

THE PLAY AND THE PLAYGOER  
of  
YESTERDAY, TO-DAY AND TO-MORROW.

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1.

The Play and the Playgoer  
of  
Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow.

From time immemorial poets and story-tellers, satirists and historians have looked upon the drama as a natural means of expression and the most forcible way of bringing their thoughts and theories before the people. As the entire art of the stage must necessarily be aimed directly at the hearts of the audience the relation between the audience, actor and the dramatist is the very life and breath of all stage art. It is a tide of living influence, always working for better and for worse; for by its very nature, the drama is an accurate and direct reflection of the thought of the people. Here we have a lasting art for man needs pleasure in some form or another in order to bear the bitterness and insipidity of his daily life and the stage, as nothing else, offers him an elevated pleasure in sympathy with human fortunes. Instead of allowing him to remain an isolated being, it attracts him by its pictures of human life to a sympathetic interest in his fellow man. As Victor Hugo has said, "The Theatre is a ~~small~~ crucible of civilization. It is a place of human communion. All its phases need to be studied. It is in the theatre that the public soul is formed."

As we study the play and the playgoer of to-day and the play and the playgoer of yesterday we shall see that it is the thought dominant in the minds of the people which governs and moulds its theatre. When the nation deteriorates, the theatre does also, and only in so far as the community becomes enlightened can there be hope for its theatre.

Strange to say, in the very beginning of the history of the drama we have that form of drama towards which we are striving to-day, the kind whose purpose it is to elevate and educate the masses. The theatre was for the Greeks the heart of national life, to which philosophers like Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides gave their best writing for all, inspiring all. They interpreted an eager people to themselves. The ideal of the Greek stage as an educational and religious force, dealt with themes that were universal, and because of this the Greek drama is lasting. In "Antigone," a typical play, we have the universal theme of love for kin, with the moral that love begins at home. The citizen of Athens was an enthusiastic playgoer, and in his great out-of-door theatre he drew both strength and amusement. Like the modern he came to understand and to enjoy, and the music, even as to-day, was not used merely to fill in time but to put him in the mood to enjoy the play. He needed no scenery except that of nature, no costuming but that which he everyday saw about him. He was content to come and be instructed as well as amused, and his attitude toward the theatre was one of great respect.

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Like the Greek the English drama had its beginning in religion. In the 12th century, Old Testament stories, New Testament stories, miracles and the lives of the saints formed the themes of the plays which were presented in the church yards and inside of the churches on the great holy days of the year. In these plays the characters of Jesus and his disciples, and the comic character of the devil were presented before the people in all reverence. The attitude of the earliest English audience was one of deep devotion, and the characters represented inspired sympathy, and awe, but never ridicule. "It is certain that our ancestors intended no sort of impiety by their monstrous and unnatural mixtures," writes one critic. The solemnity of the subject covered or excused all incongruities. But rude and ridiculous as these plays were, they nevertheless had a great influence over the characters of the people. They directed the public attention to spectacles in which the mind was concerned, and created a regard for other means of entertainment than those of bodily strength. Such plays as "Nice Wanton" taught the people to care for their children; such as "The Miracle of St. Catherines" brought before their eyes the lives and miracles of saints, teaching them as no priest ever could, for always:

"Things seen are mightier than things heard."

As time went on the great force of expression of the drama became more and more recognized and the people demanded a greater

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range of subject. Naturally the earliest subjects chosen were those of English domestic life. In 1552 we have the first English comedies "Ralph Roister Doister" and "Gammer Gurtoŋns Needle." These merely amused and entertained, while the Miracle and Morality plays<sup>with</sup> supplied the moral influence.

For many years the drama remained in this condition until there came that great age of progress under Queen Elizabeth. In this age we marvel at the advance of both dramatist and people. In the first part of the reign we have a popular drama written for unlettered audiences, treating local superstitions and folk-lore and drawing material from all sources. There were also academic plays written by scholars and presented in the courts. There was a great need for a drama which would appeal to all classes, and in the third decade of the reign, the romantic school grew up led by Greene, Peele and Marlowe. In the light of contemporary life, with its spirit of adventure exploration, the belief in the supernatural, the bluntness of manner and the coarseness of speech, the dramas glow with new meaning. Especially in the latter part of the reign with the queen as its patron saint, the drama had full sway. Leaders of society encouraged it, aiding poor dramatists, and petty prejudice were overcome. The people were no longer satisfied with only miracles and moralities, nor ridiculous comedies or nonsensical farces, they demanded life such as we find it portrayed by Shakespeare the perfecter of the great Elizabethan drama.

