

**CHARLES  
KINGSLEY**

PLAYS AND  
PURITANS

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## Charles Kingsley Plays and Puritans

The British Isles have been ringing for the last few years with the word 'Art' in its German sense; with 'High Art,' 'Symbolic Art,' 'Ecclesiastical Art,' 'Dramatic Art,' 'Tragic Art,' and so forth; and every well-educated person is expected, nowadays, to know something about Art. Yet in spite of all translations of German 'Æsthetic' treatises, and 'Kunstnovellen,' the mass of the British people cares very little about the matter, and sits contented under the imputation of 'bad taste.' Our stage, long since dead, does not revive; our poetry is dying; our music, like our architecture, only reproduces the past; our painting is only first-rate when it handles landscapes and animals, and seems likely so to remain; but, meanwhile, nobody cares. Some of the deepest and most earnest minds vote the question, in general, a 'sham and a snare,' and whisper to each other confidentially, that Gothic art is beginning to be a 'bore,' and that Sir Christopher Wren was a very good fellow after all; while the middle classes look on the Art movement half amused, as with a pretty toy, half sulkily suspicious of Popery and Paganism, and think, apparently, that Art is very well when it means nothing, and is merely used to beautify drawing-rooms and shawl patterns; not to mention that, if there were no painters, Mr. Smith could not hand down to posterity likenesses of himself, Mrs. Smith, and family.

But when 'Art' dares to be in earnest, and to mean something, much more to connect itself with religion, Smith's tone alters. He will teach 'Art' to keep in what he considers its place, and if it refuses, take the law of it, and put it into the Ecclesiastical Court. So he says, and what is more, he means what he says; and as all the world, from Hindostan to Canada, knows by most practical proof, what he means, he sooner or later does, perhaps not always in the wisest way, but still he does it.

Thus, in fact, the temper of the British nation toward 'Art' is simply that of the old Puritans, softened, no doubt, and widened, but only enough so as to permit Art, not to encourage it.

Some men's thoughts on this curious fact would probably take the form of some æsthetic *à priori* disquisition, beginning with 'the tendency of the infinite to reveal itself in the finite,' and ending—who can tell where? But as we cannot honestly arrogate to ourselves any skill in the *scientia scientiarum*, or say, 'The Lord possessed me in the beginning of His way, before His works of old. When He prepared the heavens, I was there, when He set a compass upon the face of the deep;' we shall leave æsthetic science to those who think that they comprehend it; we shall, as simple disciples of Bacon, deal with facts and with history as 'the will of God revealed in facts.' We will leave those who choose to settle what ought to be, and ourselves look patiently at that which actually was once, and which may be again; that so out of the conduct of our old Puritan forefathers (right or wrong), and their long war against 'Art,' we may learn a wholesome lesson; as we doubtless shall, if we believe firmly that our history is neither more nor less than what the old Hebrew prophets called 'God's gracious dealings with his people,' and not say in our hearts, like some sentimental girl who sings Jacobite ballads (written forty years ago by men who cared no more for the Stuarts than for the Ptolemies, and were ready to kiss the dust off George the Fourth's feet at his visit to Edinburgh)—'Victrix causa Diis placuit, sed victa puellis.'

The historian of a time of change has always a difficult and invidious task. For Revolutions, in the great majority of cases, arise not merely from the crimes of a few great men, but from a general viciousness and decay of the whole, or the majority, of the nation; and that viciousness is certain to be made up, in great part, of a loosening of domestic ties, of breaches of the Seventh Commandment, and of sins connected with them, which a writer is now hardly permitted to mention.

An 'evil and adulterous generation' has been in all ages and countries the one marked out for intestine and internecine strife. That description is always applicable to a revolutionary generation; whether or not it also comes under the class of a superstitious one, 'seeking after a sign from heaven,' only half believing its own creed, and, therefore, on tiptoe for miraculous confirmations of it, at the same time

that it fiercely persecutes any one who, by attempting innovation or reform, seems about to snatch from weak faith the last plank which keeps it from sinking into the abyss. In describing such an age, the historian lies under this paradoxical disadvantage, that his case is actually too strong for him to state it. If he tells the whole truth, the easy-going and respectable multitude, in easy-going and respectable days like these, will either shut their ears prudishly to his painful facts, or reject them as incredible, unaccustomed as they are to find similar horrors and abominations among people of their own rank, of whom they are naturally inclined to judge by their own standard of civilisation.

