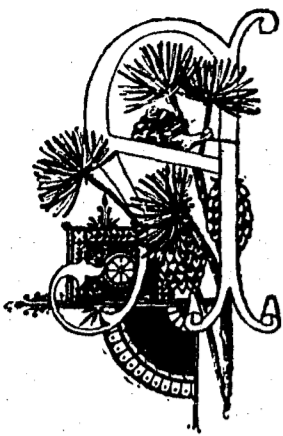


THE MORAL EFFECT OF THE DRAMA.



QUESTION of perennial interest—for its discussion began more than 2,000 years ago, and still continues—was raised afresh the other day by Mr. Hall Caine in a speech at the dinner of the Royal Theatrical Fund.

Mr. Hall Caine.

Mr. Hall Caine's contribution to the discussion, which has called forth the letters subjoined, was as follows:—

As to the moral effect of the drama upon the world—a well-known Nonconformist preacher, who was an enemy of the stage, once said that he had noticed that the young people of his congregation who went most to the theatre and wept most at the imaginative woes of the afflicted heroine in melodrama were precisely those who were hardest to move to pity and sympathy when a case of actual distress came their way in real life. I can only say this (said Mr. Caine), it is exactly the opposite of my own experience. My experience has been that the tears that are shed in the theatre do not exhaust the fount of tears; that the exercise of the muscles of the soul which the drama requires is good for the growth of the soul; and that if you want to test the moral effects of the drama on the world at large you cannot do better than look at the people who come closest to it; and that it is impossible to find a class more tender of heart, more easily moved to pity, more ready to respond to the cry of trouble than actors and actresses themselves. At all events, I should like to see the point discussed by ministers of religion generally. It is the very pith and marrow of a question of great importance to the drama and to society.

The following letters show that any general agreement on the question is as far off as ever. One aspect of it, however, seems to have been overlooked. If the moral drama has the effect of exhausting the moral feelings, then does it not follow that the immoral drama must similarly exhaust the immoral feelings? And if that be so, "the playhouse," even with its "objectionable features," should, rightly understood, be the minister's valuable ally.

The Rev. Hugh Price Hughes.

To the EDITOR of THE WESTMINSTER BUDGET.

DEAR SIR,—I have some striking evidence that Mr. Hall Caine is quite correct in stating that actors and actresses themselves are often very pitiful and sympathetic especially in ministering to the needs of members of their own profession. I also agree with him that "to amuse the world is a high vocation." Merely to make weary and perplexed people indulge in innocent laughter is a valuable service to mankind. Beyond that I am wholly with Mr. Hall Caine in the conviction that it is a pleasant and profitable relief to turn away from the hard and distressing facts of many an anxious life and enter for a season into a realm of ideal brightness and enjoyment. But when we come to "the moral effect of the drama," it is extremely difficult to give an unhesitating opinion, mainly because the drama has been associated with so much that is not in the least degree essential to it, and which is utterly fatal to morality. I do not know who is the "well-known Nonconformist preacher" whom Mr. Hall Caine quotes, but I believe that St. Augustine was of the same opinion as the "well-known Nonconformist preacher." He held that our emotions were a precious gift intended to spur the will to corresponding action, and that when the emotions were aroused without leading to any practical result, the consequence was altogether evil. Our power of emotion is limited in quantity as well as in quality, and unless it is carefully husbanded to be used only for the purpose of leading us to altruistic conduct it may be utterly wasted in mere self-gratification. St. Augustine and other profound thinkers have been of opinion that to excite the emotions for the mere pleasure which emotional excitement occasions, is to pervert their use altogether and to demoralise our souls. In this respect St. Augustine differs totally from Aristotle, who thought that our souls might be purified through the emotions of Pity and Terror excited by Art. I am not prepared to endorse the criticism of St. Augustine absolutely, as such an opinion seems to be fatal to painting, statuary, poetry, and music, as well as the drama. But I am bound to state that I have known some cases which illustrate the sentiment of the Nonconformist preacher quoted by Mr. Hall Caine. I have known both men and women who have been enthusiastic and constant theatre-goers, who have wept copiously at the spectacle of imaginary woe presented on the stage, but whose hearts have been as hard and cold as a stone in the presence of real human sorrow in the world outside. I do not wish to draw any sweeping or general conclusion from these facts. All they conclusively prove is that a quick response to the emotional appeals of the stage does not necessarily indicate any peculiar tenderness of heart. The sensuous side of our nature may be very impressionable while we are really intensely selfish and unfeeling. I do not think that we have the data at present for a judicial opinion on the important point raised by Mr. Hall Caine. For reasons into which I need not enter now the great majority of the philanthropists of our own country do not go to the theatre. The men and women who are toiling most strenuously in the service of their fellow-creatures have, as a rule, neither the time nor the disposition to frequent

playhouses. If the objectionable features of the stage, which are not in the least degree of its essence, were abolished, the humanitarian classes might frequent it more generally, and then we should be able to see its effect upon them.—I am, Sir, yours, &c.,

HUGH PRICE HUGHES.