The plays dealt with the fashions, the whims, the faults of the day, there being no newspapers and few books to bring the news before the people. There was no event too trifling, no person too august for its use. Because of the thirst for adventure, a popular demand arose for the dramatic treatment of history, and was met by dramatists whose plays, filled with praises of civil and religious liberty and the celebration of national glories, reached the hearts of all the people reacting on the spirit of the age deepening and broadening its patriotic sympathies. Thru such plays as "Edward II," and "Richard III," the people were made familiar with the history of their own country. There was a variety of subjects great enough to please everyone. The court was enchanted with the charming, witty, delicate humor of Lyly, the common people found pleasure and recreation in such natural writers as Greene, whose vivid sense of pathos and beauty of homely scenes and thorough enjoyment of English rural life, appealed strongly to them, <sup>others</sup> took delight in the blood and thunder Spanish tragedy of Thomas Kyd. And all found something in the plays of William Shakespeare. His ~~work~~ work it was to draw from the best of his predecessors and breathe into all the breath of life, giving the drama heart and soul. His masterly pen portrayed men and women of all classes with equal truth. Even to-day in our complex civilization, there is no development of passion, or character, or trait of human nature, no social evolution, that does not find expression somewhere in those marvellous plays.



All classes helped to make the theatre the great school and mirror of the age. Queen, courtiers and common people alike attended it. One critic describes the playgoer of the time:

"Here we have nature in all her fulness, the whole man, mind, heart, body, senses, with noble and fine aspirations." There was no one dominant passion to either exalt or degrade him. He differed from the refined and educated playgoer of to-day in that his speech was often coarse and manner exceedingly blunt, and this is reflected in the dramas. Thus he could take in and appreciate and enjoy just about everything, from the shameless debauchery to the most divine love, passing quickly from one mood to another. One may compare the Elizabethan playgoer with a young man just entering into life, wanting everything, interested in all.

All classes of men and women crowded the theatres from pit to gallery, enthusiastic, eager to be entertained. Before the play began they amused themselves in many ways. For some it was the meeting place, men and ~~women~~women played cards, chatted and smoked. Some brought books to pass the time by reading. What a delightful atmosphere for the production of one of Shakespeare's love plays, such as "Romeo and Juliet"! Some spectators brought note-books in order to jot down passages from the play, some thru interest in, others thru enmity for, the author. The playgoer came to see the play above all, not because of the scenery, the costuming or the worth of any particular actor. People did not have the comforts of to-day, for the theatres were very crude. Yet how they flocked there!

There were many disadvantages that one is surprised at the enthusiasm displayed. The needful dramatic illusion was obviously evoked in the playgoer of the past with an ease that is unknown to the present patroness of the playhouse. He was able to realize the dramatic force of the poet's work without any or any but the slightest aid outside the words of the play. To-day, seldom any excepting the student of ancient drama is interested in a play presented without scenery or elaborate costuming. In Shakespeare's time, merely a sign with the name of the scene was given, announcing what the imagination of the spectator was to supply. All imperfections had to be pieced out with his thoughts. In the early part of Elizabeth's reign, Sir Phillip Sidney writes:

"Now you shall have three ladies walk to gather flowers, and then we must believe the stage to be a garden. By and by we hear news of a shipwreck in the same place; then we are to blame, if we accept it not for a rock. Upon the back of that comes out a hideous monster with fire and smoke; and then the miserable beholders are bound to take it for a cave; while in the mean time two armies fly in, represented with four swords and bucklers and then what hard heart will not receive it for a pitched field?"

Could much more have been expected? But in the later years of Elizabeth's reign, the people became more and more interested in

the drama as art and Opera Houses were built and scenery and costuming were provided.

Such dramatists as Ben Jonson and Beaumont and Fletcher were more popular than Shakespeare with the audience. His plays it is true, proved to be more lasting, but "Everyman in his Humor," with its realistic types of character amused for the time being and "The Maid's Tragedy" was popular because of its tender sweetness and pathos, and its true reflection of the manners and thoughts of the people and times. With such an encouraging leader as the Queen, always urging them on, poets and dramatists gave their best. But later sovereigns did not take the same interest in the drama which she had, and as a result the drama slowly and surely deteriorated.

