

# THE REVIVAL OF THE POETIC DRAMA

BY BRANDER MATTHEWS

THE divorce between poetry and the drama is acknowledged to be most unfortunate for both parties to the matrimonial contract; and those of us who have a warm regard for either of them cannot help hoping that they may be persuaded soon to make up their quarrel and get married again. The theatre is flourishing more abundantly than ever before; and the prose-drama of modern life, dealing soberly and sincerely with the present problems of existence, has at last got its roots into the soil, and is certain soon to yield a richer fruitage. Perhaps it is even not too much to foresee the possibility of a speedy outflowing of the drama in the next half-century, in the English language as well as in the other tongues. In all the earlier epochs of dramatic expansion, in Athens, in London, and in Madrid, in France under Louis XIV and again under Louis Philippe, the masterpieces of the art have been truly poetic, in theme and in treatment. Have we any reason to suppose that our coming drama will also be poetic, both in essentials and in externals?

If the law of supply and demand were as potent in the arts as it is in commerce we should be justified in expecting that return of the poetic drama which is eagerly awaited by all who cherish the muses. But when we station Sister Anne on the watchtower and when we keep on asking if she sees any one coming, we ought to have in our own minds a clear vision of the rescuer we are looking for. When we cry aloud for the poetic drama, what is it that we stand ready to welcome? Of course, we do not mean that bastard hybrid, the so-called closet-drama, the play that is not intended to be played. A mere poem in dialogue, not destined for performance by actors, in a theatre, and be-

fore an audience, may have interest of its own to the chosen few who can persuade themselves that they like that sort of thing; but it is not what the rest of us want. The poetic drama, in its most splendid periods, has always been adjusted to the playhouse of its own time. It has always been dramatic, first of all, and its poetry has been ancillary to its action. In the theatre, and not only in the library, do we desire now to greet the noble muse of tragedy with her singing robes about her.

The closet-drama is like poverty in that it is always with us; and it is far removed from the poetic drama which we hoped to see revived in our language. But what is the exact nature of this poetic drama that we long for? It is not — or at least it ought not to be — a sort of dramatized historical novel, full of high deeds and pretty words, a costume-play in blank verse, as empty of true poetic inspiration as the *Virginus* of Sheridan Knowles or the *Richelieu* of Bulwer-Lytton. In the illuminating address on "Literature and the Modern Drama" which Mr. Henry Arthur Jones delivered at Yale in the fall of 1906, he asserted that playgoers on both sides of the Atlantic have a notion that a costume-play, with its scenes laid anywhere except in the last half-century and its personages talking "a patchwork diction, compounded of every literary style from Chaucer to a White-chapel costermonger," has a literary distinction and a profound significance "which rank it immeasurably above the mere prose play of modern everyday life," and which give to the ravished spectator an elevation of mind and "a vague but gratifying sense of superiority."

Probably this notion is to be found in the heads of not a few playgoers, pleased

with the belief that they are revealing themselves possessed of fine literary discrimination when they pay their money to behold a costume-play in blank verse. But the clothes of long ago and the lines of ten syllables have no power in themselves to confer literary merit, even when they are united. These are but the trappings of the muse, often laid aside when she warms to her singing. They may deck a play wholly artificial, unreal, false to life, — and therefore wholly devoid of literature. It ought to be evident to all of us that an unpretending farce, which has happened to catch and to fix a few of the foibles of the moment, is really more worthy of serious critical consideration than a tawdry melodrama, bombasted with swelling sonorities and peopled by heroes strutting in the toga or stiff in chain-armor. It ought to be evident also that this farce, in so far as it has its roots in reality, is a better augury for the future of the drama and may have even more of the genuine literary quality than the more pretentious costume-play in blank verse, illumined by no gleam of the light that never was on land or sea.

