The Drama during the time of Shakespeare.

There [illegible] with English [illegible] devotion a [illegible] literary [illegible] than our [illegible] period, our literary [illegible] which it comprehends [illegible] men whose talents and erudition, entitle to speak oracularly in literary matters, deliver thier opinions with doubt and uncertainty. Though it was the Augustan [illegible] its [illegible] complete [illegible] credible history [illegible]. [illegible] the date of his birth [illegible] death, [illegible] his will, the [illegible] Wm. Shakspeare [illegible], though the [illegible].

[illegible] Amer[illegible] excep[illegible] year 15[illegible].

[illegible] consist [illegible] essays [illegible] written [illegible] opinions are deemed [illegible] delight in some respects [illegible] my opinion [illegible] dramatic writers of the Elizabethan [illegible] have fallen in our age. The number [illegible] is small, comprising only Shakespeare, Jonson, six of thier contemporaries, or

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immediate successors, and only two of these who preced-
ed them. The fact that from such limited resources, it is
entirely impossible to prepare even a tolerable digest of the
dramatic history of this period, must excuse the poverty
[illegible] upon this the most fruitful of themes.

A [illegible] years [illegible] [illegible] the character and [illegible] 1564 [illegible] which Shakes- [illegible] died. It is evident [illegible] of the five hundred drama [illegible] this period, even of [illegible] however [illegible] necessary [illegible] the birth of the English Drama [illegible] were almost simultaneous, [illegible] united, [illegible] companies. [illegible] propose to [illegible] short [illegible] and to con- sider the [illegible] of the [illegible] from the time of its first ap- [illegible] England until the year 1620.

[illegible] period we shall [illegible] into [illegible] distinctly separa [illegible] all the written pre- [illegible] author [illegible] about the [illegible] Pre-Shakespearian Drama; the sec- [illegible] Shakespeare himself and [illegible] successors, who [illegible] adopted him as their model.

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To satisfy this yearning which existed in his own and kindred mind, after the perfections of the old Greek Tragedy, [illegible] by written [illegible] Ferrex and Porrex.

[illegible] the diverse influence which [illegible] Greek Tragedy [illegible] like the [illegible] it [illegible] differ- [illegible] polish, [illegible] almost impossible.

[illegible] Gorboduc, this play [illegible] his [illegible] excelled [illegible].

[illegible] Gorbuduc [illegible] birth of Shakespeare, appear [illegible] the first worthy [illegible] entitled GAMMER GURTON'S NEEDLE. [illegible] of all [illegible] but bold [illegible] by the introduction [illegible] but with all their imperfections on their heads. [illegible] Nature and [illegible] coarse- [illegible] refined [illegible] however possess [illegible] which gives them considerable [illegible] at the present time.

The Drama in both its forms soon became popular and was constantly expanding and refining itself. It gradually threw off the crudities in character and incident which it had recieved from the Mysteries and freed itself from the cumbering formalities of the Greek Tragedy. It was the product of two forces essentially different. From the one it recieved the range and freedom in the choice of Subjects which it possessed, from the other it recieved its artistic harmony of parts. Unlike the Greek Drama it sought not the ideal perfection of individual characters but the harmonizing light and Shade of Nature. It has been well said that the Greek Drama was like a group of finished statuary — each one of the figures perfect in itself and not dependent on the others for effect: — While the English Drama is like a finished landscape each part enhancing the beauty and effect of the rest. Though the Drama was yet undeveloped in our language when Shakspeare appeared as an author it is a mistake to suppose that there were no dramatists of worth or merit before him. At the [illegible] we have the [illegible] and courtly Lyly whose sweet verses fall upon the ear like "the melody of many waves", "Or choral murmurs from a pearl lipped shell". He seems to have been doomed to oblivion by literary connoisseurs but if he had written nothing more than the touching Scenes of Endymion he would have well

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deserved an immortality of grateful remembrances. What could be more beautiful and poetic than the words of his faithful Eumenides who referring to the long sleep of Endimion says "The twig to which thou laidest down thine head has grown a tree". But in addition to this he has left us one of the noblest characters of our historic Drama - his Alexander which approaches nearer to our ideal of the Macedonian hero than any other description or representation which we have ever seen. Another noble name which has been almost eclipsed by the brilliancy of Shakespeare's Coming is Christopher Marlowe "the dark, the terrible, the dreamy" whose "mighty line" held a place upon the stage side by side with the tragedies of our great Master long after both Authors had departed. His mind seems to have been attuned for horrors. To him darkness must indeed have been "visible" for his soul loved it and revelled in its mystery. The Mephistophiles of his Faustus was undoubtedly the original of Milton's Satan, So strong is the resemblance to us, that we wonder that more Critics have not recognized this lineage of "the Satan" as true which was pointed out by an Eminent literateur more than twenty years since. A. W. Foster tells a modern critic says. "Faustus is a sketch but a gigantic one and its force and strength far surpasses the Faustus of the