During the reign of Charles I, the drama had fallen to its lowest depths. Shakespeare had been banished from the stage being considered too tame to suit the tastes of a lewd public and a still more immoral court. The wonderful dramas of the Elizabethan times no longer pleased the public, who rejected all that was noble and educational. Plays which were presented were vulgar, society was scandalized and law and religion were set at naught. A good play, had it been staged, could never have lived.

The dramatists made the Puritans, who for sometime had been particularly opposed to the theatre, the object of their taunts and gibes thereby greatly increasing the enmity, so that when Puritanism came into power the theatres were ordered closed,

The object being<sup>d</sup> to reform but to entirely suppress the drama. Where dramatic entertainments were secretly given the law was rigidly enforced, actors and playwrights were treated with the greatest contempt. Still a few dramatic works were published during this time and private performances did take place.

When Charles II was restored to the throne, the theatres were reopened and became very popular. But still Shakespeare was considered dull. The people were not ready to settle down to serious drama, they still merely wanted to be amused. Pepyr writes in his diary; "Last night it was my misfortune to witness a play called a " A Midsummer Night's Dream" by that rogue Shakespeare. I hope I shall never see such a miserable play again." Vulgar and suggestive comedies were popular. This national reaction against the stern, narrow laws of Puritanism made the people more frivolous than ever, and the theatre, as always, mirrored their thoughts. Charles II, brought into England the dangerous freedom of stage morals and manners of Paris. The country became filled with foreign vices and follies. Dryden during the first part of the Restoration period, was the light of the stage and he writes: "My chief endeavors are to delight the age in which I live. If the humor of this be for low comedy, small accidents and raillery, I will force my genius to obey it." Dryden was exceedingly vulgar, even ~~almost~~ too vulgar for the immoral age. Evelyn, a playgoer of the time said:

" I am grieved to see how the stage is degenerated and polluted by licentious times."

As the people, after all <sup>the</sup> excitement, settled down and became more sane in their manners and morals, so also the the stage grew less vulgar, and we find the comedy of manners of the Later Restoration far in advance of the earlier period. It also was amusing above all, but the tone was more refined. As a rule the comedies were offensive in characterization and in moral skepticism, and the idea of educating was entirely forgotten. Congreve the greatest writer of the day was not as popular as other dramatists, merely because he was not coarse enough to suit the tastes of the people. The playwrights of those days even as to-day, were forced to please the public in order to succeed. Congreve's "Love for Love" is typical of this period in subject but above it is morals and characterization. The people as a whole cared nothing for the more serious aspects of life and only the comedy which treated of the follies and fables of the day, with silly, suggestive passages could succeed in the playhouse. A love story, deftly handled and developed with vivid characterizations, pleased the playgoer. The "fop", a product of this period delighted the audience, of that time as it does the audiences of to-day.

In the eighteenth century the drama worked its way out of this miserable condition. Several writers started the reaction and attempted to lift the public taste thru literary efforts, for they well knew that if they could accomplish this the theatre would also grow more pure. Everything was attempted

novels, drama and music all directed toward the uplift of the public mind. Garrick's appearance at this time helped much because of his fine portrayal of the great character of Shakespeare. These energetic men succeeded and as a result we find no coarseness in the comedies of Sheridan and Goldsmith, and in such plays as "The School for Scandal," "She Stoops to Conquer," and "The Rivals," there are the charming characters and love stories which delight the audience of to-day as much as the audience of yesterday.

From 1775 to 1850 we have an intermediate period during which the English drama as a whole did deteriorate as art. Some dramatic efforts of note did appear during the early part of the century, such plays as "Richelieu" and "The Lady of Lyons" being still acted to-day. Yet there was no serious carrying on of the drama for there was no field for it. Dickens, Reed, and Collins did ~~did~~ work in drama as well as fiction.

In 1870 came Tom Robertson's "Caste," which contained the first note of the new realistic comedy of manners of our day. There came, on the part of the people a reaction against romanticism, and a demand for simple, plain truth. A new field was opened for dramatic work, which so many call the drama of ideas, represented by such men as Pinero, Jones, Shaw and Wilde.

