

Chapter XI: The Anti-Catholic Drama.

One of the first attempts to pervert the Catholic drama was The Three Musketeers, by Dumas. It ran for a few years in the sixties. It still lives in opera. You can put anything over in opera or movies. There is nothing anti-Catholic in the play until Richelieu appears. He is made the villain. There was no apparent reason for making his character the opposite of what it was, and the public would not let it go down. Twenty five thousand dollars (a large sum in those days) was lost in the production.

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Alfred Tennyson, then poet Laureate, made the next attempt. He undertook to ridicule the Church in a play called Mary Tudor. He always entertained a deep dislike for Catholics, and in his play he gave full vent to his feelings. The play was put on to please the queen and Tennyson, but it was a decided failure. Any actress of prominence would have refused to play it because she would have realized that the leading character would have to have the sympathy of the audience. The people do not want the abnormalities of history.

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Tennyson again tried his hand at an anti-Catholic play, and wrote Thomas a Becket, in which he tried in every way to belittle the character of the saint. Sir Henry Irving put it on, but was wise enough to change the lines and take out all the sentiment which tended to belittle the character of the leading figure. The audience fell in love with the character, and the purpose of the author was completely defeated. There is no more convincing example of the conventions of the romantic drama.

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In another instance, however, Irving did not show the same perspicacity, and made a great blunder. Sardou was not a man of genius, but he knew how to write a play to please the people. He tried to write a play on Dante, and Irving undertook to put it on in New York. Irving had been in poor shape financially and physically, and had come to New York to recuperate. He could not have made a greater mistake than to put on Dante the first night. The critics declared it a rank melodrama. The scene in hell was supposed to be good, but it was rank and burlesque. Irving picked out the scenes which opposed the Catholics, but it did not do any good. The play was dead.

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Sardou wrote another piece, The Sorceress, which Mrs. Patrick Campbell tried to put on in New York. In it he debased one of the holiest, noblest, most brilliant characters of history, Cardinal Ximenes, the Chief Inquisitor. He was a statesman, Prime Minister of Spain and Regent after the death of Ferdinand the Catholic, a man of highest learning and great sanctity. He had nothing to do with the administration of justice by the Spanish Inquisition, yet Sardou transports him to the scenes of its tortures and has him gloat over the victims as they writhed in their agony. It was splendidly played but the people were disgusted.