German lover Goethe. The "Jew of Malta" seems to to us to a Shylock in blacker colors, Shakspeare's Jew clad in a bloody gabardine. A conception which the more skillful hand has thrown somewhat into the shade by making it the background on which are painted Portia's and virtues. Thus we see Shakspeare did not find the ~~Drama~~ drama unsolidated and rude but of such strength and merit as to have won for itself an honorable place in the literature of the world even without the aid of his genius. Instead therefore of wasting his powers in fruitless attempts to discover new and superior modes for the expression of poetic truths he was filled with reverence for those which already existed and quite contentedly he was doubtless glad to labor in the field where Marlowe, Peele and Lyly had toiled. At this time however the Romance writings of southern Europe were beginning to have their effect upon English Literature. Shakspeare was not exempted from its influence on the contrary he seems to have been impregnated with its spirit. For several of his plays ~~are~~ are founded on the works of the Italian Romancists and almost every one contains indubitable evidence of his familiar acquaintance with their writings. Inspired by these he threw Romance into dramatic form. He did not merely copy Nature in her disconnected parts but he imitated her in all and gathered them into a whole. He grouped the faultless statues of the Greek tragedy in

perspective and formed pictures worthy of an Angel.
It is this element which gives to Shakespeares Tragedies
that peculiar life and interest which his predecessors lacked
Shakspeare without the influences exerted on his
mind by the Romances of Italy and Spain would
have been "like the play of Hamlet without the
Prince of Denmark" if I may give another stroke
to the much hackneyed figure — and instead of
towering above his predecessors and contemporaries
"in such excellent proud and eminent" it is
doubtful whether he would not have fallen below some
of them in genius. It is vain to say our literature
that the Moralities did not die out entirely with
the first attempts to extinguish them for they impressed
upon our dramatist the use of ludicrous
characters. The Moralities had fixed upon the minds
of the English people an impress too strong to be
erased. These characters who were for the
stage (as all then did) were obliged therefore, to
a certain degree to cater to the taste created by
them. Thus it came that Satan was father to
the Clown and nice parent of the buffoon. This
character given to the English Drama its freedom
in the choice of subject its breadth of view which
make it so different from and superior to that of
any other language. The characters of the classic Drama
were developed only so far as the incidents of the play
demanded, while those of the Romantic drama though
perhaps less perfect both in conception and

in Execution are completely developed and stand before us living images. The former were like the relievos of Praxitiles, the latter like the blinded figures of a rough artist. Thus we see that the Romantic or Shakspearian drama was of a composite nature, recieving its form from the classic shores of Greece, its mirthful features from the cell of the religious anchorite and its peculiar character and sentiment from the sunny plains of Northern Italy. It is probably the most perfect form of scenic literature that the world has ever known. This may be said to have been brought to its greatest possible perfection by Shakspeare. His plays embrace every grade of character and may be said to constitute an almost perfect "Index Rerum" of nature's different phases. It is useless to speak of the merits of Shakspeare. There are however certain excellencies which as characteristics of the Romantic Drama we wish to notice. These specialities of the Drama which Shakspeare incorporated were first plainly set forth by Coleridge in his lectures on that Author and as they can scarce be better stated than by him we shall extract those which we consider bear on our theme.

1.° "He always preferred expectation to surprise". In reading Shakspeares Dramas we always feel what is to come before it ~~before~~ has arrived. "It is like the true reading of the passage "God said let there be light and there was light — not there was light. As the feeling with which we

startle at a shooting star. Compared with that of watching the sunrise such an one is surprise compared with expectation". 2° "He always keeps the high road of life. Shakespeare has no incestuous adulteries, no intricating incests, no villainous vice, he never renders amiable that which Religion and Reason alike teach us to detest, or clothes sinfulness in the garb of virtue". He never inverts the order of Nature and Society, does not make Every Magistrate a glutton or a drunkard, nor every Roman an intemperate; he has no benevolent butchers nor sentimental rat-catchers". This cannot be said to be true of the Romantic drama itself for in none of Shakespeare's successors as Beaumont and Fletcher is was directly the reverse.

3° "The dramatic interest is independent of the plot". In the Romantic drama the interest is dependent not upon the plot but upon the characters. The plot is merely the background in which they are exhibited. It is not the beauty or value of the pearls which the string but the worth and beauty of each that makes the collection valuable. Of the other exponents of the Romantic drama, the immediate successors or partial contemporaries of Shakespeare we will not but few. And first among these we will place John Fletcher, the first born

mild, thoughtful friend of the rough Beaumont whose name with true friendliness and sacrificing modesty he placed first in the collection of their earlier works. "The sale of Fletcher's Phantasie" as Fuller quaintly remarks "bore him through 36 Tragedies and Comedies among which are some of the noblest ornaments of our noble literature". Next came the sweet thoughtful Philip Massinger whose writings always make us think of the "loved disciple", so full are they of tenderness and purity. Then Ford with his constant burthen of sorrow and the fierce miseries of the Broken Heart. The last that we can mention is Webster who always seems to us to have been a grinning fiend, who wrote with a pen dipped in blood amid the discordant shoutings of madness, for of all the scenes of horror which man has attempted to portray, the Death Scene of the Duchess of Malfy is unquestionably the most crushing and terrible. Sure he must have listened to the wailings of the lost who could picture such a scene. If there be any one thing which the Romantic Drama, by whomsoever written and whether in the form of Tragedy or Comedy, seems inherently to lack, it is humor. This seems to have been the only faculty of man which the myriad minded Shakspeare could not successfully imitate. In this however he entirely failed and we challenge the most enthusiastic lover and

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indefatigable Student of Shakespeare to cite a single passage which has a shade of humor in it. He has according to our notions of wit and humor a host of witty characters but not a humorous one. This lack however was fully supplied by the Jonsonian Drama which we shall briefly notice ——

A. W. Tourgee

Dramatic Poetry of the Age of Shakespeare.

Class Essay, written March 24 – 1860.
Read before the [illegible] June 4 [illegible]

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