Thus if any one, in justification of the Reformation and the British hatred of Popery during the sixteenth century, should dare to detail the undoubted facts of the Inquisition, and to comment on them dramatically enough to make his readers feel about them what men who witnessed them felt, he would be accused of a 'morbid love of horrors.' If any one, in order to show how the French Revolution of 1793 was really God's judgment on the profligacy of the *ancien régime*, were to paint that profligacy as the men of the *ancien régime* unblushingly painted it themselves, respectability would have a right to demand, 'How dare you, sir, drag such disgusting facts from their merited oblivion?' Those, again, who are really acquainted with the history of Henry the Eighth's marriages, are well aware of facts which prove him to have been, not a man of violent and lawless passions, but of a cold temperament and a scrupulous conscience; but which cannot be stated in print, save in the most delicate and passing hints, to be taken only by those who at once understand such matters, and really wish to know the truth; while young ladies in general will still look on Henry as a monster in human form, because no one dares, or indeed ought, to undeceive them by anything beyond bare assertion without proof.

'But what does it matter,' some one may say, 'what young ladies think about history?' This it matters; that these young ladies will some day be mothers, and as such will teach their children their own notions of modern history; and that, as long as men confine themselves to the teaching of Roman and Greek history, and leave the history of their own country to be handled exclusively by their unmarried sisters, so long will slanders, superstitions, and false political principles be perpetuated in the minds of our boys and girls.

But a still worse evil arises from the fact that the historian's case is often too strong to be stated.

There is always a reactionary party, or one at least which lingers sentimentally over the dream of past golden ages, such as that of which Cowley says, with a sort of naïve blasphemy, at which one knows not whether to smile or sigh—

'When God, the cause to me and men unknown,  
Forsook the royal houses, and his own.'

These have full liberty to say all they can in praise of the defeated system; but the historian has no such liberty to state the case against it. If he even asserts that he has counter-facts, but dare not state them, he is at once met with a *præjudicium*. The mere fact of his having ascertained the truth is imputed as a blame to him, in a sort of prudish cant. 'What a very improper person he must be to like to dabble in such improper books that they must not even be quoted.' If in self-defence he desperately gives his facts, he only increases the feeling against him, whilst the reactionists, hiding their blushing faces, find in their modesty an excuse for avoiding the truth; if, on the other hand, he content himself with bare assertion, and with indicating the sources from whence his conclusions are drawn, what care the reactionists? They know well that the public will not take the trouble to consult manuscripts, State papers, pamphlets, rare biographies, but will content themselves with ready-made history; and they therefore go on unblushingly to republish their old romance, leaving poor truth, after she has been painfully haled up to the well's mouth, to tumble miserably to the bottom of it again.

In the face of this danger we will go on to say as much as we dare of the great cause, Puritans v. Players, before our readers, trusting to find some of them at least sufficiently unacquainted with the common notions on the point to form a fair decision.

What those notions are is well known. Very many of her Majesty's subjects are of opinion that the first half of the seventeenth century (if the Puritans had not interfered and spoilt all) was the most beautiful period of the English nation's life; that in it the chivalry and ardent piety of the Middle Age were happily combined with modern art and civilisation; that the Puritan hatred of the Court, of stage-plays, of the fashions of the time, was only 'a scrupulous and fantastical niceness'; barbaric and tasteless, if sincere; if insincere, the basest hypocrisy; that the stage-plays, though coarse, were no worse than Shakspeare, whom everybody reads; and that if the Stuarts patronised the stage they also raised it, and exercised a purifying censorship. And many more who do not go all these lengths with the reactionists, and cannot make up their mind to look to the Stuart reigns either for model churchmen or model courtiers, are still inclined to sneer at the Puritan 'preciseness,' and to say lazily, that though, of course, something may have been wrong, yet there was no need to make such a fuss about the matter; and that at all events the Puritans were men of very bad taste.