In this period of the English drama we have come near to life. In the last quarter of a century we find more stability in the drama. It is distinctly vital in its sincerity and in its honest demand for truth, and thoroughly encouraging in its flexibility, its inherent strength, and its possibilities still to be unfolded.

To-day we find the Englishman a serious playgoer, a man of many interests, who looks upon the theatre as an educational force as well as one of amusement. In his magnificent theatres, as elaborate to-day as they were simple in the early days, he delights in the dramas of Pinero, Jones and Wilde. In the main he shows more enthusiasm than the American for he is backed by a stronger feeling for dramatic values and is therefore prepared to enjoy legitimate drama. Having passed thru such a wonderful history, he is left with a system of critical standards. The Drury Lane audience is made up to-day of a crowd of critical people in a deliberately uncritical mood. They want an all-around good production and have a deep, keen interest in every member of the company. In America we too often find one star and a mediocre company instead of a caste of universal excellence. The fact that there are put on in London a greater number of stimulating plays well acted thru out than are put on in New York is at once the cause and the consequence of the attitude that the Englishman holds toward the theatre. He contributes much, we contribute but little to the situation. Until the public demands better things we cannot expect that the dramatic efforts will be of a high order.

In America to-day we find the theatres filled every night with tens of millions of people who look upon it as a favorite place of amusement. With us also there has been a decided

improvement<sup>which</sup> has been the result of the general enlightenment of public opinion. Our work at the present time should be to educate the people in to appreciating the best in dramatic art, and so gradually draw them away from the comic opera and the vaudeville theatres, which, it is true, amuse and rest but do not work towards the establishment of a great national drama such as America needs. True it is that the people as a whole are not willing to be instructed. They want to be entertained, to laugh, not to study. They ask for the ideal and the romantic rather than for the realism of an Ibsen. Brander Matthews has truly said illustrating this point:

"Say the people at large are massed in a pyramid, one layer above the other, the most intelligent at the apex, and then cut cross sections. The greater public does go to the theatre to be amused, they want sensation and excitement and not analysis and disquisition. But there is a public which asks for the latter. They demand the naked truth. Both are sincere, but the first is more so. It is not ashamed. It says that Ibsen is dull." In the main these people have instincts which are sound and healthy. Present conditions are responsible for this longing for rest and recreation. In these busy times when people have to work hard for a living, men's brains are so overtaxed during the day that they want peace, and amusement at night rather than the task of solving a complicated moral problem. Man is a frivolous playgoer because he is a strenuous citizen, and we may have the stage frivolous just in so far as we keep it wholesome, for wholesome humor is not going to hurt any ones morals.



The problem play has its work to do, but it must not only present the cause and the social evils which exist, but must show how to avoid them and not leave the audience in a hopeless frame of mind.

The general public does not go to the theatre to hear a message of hopelessness.

There are almost as many reasons why people go to the theatre to-day as there are plays and audiences, and individuals in audiences. The gallery gods have not studied psychology, they go to see the play proper, not ~~any~~ any special actor, not to study technique. Among these uneducated people is more plainly seen than anywhere else the tremendous power of the stage over the lives of the thousands who weekly visit the theatres. The Ibsen play does not reach these because its influence is not universal. It reaches only that part of the audience which goes there, not weary from the days labor, but with mind alert in order to appreciate the full excellence of the play. This audience can enjoy Ibsen's Ghosts and for ~~its~~ it was written, but to-day this type is not in the majority. Man is not bad, but essentially good, and this is what the modern drama must make him out to be, if it will succeed. The drama must reflect truth or it cannot live but that truth must have in it an optimistic note, or the people will not support it. In these days we must have variety because of the variety of people who attend the theatre. If we do not have religious subjects and seriousness, we keep out of the theatre that class which is interested in those subjects and vice versa.