Poetry, essential poetry, is not a matter of versifying only. Many a play in verse is prosy, whether written in French alexandrines or in English pentameters. Many a play in humble prose is shot through and through with the radiance of poesy. Perhaps the most truly poetic dramas of the end of the nineteenth century are the little pieces of M. Maeterlinck; and neither the *Intruder* nor *Peleas and Melisande* is in verse. Certainly the most poetic plays of the middle of the nineteenth century are the delicious fantasies of Alfred de Musset; and *On ne badine pas avec l'amour*, and its fellows, did not need the aid of verse. And it would be easy to give many another example. Aldrich's *Judith*, for instance, which is in verse, is not only less dramatic, it is in a way less poetic than his *Mercedes*, which is in prose. More significant still is the fact that the most charmingly lyric of all the comedies of Shake-

peare, *As You Like It*, filled with the fragrance of young love and of perennial springtime, is very largely in prose. So is the sleep-walking scene of *Lady Macbeth*, tense with tragic emotion lifted to the loftier altitudes of poetry.

It may not be too bold to suggest that Shakespeare knew what he was about. He had the right instinctive feeling; and he varied his instrument as the spirit moved him. Nothing will better repay study than the skill with which Shakespeare, in *Julius Cæsar*, for example, commingled blank verse and rhythmic prose and the plainer speech of every day, giving the verse to his nobler characters, Brutus and Cassius and Antony, letting the cadence of balanced sentences fall from the lips of those less important, and bestowing the simplest words on the mob of ruder citizens. A modern dramatic poet could scarcely have refrained from sustaining the whole of *As You Like It* and *Macbeth* and *Julius Cæsar* at the higher level of blank verse. And even Shakespeare's contemporaries had not his instinctive art. Massinger, for one, often used verse in plays of contemporary life, such as the *New Way to pay Old Debts*, which demanded rather the realistic directness of prose. This has led astray so many of the later imitators of the Elizabethans, — Sheridan Knowles, for example, whose *Hunchback* is in the blankest of verse.

The dramatic poets of the other modern languages have sometimes fallen into the same error. Augier's *Paul Forestier* deals with a highly emotional situation in modern life; but it loses more than it gains from its verse. Ibsen eschewed verse after he had written *Love's Comedy*, which is the least significant of all his modern plays; and he declared that prose was not only more appropriate to plays of contemporary character but incomparably more difficult. And who would venture to deny the title of poet to Ibsen? There is a stern and austere poetry even in *Ghosts*, while *When We Dead Awaken* is an almost ethereal alle-

gory. To recall these instances is to suggest a question. Do we not need to broaden our conception of poetry and at the same time to narrow it? We ought to be able to see that *When We Dead Awaken* and the *Intruder* and *On ne badine pas* are truly poetry, although in prose, whereas *Richelieu* and *Virginus* are emphatically prose, although in verse. It is not the cowl that makes the monk, said the mediæval proverb. Perhaps it may seem like bad manners to look Pegasus in the mouth; but it is good sense to see that he is entered for the right race before we bestride him.

Although the dramatic poets of other modern languages have also made the mistake of employing verse when prose would have served their purpose better, it is the dramatic poets of the English language who have most often been guilty of the blunder. And this is due, no doubt, to the weight of the example set by the Elizabethan dramatists. What these earlier poets did spontaneously, the later bards have striven to do by main strength. Most of the Elizabethans used blank verse indiscriminately, whether their theme was poetic or not. Even Shakespeare employed it in handling subjects essentially unpoetic, as in *All's Well* and *Measure for Measure*. It is a question whether the overwhelming influence of the Elizabethans has not hampered the true development of a later English poetic drama. They set a standard; and they have been copied in their defects no less than in their virtues. Indeed, their defects have proved far easier of imitation than their finer qualities. Many of these failings are due to the fact that the Elizabethan drama is not really modern; it is semi-mediæval, being composed in accordance with the primitive conditions of the theatre of those spacious days, only a little more advanced than the platform in the market-place that served for the clumsier mysteries.