Mr. Gifford, in his introduction to Massinger's plays (1813), was probably the spokesman of his own generation, certainly of a great part of this generation also, when he informs us, that 'with Massinger terminated the triumph of dramatic poetry; indeed, the stage itself survived him but a short time. The nation was convulsed to its centre by contending factions, and a set of austere and gloomy fanatics, enemies to every elegant amusement and every social relaxation, rose upon the ruins of the State. Exasperated by the ridicule with which they had long been covered by the stage, they persecuted the actors with unrelenting severity, and consigned them, together with the writers, to hopeless obscurity and wretchedness. Taylor died in the extreme of poverty, Shirley opened a little school at Brentford, and Downe, the boast of the stage, kept an ale-house at Brentford. Others, and those the far greater number, joined the royal standard, and exerted themselves with more gallantry than good fortune in the service of their old and indulgent master.'

'We have not yet, perhaps, fully estimated, and certainly not yet fully recovered, what was lost in that unfortunate struggle. The arts were rapidly advancing to perfection under the fostering wing of a monarch who united in himself taste to feel, spirit to undertake, and munificence to reward.

Architecture, painting, and poetry were by turns the objects of his paternal care. Shakspeare was his "closet companion," Jonson his poet, and in conjunction with Inigo Jones, his favoured architect, produced those magnificent entertainments,' etc.

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He then goes on to account for the supposed sudden fall of dramatic art at the Restoration, by the somewhat far-fetched theory that—

'Such was the horror created in the general mind by the perverse and unsocial government from which they had so fortunately escaped, that the people appear to have anxiously avoided all retrospect, and, with Prynne and Vicars, to have lost sight of Shakspeare and "his fellows." Instead, therefore, of taking up dramatic poetry where it abruptly ceased in the labours of Massinger, they elicited, as it were, a manner of their own, or fetched it from the heavy monotony of their continental neighbours.'

So is history written, and, what is more, believed. The amount of misrepresentation in this passage (which would probably pass current with most readers in the present day) is quite ludicrous.

In the first place, it will hardly be believed that these words occur in an essay which, after extolling Massinger as one of the greatest poets of his age, second, indeed, only to Shakspeare, also informs

us (and, it seems, quite truly) that, so far from having been really appreciated or patronised, he maintained a constant struggle with adversity,—‘that even the bounty of his particular friends, on which he chiefly relied, left him in a state of absolute dependence,’—that while ‘other writers for the stage had their periods of good fortune, Massinger seems to have enjoyed no gleam of sunshine; his life was all one misty day, and “shadows, clouds, and darkness rested on it.”’

So much for Charles’s patronage of a really great poet. What sort of men he did patronise, practically and in earnest, we shall see hereafter, when we come to speak of Mr. Shirley.

But Mr. Gifford must needs give an instance to prove that Charles was ‘not inattentive to the success of Massinger,’ and a curious one it is; of the same class, unfortunately, as that with the man in the old story, who recorded with pride that the King had spoken to him, and—had told him to get out of the way.

Massinger in his ‘King and the Subject’ had introduced Don Pedro of Spain thus speaking—

‘Monies! We’ll raise supplies which way we please,  
And force you to subscribe to blanks, in which  
We’ll mulct you as we shall think fit. The Cæsars  
In Rome were wise, acknowledging no law  
But what their swords did ratify, the wives  
And daughters of the senators bowing to  
Their will, as deities,’ etc.

Against which passage Charles, reading over the play before he allowed of it, had written, ‘This is too insolent, and not to be printed.’ Too insolent it certainly was, considering the state of public matters in the year 1638. It would be interesting enough to analyse the reasons which made Charles dislike in the mouth of Pedro sentiments so very like his own; but we must proceed, only pointing out the way in which men, determined to repeat the traditional clap-trap about the Stuarts, are actually blind to the meaning of the very facts which they themselves quote.

Where, then, do the facts of history contradict Mr. Gifford?