Much has been said and written lately about the immorality of the American stage. We must not blame the manager for presenting the play with a tinge of immorality in it, for if the people did not support it, it would not exist. It is queer that men and women who preach against the immorality of the problem play see nothing immoral or harmful in vulgar vaudeville sketches. There is no immorality in the serious discussion of the vital problems of life on the stage, for nothing that is beneficial to mankind can be called immoral or wrong in any rational sense. In Europe the drama deals with every theme that interests mankind, and nobody seems the worse for it. Why? Because there on the continent we have enlightened public opinion which we have not yet in America. Plays which discuss serious subjects seriously are not to be feared, but the amusing, the entertaining play which appeals to the senses alone must be banished from the stage. Enlightened public opinion only is adequate to judge and to direct the kind of plays, for it alone is the true regulator of a people's manners and morals. We have seen how in different periods the English drama has sunk to very low depths and that the reason has been in the people themselves. In every profession there has been unscrupulous men who have catered to instead of guided the public taste. These men have also been found in the dramatic world and in America the stage has come to be a profession. It is true that the stage needs cleansing to-day, but this must be done by discriminating

criticism, rather than by condemnation. Just because some plays are bad, we must not say that we shall do away with the art. When the people come to realize this and will only support plays which are wholesome, then and then only will our stage stand for what it did in the old Greek period, an educational factor in the community. The managers are to blame only in so far that they often put on plays which appeal to the lower side of human nature. They too often forget that there is a good side to which they should appeal. Whenever the stage is willfully given over to unworthy purposes it is necessary for public opinion to apply the corrective, and this can be done best and quickest by ~~non~~-attendance, for a play can only live if the people will support it. We have earnest dramatists who have the power to write descent plays as well as indecent ones. What we must work for is as earnest a public. People have been educated to enjoy good music. What they need now is to be taught what is right and what is not right in dramatic art, for as long as they remain uncritical we cannot expect an improvement in the morals of the stage.

The public must come to realize the degrading influence which this sort of ~~the~~ drama has upon the young people of the country who will be the critics of the future. They become deteriorated in taste, morality and mentality. The young

are most greatly influenced when they least realize it, and it is in the theatre that the reason is spoken to when it is off guard and ready to receive the message. Again, these immoral plays appeal to the emotions, the most powerful element in the nature of man.

Much has been said of late about the creation of a censorship for the stage, but the people of this enlightened age should be able to judge intelligently for themselves. Some efforts have been made in America, of which the people's institute is the strongest. It is solving for the first time the question of higher art by a practical and amiable dictatorship.

In 1907 a number of censors were appointed, consisting of many dramatic critics, representatives of the school system one member representing organized labor and one committee man from the executive board of the People's institute itself. The actual membership includes thousands of workers. When a play has been attended and voted upon, its recommendation or condemnation is published. This announcement satisfies the average playgoer. Plays dealing seriously with social, political or economic questions of the day are greatly favored. Farce comedies are either refused or indifferently commended, for they do not educate in any way.

The American dramatists to-day as a rule cater to the public taste; it is an Anglo-Saxon inheritance to cater to instead of to guide this. We have only ourselves to blame for the fact that as yet there has been no great national American dramatist.

for we have shown plainly that we can get along without one by our willingness to borrow from the continental dramas. We have had dramatists whose dramas have been successes, as Bronson Howard's "Aristocracy" and "Henrietta". James Herne has endeared himself to the public by his realistic portrayal of American rural life. To-day Wm. Gillette, in "Secret Service" and "Sherlock Holmes" gives us realistic and intense melodrama. Augustus Thomas proves by the success of "Arizona" and "Alabama" that the American audience enjoys wholesome dramas. Clyde Fitch, who has published over fifty plays is considered to be our most popular dramatist to-day. In the main his plays merely entertain, dealing with trifles of social life, presenting these in such lights as to appear important and dramatic. He is too willing to sacrifice truth for theatrical effect. Of his many plays "The Truth" is by far the best. It has an idea and contains a fine criticism on life, and has also a fine characterization.

The outlook is very promising with such names as Thomas Aldrich, Olive Dargan in poetry, and Percy Mackaye, Wm. Moody and others in prose. Percy Mackaye's "The Scarecrow" and "Mater" are perhaps the most encouraging signs to-day in the higher drama. Moody's "The Faith Healer" and "The Great Divide" are nobly conceived and show fine technique.

Novelists are going more and more into the dramatic field putting on the stage novels which are popular at the time being. The novelized drama and the dramatized novel have their work to do in associating literature with the drama. Generally the plays are not so good as the novels from which they spring. There are of course some exceptions as Booth Tarkington's "Beaucaire". Turning a novel into a play is not very successful work for the novel is manufactured, while the play comes from within. The dramatist is at a disadvantage because he has not the time to work out a character as the novelist has. Again, the dramatized novel puts a damper on dramatic originality and so should not be encouraged too much.