Our modern theatres, for which our poets must write, since the semi-mediæval playhouse has ceased to be, are very

different; they are roofed and lighted; they have a stage set with painted scenery and seen through a picture-frame; and they impose conditions on the modern playwright very different from those which the Elizabethan playhouse imposed on the Elizabethan playwright. This may be a gain or it may be a loss; beyond all question it is a fact. Just as the drama of the Athenians would have been a bad model for the Elizabethans, so the drama of the Elizabethans is a bad model for the poets of to-day. This is not only because the earlier English plays were conditioned by the earlier English theatre but also because certain mediæval traditions survived, with the result that much that was not truly dramatic was tolerated in a play, and even expected. The stage might then be on occasion a pulpit or a lecture-platform, and the play might be also a rival of a dime novel or of a yellow journal. The absence of scenery tempted the poet to passages of pure description, just as the presence of actors who had been choir-boys tempted him to lyrics introduced often for their own sake. Nowadays the drama has shed these extraneous elements and is sufficient unto itself. The actors of our time have very rarely had a training as singers also; and the scenery of our time renders it needless for a poet to indulge in description.

The drama has cast out all that is undramatic and it has now no room for anything but the action and the characters. It is compacter than ever before; and it rejects not only description but also narrative. Its duty is to show what was done and the consequences of the deed; and it has neither time nor space for narrative for its own sake, however beautiful in itself. Here is one weakness of modern poets who write plays, — Mr. Stephen Phillips, for one. His verse is often epic or lyric or idyllic rather than dramatic. He is felicitous in polished narrative and in suggestive description, but he more rarely achieves the stark boldness of vital drama, when the speaker has no time and

no temper for fanciful comparisons or adroit alliterations, and when his phrase ought to flash out suddenly like a sword from its scabbard. His lines have often a beauty of their own, but it is a conscious and elaborate beauty, out of place when the action tightens and a human soul must be bared by a word. They lack that unforced simplicity, that colloquial ease, that inevitable naturalness which grip us in the great moments of Shakespeare.

How unadorned are the words of Viola and how full of meaning and of melody also, when she has told the Duke of her alleged sister's unspoken love. He asks,

But died thy sister of her love, my boy ?

And she answers, —

I am all the daughters of my father's house,  
And all the brothers too; and yet I know not.  
Sir, shall I to this lady ?

Consider also how free from fine language and phrase-making, how completely devoid of simile and metaphor, and yet how vitally poetic, is the parting of Romeo from Juliet: —

*Juliet.* I have forgot why I did call thee back.

*Romeo.* Let me stand here till thou remember it.

*Juliet.* I shall forget, to have thee still stand there,

Remembering how I love thy company.

*Romeo.* And I'll still stay, to have thee still forget,

Forgetting any other home but this.

The poetic drama which we are hoping for is not the closet-drama; it is not the mere costume-play in blank verse; it is not the empty imitation of the Elizabethan formula. Then what is it, if it is none of these things? It is a play composed in accordance with the conditions of the modern theatre, whether in verse or in prose matters little, but poetic in theme and poetic in treatment, as well as dramatic in theme and dramatic in treatment. It is a play at once truly poetic and truly dramatic, — only this and nothing more. It will not be a play like several of Hugo's, in which a framework

of melodrama is draped with lyric splendor. It will not be a play with a commonplace subject decked with fine phrases and stuccoed with hand-made verses. It must be lifted up into poetry by the haunting beauty of its story. It cannot be made vitally poetic by any merely lyrical decoration. The story need not be strange or exotic or unusual; it may even be a tale of to-day and of every day, one of the old, old tales that are forever renewing their youth. Dramatic art has a right to follow the practice of pictorial art, when, in Whistler's sincere words, it was "seeking and finding the beautiful in all conditions and all times, as did her high priest Rembrandt when he saw picturesque grandeur in the Jews' quarter of Amsterdam and lamented not that its inhabitants were not Greeks."