We believe that, so far from the triumph of dramatic poetry terminating with Massinger, dramatic art had been steadily growing worse from the first years of James; that instead of the arts advancing to perfection under Charles the First, they steadily deteriorated in quality, though the supply became more abundant; that so far from there having been a sudden change for the worse in the drama after the Restoration, the taste of the courts of Charles the First and of Charles the Second are indistinguishable; that the court poets, and probably the actors also, of the early part of Charles the Second’s reign had many of them belonged to the court of Charles the First, as did Davenant, the Duke and Duchess of Newcastle, Fanshaw, and Shirley himself; that the common notion of a ‘new manner’ having been introduced from France after the Restoration, or indeed having come in at all, is not founded on fact, the only change being that the plays of Charles the Second’s time were somewhat more stupid, and that while five of the seven deadly sins had always had free licence on the stage, blasphemy and profane swearing were now enfranchised to fill up the seven. As for the assertion that the new manner (supposing it to have existed) was imported from France, there is far more reason to believe that the French copied us than we them, and that if they did not learn from Charles the First’s poets the superstition of ‘the three unities,’ they at least learnt to make ancient kings and heroes talk and act like seventeenth century courtiers, and to exchange their old clumsy masques and translations of Italian and Spanish farces for a comedy depicting native scoundrelism.

Probably enough, indeed, the great and sudden development of the French stage, which took place in the middle of the seventeenth century under Corneille and Molière, was excited by the English cavalier playwrights who took refuge in France.

No doubt, as Mr. Gifford says, the Puritans were exasperated against the stage-players by the insults heaped on them; but the cause of quarrel lay far deeper than any such personal soreness. The Puritans had attacked the players before the players meddled with them, and that on principle; with what justification must be considered hereafter. But the fact is (and this seems to have been, like many other facts, conveniently forgotten), that the Puritans were by no means alone in their protest against the stage, and that the war was not begun exclusively by them. As early as the latter half of the sixteenth century, not merely Northbrooke, Gosson, Stubs, and Reynolds had lifted up their voices against them, but Archbishop Parker, Bishop Babington, Bishop Hall, and the author of the *Mirror for Magistrates*. The University of Oxford, in 1584, had passed a statute forbidding common plays and players in the university, on the very same moral grounds on which the Puritans objected to them.

The city of London, in 1580, had obtained from the Queen the suppression of plays on Sundays; and not long after, 'considering that play-houses and dicing-houses were traps for young gentlemen and others,' obtained leave from the Queen and Privy Council to thrust the players out of the city, and to pull down the play-houses, five in number; and, paradoxical as it may seem, there is little doubt that, by the letter of the law, 'stage plays and enterludes' were, even to the end of Charles the First's reign, 'unlawful pastime,' being forbidden by 14 Eliz., 39 Eliz., 1 Jacobi, 3 Jacobi, and 1 Caroli, and the players subject to severe punishment as 'rogues and vagabonds.' The Act of 1 Jacobi seems even to have gone so far as to repeal the clauses which, in Elizabeth's reign, had allowed companies of players the protection of a 'baron or honourable person of greater degree,' who might 'authorise them to play under his hand and seal of arms.' So that the Puritans were only demanding of the sovereigns that they should enforce the very laws which they themselves had made, and which they and their nobles were setting at defiance. Whether the plays ought to have been put down, and whether the laws were necessary, is a different question; but certainly the court and the aristocracy stood in the questionable, though too common, position of men who made laws which prohibited to the poor amusements in which they themselves indulged without restraint.

But were these plays objectionable? As far as the comedies are concerned, that will depend on the answer to the question, Are plays objectionable, the staple subject of which is adultery? Now, we cannot but agree with the Puritans, that adultery is not a subject for comedy at all. It may be for tragedy; but for comedy never. It is a sin; not merely theologically, but socially, one of the very worst sins, the parent of seven other sins,—of falsehood, suspicion, hate, murder, and a whole bevy of devils. The prevalence of adultery in any country has always been a sign and a cause of social insincerity, division, and revolution; where a people has learnt to connive and laugh at it, and to treat it as a light thing, that people has been always careless, base, selfish, cowardly,—ripe for slavery.

And we must say that either the courtiers and Londoners of James and Charles the First were in that state, or that the poets were doing their best to make them so.