8, Taviton-street, Gordon-square, W.C.

Rev. Dr. Thain Davidson.

To the EDITOR of THE WESTMINSTER BUDGET.

SIR,—So far as my observation has gone, neither on the one side, those who are great frequenters of the theatre, and passionately moved by its representations; nor, on the other side, those "unco guid" people who acrimoniously condemn the drama as inherently sinful, are the most useful and beneficial members of society. I have found the highest morale, the truest sympathy with suffering, the most practical Christianity amongst those who take a commonsense attitude on the matter, and believe that a pure drama has its own place in the healthful education of the human mind.—I am, &c.,

THAIN DAVIDSON.

The Rev. F. B. Meyer.

To the EDITOR of THE WESTMINSTER BUDGET.

DEAR SIR,—My experience as to the effect of theatre-going on young people is too limited for me to be able to throw light on the very interesting question you raise.

I should think that theatre-going has been the rare exception in congregations to which I have ministered for the last twenty-five years.

As a rule, our people are not frequenters of the theatre. And those who attend would not parade but conceal the fact as much as possible. I do not say that they are exactly ashamed of it, but they would not speak of it freely in the presence of minister and church officers.

Judging from the effect of novel-reading on a certain class on those who give themselves up to it, I should certainly think that the effect of stimulating the emotions by fiction, whether acted or written, and without corresponding action, certainly tends to make the heart callous to the appeal of real need.—

Yours truly,

Christ Church, Westminster-road, S.W.

F. B. MEYER.

Mr. Robert Buchanan.

To the EDITOR of THE WESTMINSTER BUDGET.

SIR,—The question asked by Mr. Hall Caine, and which you ask me to assist in answering, appears to me essentially trivial and purposeless, and worthy of serious attention only from the sort of people who interest themselves in conundrums and double acrostics. Who doubts for a moment that good literature and good drama tend to make men both better and happier, at least for the time being? But who can say how great or how little is the outcome of this good influence in actual conduct? Unfortunately, Art is like Religion, and appears to be more a luxury than a serious business, which is saying, in other words, that both Religion and Art are only small parts of life. Many strong and good men do very well without either, just as most wise men do very well without newspapers. The tendency of writers like Mr. Caine is to exaggerate the importance of their own vocation, and to assume that work done primarily for their own benefit and amusement is a department of practical philanthropy. The *reductio ad absurdum* comes when we are asked to leave the settlement of any artistic question to the "ministers of religion," and when a novelist seriously quotes the platitudes of a "Nonconformist clergyman." No true artist under the sun cares twopence what the ministers of religion think about him or his work. A man who strains at the gnat of the drama, and yet pretends to have swallowed the whole camel of theology, can have no opinion worth hearing on any really human subject. The drama exists because it amuses, not because it does good; and Mr. Hall Caine exists as an author for the same reason. If, in addition to amusement there comes a little edification, so much the better; but let it always be understood that the edification is secondary, not primary. There will soon be no Art at all, and less Drama, if authors, instead of sticking to their profession, which is to write books which will be read or plays which will be seen, delude themselves into the belief that they are social benefactors. Cant is excusable in the professors of Religion, since no religion yet invented has been able to thrive thoroughly without it. It is inexcusable in the professors of Literature, which is practically independent of both religion and ethics, though by privilege it embraces both.

ROBERT BUCHANAN.

Mr. Herbert Spencer's Views.

To the EDITOR of THE WESTMINSTER BUDGET.

SIR,—It is a fascinating problem in æstho-psychology which Mr. Hall Caine has broached afresh. You have quoted Aristotle, according to whom, as you point out, tragedy by pity and by fear purges the passions and refines the soul. Rather a different conclusion seems to be that of a later philosopher who has discussed the matter. Says Mr. Herbert Spencer on this subject ("Principles of Ethics," Part III., chap. vii.):—

Higher even than the gratification yielded by a good novel is that yielded by a good play; and the demoralisation caused by excess of it would be still greater were there the same opportunity for continuous absorption. Pleasures which are intense must be sparingly partaken of. The general law of waste and repair implies that in proportion to the excitement of a faculty must be its subsequent prostration and unfitness for action—an unfitness which continues until repair has been made. Hence overwhelming sympathy felt for personages in fiction or drama is felt at the cost of some subsequent callousness. As the eye by exposure to a vivid light is momentarily incapacitated for appreciating those feeble lights through which objects around are distinguished; so after a tearful fellow-feeling with the sufferers of imaginary woes there is for a time a lack of fellow-feeling with persons around. Much theatre-going, like much novel-reading, is therefore to be ethically reprobated.

Clearly, therefore, there exists a philosophic basis for the empirical generalisation of Mr. Hall Caine's anti-theatre-going Nonconformist preacher.—Yours, &c.,

H. A. S.