The poetic drama which we are awaiting eagerly must be keenly dramatic and truly poetic; but it must not plead its poetry as an excuse for mere foolishness, and it must not give us characters who are not governed by common sense at the crucial moments of the action. The principle by which the dramatic poet must always be guided has been clearly laid down by Professor Lounsbury in his illuminating analysis of *A Blot in the Scutcheon*: "The plot may be what you please. The story upon which it is based may be so far from probable that it verges on the impossible. But this, while objectionable, can be pardoned. What is without excuse is to find the characters acting without adequate motive; or, if the motive be adequate, to find them acting in the most incomprehensible way for rational beings." The acute critic then pointed out that Shakespeare is almost always unerring in his observance of this dramatic propriety. "The plot of his play may rest upon a story which is simply incredible, as is notably the case in the *Merchant of Venice*. All that Shakespeare asks is that the story shall be one which his hearers are willing to accept as likely to happen, whether in itself likely or not. This granted, there is no

further demand upon our trust in him as opposed to our judgment. We say of every situation: This is the natural way for the characters as here portrayed to think and feel and act. The motives are sufficient; the conduct that follows is what we have a right to expect."

When this test is applied to Browning's play we are told that "the characters throughout scrupulously avoid doing what they might reasonably be expected to do; while the things they might naturally be expected to avoid are the very things which they do not seem to conceive the idea of refraining from doing. The play consequently violates every motive which is supposed to influence human conduct; it outrages every probability which is supposed to characterize human action." In other words, Browning in *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon* has a perfectly possible story, which he has chosen to people with characters arbitrarily unnatural in their conduct, whereas Shakespeare in the *Merchant of Venice* has an almost impossible story, carried on by characters unfailingly natural. In Browning's play, "we are in a world of unreal beings, powerfully portrayed; for the situations are exciting, and the pathos of the piece is harrowing. But the action lies out of the realm of the reality it purports to represent, and therefore out of the realm of the highest art," — that realm of the highest art which easily includes Shakespeare's play in spite of the incredibility of its story.

Abundance of poetry, of power, of pathos will not excuse paucity of common sense in the conduct of the personages of the play. No bravura fervor of phrase will palliate sheer foolishness of deed. This defect may be more or less hidden from us when we read the play in the library, but it stands out undisguised and naked when we see the story bodied forth on the stage. There is then no excuse for any effort to apologize for it or to gloss it over. It is fatal, for the massed spectators in the theatre have sharp eyes and plain tongues and they resent every

effort to make them admire a play which they find revolting to their everyday knowledge of human nature.

Nothing is more unfortunate for the future of the poetic drama than the frequent attempts of "superior persons" to dragoon the ordinary playgoer into the theatre to behold a play which he is certain not to enjoy. He resents being berated for not admiring that which has annoyed him by its artificiality or bored him by its clumsiness.

The attitude taken by many merely literary critics after performances of *Pippa Passes* or the *Sunken Bell* is distinctly harmful to the cause they have at heart. If these performances wearied the spectator, as they indisputably did, and if the spectator is scolded because he has failed to appreciate these alleged poetic dramas, the spectator is very likely to stay away the next time these merely literary critics seek to browbeat him into the theatre to see another poetic drama. Perhaps it is just as well for us all to remember not only that the playgoer knows what he likes, but also that he knows very definitely what he does not like. When he goes to the playhouse he wants to see a play peopled with recognizable human beings and affording him the kind of pleasure he expects in the theatre. He has no objection to poetry, if poetry is added to the play. He rejects poetry unhesitatingly, when he finds it proffered as a substitute for a play. He is in the present very much what he was in the past. The playgoers of Shakespeare's time did not have to be coerced into paying to see *As You Like It* and *Hamlet*; they went gladly, for they had been told that they would get their money's worth. The playgoers of Mr. Barrie's time have flocked to see *Peter Pan*, a truly poetic play, compounded of fantasy and reality.

And the example of Mr. Barrie is suggestive; he has succeeded on the stage because he has mastered its mysteries. We cannot expect a rebirth of the poetic drama until our poets turn playwrights or our playwrights develop into poets.