We shall not shock our readers by any details on this point; we shall only say that there is hardly a comedy of the seventeenth century, with the exception of Shakspeare's, in which adultery is not introduced as a subject of laughter, and often made the staple of the whole plot. The seducer is, if not openly applauded, at least let to pass as a 'handsome gentleman'; the injured husband is, as in that Italian literature of which we shall speak shortly, the object of every kind of scorn and ridicule. In this latter habit (common to most European nations) there is a sort of justice. A man can generally retain his wife's affections if he will behave himself like a man; and 'injured husbands' have for the most part no one to blame but themselves. But the matter is not a subject for comedy; not even in that case which has been always too common in France, Italy, and the Romish countries, and which seems to have been painfully common in England in the seventeenth century, when, by a *mariage de convenance*, a young girl is married up to a rich idiot or a decrepit old man. Such things are not comedies, but tragedies; subjects for pity and for silence, not for brutal ribaldry. Therefore the men who look on them in the light which the Stuart dramatists looked are not good men, and do no good service to the country; especially when they erect adultery into a science, and seem to take a perverse

pleasure in teaching their audience every possible method, accident, cause, and consequence of it; always, too, when they have an opportunity, pointing 'Eastward Ho!' *i.e.* to the city of London, as the quarter where court gallants can find boundless indulgence for their passions amid the fair wives of dull and cowardly citizens. If the citizens drove the players out of London, the playwrights took good care to have their revenge. The citizen is their standard butt. These shallow parasites, and their shallower sovereigns, seem to have taken a perverse and, as it happened, a fatal pleasure in insulting them. Sad it is to see in Shirley's 'Gamester,' Charles the First's favourite play, a passage like that in Act i. Scene 1, where old Barnacle proclaims, unblushing, his own shame and that of his fellow-merchants. Surely, if Charles ever could have repented of any act of his own, he must have repented, in many a humiliating after-passage with that same city of London, of having given those base words his royal warrant and approbation.

The tragedies of the seventeenth century are, on the whole, as questionable as the comedies.

That there are noble plays among them here and there, no one denies—any more than that there are exquisitely amusing plays among the comedies; but as the staple interest of the comedies is dirt, so the staple interest of the tragedies is crime. Revenge, hatred, villany, incest, and murder upon murder are their constant themes, and (with the exception of Shakspeare, Ben Jonson in his earlier plays, and perhaps Massinger) they handle these horrors with little or no moral purpose, save that of exciting and amusing the audience, and of displaying their own power of delineation in a way which makes one but too ready to believe the accusations of the Puritans (supported as they are by many ugly anecdotes) that the play-writers and actors were mostly men of fierce and reckless lives, who had but too practical an acquaintance with the dark passions which they sketch. This is notoriously the case with most of the French novelists of the modern 'Literature of Horror,' and the two literatures are morally identical. We do not know of a complaint which can be justly brought against the School of Balzac and Dumas which will not equally apply to the average tragedy of the whole period preceding the civil wars.

This public appetite for horrors, for which they catered so greedily, tempted them toward another mistake, which brought upon them (and not undeservedly) heavy odium.

One of the worst counts against Dramatic Art (as well as against Pictorial) was the simple fact that it came from Italy. We must fairly put ourselves into the position of an honest Englishman of the seventeenth century before we can appreciate the huge *præjudicium* which must needs have arisen in his mind against anything which could claim a Transalpine parentage. Italy was then not merely the stronghold of Popery. That in itself would have been a fair reason for others beside Puritans saying, 'If the root be corrupt, the fruit will be also: any expression of Italian thought and feeling must be probably unwholesome while her vitals are being eaten out by an abominable falsehood, only half believed by the masses, and not believed at all by the higher classes, even those of the priesthood; but only kept up for their private aggrandisement.' But there was more than hypothesis in favour of the men who might say this; there was universal, notorious, shocking fact. It was a fact that Italy was the centre where sins were invented worthy of the doom of the Cities of the Plain, and from whence they spread to all nations who had connection with her. We dare give no proof of this assertion. The Italian morals and the Italian lighter literature of the sixteenth and of the beginning of the seventeenth century were such, that one is almost ashamed to confess that one has looked into them, although the painful task is absolutely necessary for one who wishes to understand either the European society of the time or the Puritan hatred of the drama. *Non ragionam di lor: ma guarda è passa.*

