drama, it would be easy to show that, though in reaction the stage may have aggravated the vices of society, it has always been society that has first vitiated the stage, and that actors and managers have been slow rather than quick in consenting to that debasement of their art for which a depraved public appetite has too often craved.

Before defending the moral influence of the theatre, however, it may be necessary to dispose of a most depreciatory view of it which lies nearer the root of the question of its utility. From a variety of causes has arisen a foolish inclination to undervalue acting as an interpreting and illustrative art—to be sceptical as to its inspirations—to question the service which it renders in realizing

to the mind and the heart the conceptions of great poets. It is thought by some to be a mark of superiority to say that one appreciates Shakspeare far more in reading him than in seeing him acted. Well, this is a cheap badge of superiority, whatever may be its worth. No one need be without the gratification of self-esteem, and if a man can worship himself on a pedestal at the inappreciable cost of a conceited and silly delusion by all means let him enjoy his inexpensive privilege. But what does it amount to ?

It clearly assumes, to begin with, that an unprepared reader, whose mind is usually full of far other things, will see, on the instant, all that has been developed in hundreds of years by the members of a studious and enthusiastic profession. It should surely be allowed that a man whose business it is to comprehend and represent dramatic authors may have acquired, in the mere routine of his business, at least such aptitude for perceiving points and bearings as we should concede to a conveyancer who had spent his life in scrutinizing title-deeds. And if you urge that such an actor will be exceedingly conventional and follow well-beaten tracks, at least let it be allowed, that his favourite traditions have been arrived at long ago by the study and practice of trained intellects, and that the tracks he treads have been marked out with the best available skill and judgment and are the survivals of a process by which the stage is

constantly effacing by disuse the mistakes of former times. I am the last man to admire a slavish or even an unthinking adherence to the interpretations and conceptions of tradition. My own conviction is that there are few characters or passages of our great dramatists which will not repay original study. But at least we must recognize the vast advantages with which a trained actor, impregnated with all the practical and critical skill of his profession up to the date at which he appears, addresses himself to the interpretation of any great poetical name, even if he have no originality whatever.

But there is something more than this in acting. There is a natural dramatic fertility in every one who has the smallest histrionic gift; so that as soon as he knows the author's text and obtains self-possession, and feels at home in a part without being too familiar with it, the mere automatic action of rehearsing and playing it at once begins to place the author in new lights and to give the personage being played an individuality partly independent of, and yet consistent with, and rendering more powerfully visible the dramatist's conception. It is the vast power a good actor has in this way which has led the French to speak of creating a part when they mean its being first played; and French authors are so conscious of the extent and value of this co-operation of actors with them that they have never objected to the phrase, but, on the

contrary, are uniformly lavish in their homage to the artists who have created on the boards the parts which they themselves have created on paper.

By no one has this aspect of the player's art been more admirably exhibited than by Mr. Theodore Martin, whose sensibilities on the subject may well be chivalrously quickened by affectionate admiration for his wife, a most distinguished actress. He has told us, in the *Quarterly Review*, that without the living comment and interpretation of fine acting, dramatic literature in its highest forms must be a sealed book to us. "We may indeed," says he, "think that we see all the significance of a great conception. We may imagine, as so many people obviously do, that actual impersonation will never make us better acquainted with Imogen, Rosalind, Portia, Othello, Macbeth or Coriolanus than our own unaided study has done. There can be no greater mistake. Plays are written, not to be read, but to be seen and heard. No reader, be his imagination ever so active, can therefore thoroughly understand a finely-conceived character or a great play until he has seen them on the stage. The dramatic poet himself may be independent of what it is the office of the stage to perform in giving completeness to his conception, but no one else can be. He knows that words can never paint the passions of the soul, whether in sun-