The poets must go to school in the theatre and learn the craft of the playmaker in his own workshop, as Mr. Barrie has done and as Victor Hugo did when he set himself to spy out the secret of the success attained by the melodramatists of the unliterary theatres. For a poet to compose a poem in dialogue, and then expect that some adroit stage-manager can lick it into shape and make an actable play out of it, — this is very much as if he should ask the monthly nurse to put a backbone into the baby after it is born. A poetic play must be dramatic in its conception, or it will never be a play at all. The fundamental principles of dramaturgy are not really difficult to acquire; and if a poet has it in him to be a playwright he ought to be able to get hold of the essentials of the new art without a prolonged apprenticeship. But he needs to feel, first of all, that it is an art, a very special art, closely connected with the actual theatre. If he begins by assuming an attitude of haughty disdain, he is not likely to find profit in his venture.

While some poets will choose to master the craft of the playwright, some playwrights will prove themselves possessed of the faculty divine. We are accustomed to consider the great dramatists primarily

as poets, and we do not often look closely enough into their careers to observe that some of them began as playmakers, pure and simple. Shakespeare, for one, and Molière for another, were at first merely professional playwrights, composing their earliest pieces to please contemporary playgoers and revealing in these earliest pieces scarcely a foretaste of the abundant poetry which enriches their later and greater plays. No examination of the firstlings of their muse would have warranted any prediction of their extraordinary development in their riper years. And perhaps some of the professional playwrights of the twentieth century will rise to loftier heights as they grow in power and in ambition. They may burgeon into verse when the fascination of a truly poetic theme shall some day seize them.

But whether the revival of the poetic drama shall be due to the development of the playwright into a poet or to the education of the poet to be a playwright, it will not come unless all who are anxious to hasten its arrival firmly grasp the fundamental fact that whenever and wherever a poetic drama has existed it has been both dramatic and poetic, and that it has also been dramatic even more than it has been poetic.



# CONFESSIONS OF A RAILROAD SIGNALMAN

## II

BY J. O. FAGAN

THE problem of safety in railroad travel has been discussed, from widely differing points of view, by many conscientious investigators. The methods of these writers in marshaling facts and drawing conclusions are usually identical. The formula consists of a variety of accidents, a variety of causes, and a variety of possible or proposed remedies. For results, up to date, we have a library of information but not a suspicion of improvement in the record of preventable fatalities. Meanwhile, in the public mind there is confusion of ideas and considerable doubt as to the practical outcome of all this discussion. This is a natural state of affairs, for the reason that the only factor in the situation which is constant, and about which there is no difference of opinion, is the impotency of railroad people in coping with the difficulties.

Now, after all that has been spoken and written on the subject of efficient and safe railroad service, the problem remains, as at the beginning, essentially personal, social, and ethical in its nature. Nearly all questions in regard to it must, sooner or later, be thought out in this direction by railroad employees and managers. We may continue to work over and reconstruct our rules and to multiply our safety devices until we compel trains to creep from station to station; yet the problem will remain unsolved, the needless and disgraceful sacrifice of life will continue, until trainmen, enginemen, and managers put their heads together and agree to adopt a new code of railroad morals. My meaning when I allude to railroad morals should be clearly understood.

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On nearly all railroads a given rule is obeyed at one point and disregarded at another, on account of different sets of conditions. This conduct leads to accidents when men who have habitually disobeyed the regulations at points where such action is harmless undertake to behave in the same way under conditions when a strict observance of the rules is vitally important. Generally speaking, managers are cognizant of this state of affairs, and thus in a measure they are morally to blame for it; but I do not think that they realize the extent of the evil, for the reason that any organized out-of-door supervision is unknown, and thus the report of an accident, that is to say, the result of these practices, is usually the first and only information on the subject that reaches the manager's office. The blame for accidents that happen in this way cannot be said to rest upon any particular class of employees or to depend upon their intelligence or length of service. Among the culprits you will find some of the oldest and most experienced men as well as some of the greenest. This goes to show that the trouble is inherent in the system, and a part of the everyday life and character of armies of railroad men.

But in a straightforward investigation of this nature it is particularly desirable to get hold of all the facts that can be used in any way to throw light on the situation, and there is only one method, as yet untried, for properly securing and emphasizing these facts. Let us call this the confessional method. In the hands of a competent witness it can be depended upon to furnish us with all the information necessary for a thorough

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