

Chapter X: The Catholic Drama.

There is such a thing as a Catholic drama, a development of modern times. It has been called "an unknown chapter of the Oxford movement." Its writers are not necessarily Catholics. Some of them have been Protestants, some infidels, some Jews, some Catholic-haters, but its spirit is essentially Catholic, and its influence in breaking down the barrier of prejudice against the Catholic Church has been incalculable.

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Richelieu, by Bulwer-Lytton, the first Catholic drama, was produced in 1839. At that time Catholic influence was at its lowest ebb all over the world. The principal character in the play was the typical powerful political Cardinal of the Middle Ages, who threatens the king with the curse of Rome. Thunder and lightning, a shot in the dark, a ghost, George Cohan's American flag, -- nothing produces the effect of the curse of Rome. It represents not superstition, not fear, not patriotism, but majestic power; and the people love it.

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Richelieu was a revolution. All the managers demanded plays that had a Cardinal or some high dignitary of the Church for the central figure. Douglas Jerrold, a playwright who had no sympathy for the Church nor for the character he attempted to portray, wrote a play about Thomas à Becket. He had to make the Saint's action appear noble in order to please the people, but it went against the grain and a great contrast is noted in the scenes in which his own nature got the upper hand.

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In 1850 The Pope of Rome was staged. It was the first play that depicted the Holy Father on the stage, and it was a tremendous success. Tom Taylor put on a play called Joan of Arc which depicted the maid of Orleans as she was. It aroused the infidels of France and inspired an invective essay by Francis against this woman who is now a saint of the Church, but the effective answer to this was the production of Percy McKay's Joan of Arc. Mark Twain studied the character of Joan intending to write a burlesque, but so fell in love with her character that he has written one of the finest stories ever written about her.

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Schiller's Mary Stuart, produced by Modjeska, showed Mary as an angel and queen Bess as a devil. Although it was against English sentiment, it was played on the American and English stage and made a great hit. Everyman, a modern morality play, which shows the last hours of a Catholic, was a great success, and Hall Caine's The Eternal City, commonplace but powerful, has recently been revised for the screen.

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People who do not have their religious doubts satisfied by authority and whose religious emotions are repressed by absence of liturgy, will always welcome the Catholic drama. People love incense and worship power.