It is equally a fact that these vices were imported into England by the young men who, under pretence of learning the Italian polish, travelled to Italy. From the days of Gabriel Harvey and Lord Oxford, about the middle of Elizabeth's reign, this foul tide had begun to set toward England, gaining an additional coarseness and frivolity in passing through the French Court (then an utter Gehenna) in its course hitherward; till, to judge by Marston's 'Satires,' certain members of the higher classes had, by the beginning of James's reign, learnt nearly all which the Italians had to teach them. Marston

writes in a rage, it is true; foaming, stamping, and vapouring too much to escape the suspicion of exaggeration; yet he dared not have published the things which he does, had he not fair ground for some at least of his assertions. And Marston, be it remembered, was no Puritan, but a playwright, and Ben Jonson's friend.

Bishop Hall, in his 'Satires,' describes things bad enough, though not so bad as Marston does; but what is even more to the purpose, he wrote, and dedicated to James, a long dissuasive against the fashion of running abroad. Whatever may be thought of the arguments of 'Quo vadis?—a Censure of Travel,' its main drift is clear enough. Young gentlemen, by going to Italy, learnt to be fops and profligates, and probably Papists into the bargain. These assertions there is no denying. Since the days of Lord Oxford, most of the ridiculous and expensive fashions in dress had come from Italy, as well as the newest modes of sin; and the playwrights themselves make no secret of the fact. There is no need to quote instances; they are innumerable; and the most serious are not fit to be quoted, scarcely the titles of the plays in which they occur; but they justify almost every line of Bishop Hall's questions (of which some of the strongest expressions have necessarily been omitted):—

'What mischief have we among us which we have not borrowed?

'To begin at our skin: who knows not whence we had the variety of our vain disguises? As if we had not wit enough to be foolish unless we were taught it. These dresses, being constant in their mutability, show us our masters. What is it that we have not learned of our neighbours, save only to be proud good-cheap? whom would it not vex to see how that the other sex hath learned to make anticks and monsters of themselves? Whence come their (absurd fashions); but the one from some ill-shaped dame of France, the other from the worse-minded courtesans of Italy? Whence else learned they to daub these mud-walls with apothecaries' mortar; and those high washes, which are so cunningly licked on that the wet napkin of Phryne should be deceived? Whence the frizzled and powdered bushes of their borrowed hair? As if they were ashamed of the head of God's making, and proud of the tire-woman's.

Where learned we that devilish art and practice of duel, wherein men seek honour in blood, and are taught the ambition of being glorious butchers of men? Where had we that luxurious delicacy in our feasts, in which the nose is no less pleased than the palate, and the eye no less than either? wherein the piles of dishes make barricadoes against the appetite, and with a pleasing encumbrance trouble a hungry guest. Where those forms of ceremonious quaffing, in which men have learned to make gods of others and beasts of themselves, and lose their reason while they pretend to do reason? Where the lawlessness (miscalled freedom) of a wild tongue, that runs, with reins on the neck, through the bedchambers of princes, their closets, their council tables, and spares not the very cabinet of their breasts, much less can be barred out of the most retired secrecy of inferior greatness? Where the change of noble attendance and hospitality into four wheels and some few butterflies? Where the art of dishonesty in practical Machiavelism, in false equivocations? Where the slight account of that filthiness which is but condemned as venial, and tolerated as not unnecessary? Where the skill of civil and honourable hypocrisy in those formal compliments which do neither expect belief from others nor carry any from ourselves? Where' (and here Bishop Hall begins to speak concerning things on which we must be silent, as of matters notorious and undeniable.) 'Where that close Atheism, which secretly laughs God in the face, and thinks it weakness to believe, wisdom to profess any religion? Where the bloody and tragical science of king-killing, the new divinity of disobedience and rebellion? with too many other

evils, wherewith foreign conversation hath endangered the infection of our peace?—  
Bishop Hall's 'Quo Vadis, or a Censure of Travel,' vol xii. sect. 22.

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