People delight in seeing acted out what they have read and such delightful works as "The Little Minister" and "Becky Sharp" will always be enjoyed by American audiences. If the novel has intellectual and ethical value, then it is well to act it out, for the lesson impresses itself on the public mind far deeper than the reading of the novel ever could.

Thus it is plainly seen that before we can have a great American drama, we have several things to do. First of all we must educate our play-going public so that their demand will be for lofty dramas well acted, leaving them with something to think about. We must do away with the Syndicate which prevents the growth of the American drama. Managers who belong to it cannot take too great risks and so wish to accept only plays of established playwrights. They fear to put on anything tragic or austere, for the people do not want such plays. We should do away with the idea of commercialism entirely. The great trouble with the drama in America is that from the very first it has been a matter of business. It has always been contrary to American ideas for the government to direct the amusements of the people as has been the rule on the continent. Nor is there here an aristocracy of wealth or one of birth to provide means for public diversion, so it has been left to men of business to provide. No one can tell which play will or will not be a success and the manager who has to pay for the theatre, the salaries of his company, and also care for his family, cannot experiment too much. True the manager must help ~~keep~~ us as much as he can by

ridding himself of the idea of "business is business" and by endeavoring to further the intellectual and aesthetic interest of the people ( for it is there<sup>d</sup>), instead of deepening and furthering the desire for emotional stimulation. The theatre as a private commercial enterprise retards the growth of the American drama as the essential art and expression of public life.

"The Educational Theatre for children and young people" with Samuel Clemens as president of the Board of Directors is the first step which America has taken towards educating its audience. It has non-commercial ends and has as its chief aim the education of the American young people. As the first requisite of an enlightened theatre is an enlightened audience, it is the hope of those engaged in this work to so broaden the interests of these young men and women as to further the cause of the endowed theatre in years to come. For it is very evident that we must work up to the endowed theatre.

The people are waking up. Our national consciousness is to-day more increasingly alive to the deeper significance in our life of our institutions than it has ever been before. There are many who condemn the American theatre because at the present moment our boards are held to a great extent by comic operas and immoral and ~~U~~mmoral plays. Good plays are in the majority, but do not receive the attention of the many critics who are on the look-out for immoral ones. It is true that we have not reached the high ideal of the democratic drama, and this can only be accomplished when our theatres are dedicated to public rather than

to private ends. The Continental drama has always had a better influence on society because of its endowment and protection of king and court. Why can not also America have endowed theatres? Surely there is wealth enough in the land if we could but make the people of brains and wealth realize that the drama to-day has by far a greater influence over the people than any other American institution!

This endowed national theatre has been the great dream of the Americans for many years, a theatre where actors would be given living wages, and the plays given would be of such a character as to train both actor and playgoer. Here the work of playwrights looking for artistic rather than material success would be presented. Even tho we have no aristocracy of birth, or of wealth, who could be asked to provide the funds for this theatre; in this age of the wholesome endowment of free libraries and art galleries, public schools and colleges, it is to be expected that adequate funds could be received alone from public generosity, if the appeal were well backed by persons whose positions and character would be a proof that the funds would be properly used. Having the funds, it would be easy to select an actor-manager, having literary and business knowledge, who would be able to give the public an ideal American drama.

Then we shall be able to have the drama of democracy, the great drama of the future, appealing to everyone and not only to a single class. This great drama of the English speaking people, I think, will be thoroughly optimistic, having in it an uplifting quality, a greater hope, It will be simple, compre-  
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hensive, satisfying the wants of both sense and soul, supplying material for deep thought as well as for amusement. It will adapt itself to either national or religious subjects as well as to the trifling incidents of every day life or the private trouble of every heart. It will be a living tide of influence, educating and inspiring all classes to great deeds and nobler lives. It will be the direct result of enlightened public opinion, for even as in the past, the life, thought, and desires of the playgoer were reflected in the play, so the drama of the future will only gain in dignity and worth if the American public, through insistent demand for the best, will call forth a new drama whose tendency it will be to elevate the tone of the stage and the mind of the nation.