

a community called ...

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CAN A CHRISTIAN CONSISTENTLY PATRONIZE THE THEATER.

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IT is Locke who relates that he once listened to a long and animated discussion, which waxed sharper and fiercer until it was happily suggested that the heated disputants should clearly define the sense in which they used the terms under consideration. Then it was discovered, to the surprise of all parties, that there was no cause for dispute. It is, therefore, important that we should, at the beginning, definitely know what it is that we

intend to discuss. The theater presents to our view various topics, each of which would be sufficient for one paper; namely, the history of the theater, the relation of the theater to the fine arts, the influence of the theater on the production of dramatic poetry, the theater as a school of æsthetics, etc. In this tract, however, I shall not discuss any of these topics, but present views of the theater from the stand-point of Christian ethics. Hence I will confine myself to this question: *Can a Christian consistently patronize the theater?*

To determine this question it will be necessary to investigate the nature and influence of the theater of the past and the present. If its nature be in harmony with the teachings and precepts of the Bible and Christianity; if its influence be salutary to the temporal and eternal welfare of man; if it be a promoter of good morals; if it kindle and feed the holy fire of virtue in man—then we will unhesitatingly and most emphatically answer this question in the affirmative, and praise God for an institution at once so attractive and bene-

ficial; we will as earnestly pray for the success of the theaters in our cities as we have prayed and still pray for revivals in our respective churches. If, however, the investigation prove that the theater is in its nature and influence a hotbed for the cultivation of vice, detrimental to character, undermining virtue and the Christian faith—then we will as unhesitatingly and emphatically answer the question negatively, namely: A Christian, loving his Master, his own soul, and his fellow-beings, cannot consistently patronize the theater. If it is an ally of vice and leads men to destruction, it is the duty of every virtuous man, and more especially of every earnest Christian, to abjure the theater and to do every thing that can legitimately be done to counteract its baleful influence.

As a result of my own observation, and of a careful investigation of the testimony of others who, being well informed on the subject, are qualified to sit in judgment on this institution, I charge against the theater: *That it is antichristian in tendency and a corrupter*

of good morals. If I succeed in producing sufficient testimony to sustain this charge and convict the theater of the same, to the exclusion of all reasonable doubt, then we must necessarily come to the conclusion that no Christian can consistently give his patronage to such an institution.

Let me premise, however, that I will speak of the actual, not of the imaginary theater—of the theater of yesterday and to-day. What this institution might be, viewed from the stand-point of the ideality of Schiller, or from any other imaginary state of things, it is not easy to know. Such inquiries only lead into the region of speculation, and produce no practical results. We have to do, not with the ideal or imaginary, but with the actual theater, as it was and is.

This institution was and is antichristian and immoral. It was born and nurtured, not in Christendom, but in heathendom. Its existence dates back at least six centuries before Christ. It originated as a religious ceremony of paganism. The earliest mention we find

of it in history is in the days of Solon. Its appliances and influences were then used to clothe with greater solemnity and effect the sacred celebrations of the Greeks. The theater of that period held such a high place in the estimation of the people that actors were all trained and paid at the expense of the state. Now these dramatic performances, associated as they were with the worship of Bacchus and with other heathen celebrations, were highly seasoned with licentiousness, both in language and in action. There is sufficient evidence on record that the theatrical representations among the Greeks were, on the whole, characterized by excesses and gross irregularities. Solon, one of the seven wise men of Greece, raised his voice in protest against these performances. Rollin tells us that Solon went to hear Thespis, who, according to the custom of ancient poets, acted himself. When the play was ended he asked Thespis, "Are you not ashamed to utter such lies before so many people?" Thespis replied, "There is no harm in lies of this sort,

and in poetical fictions, which were made for diversion." "No," answered Solon, giving a great stroke with his stick upon the ground, "but if we suffer and approve of lying for our own diversion it will quickly find its way into our serious engagements, and all our business and affairs." He condemned the theater as "a vicious novelty, tending by its simulation of false character, and its effusion of sentiments not genuine or sincere, to corrupt the integrity of human dealings."

Listen for a moment to the testimony of the philosopher Plato. He says: "The diversions of the stage are dangerous to the temper and sobriety of mind. They arouse the feelings of anger and desire too much. Tragedy is prone to render men boisterous, and comedy makes them buffoons. Hence those passions are cherished which ought to be checked, virtue loses ground, and reason becomes unsound." Aristotle, one of the great thinkers of the world, declares: "The law ought to forbid young people the seeing of comedies till they are proof against de-

bauchery." Now I claim that an institution which was born and nurtured in pagan Greece, an institution which even the more noble among the pagans denounced as dangerous and vicious, must be in its nature, spirit, and characteristics in opposition to the nature and spirit of Christianity, and therefore antichristian and a corrupter of good morals.

But let us follow up the history of the theater. This institution, born and nurtured in pagan Greece, was adopted into the family by pagan Rome. Tytler, the historian, says: "The Romans borrowed their literature from Greece, and first attempted that species of literature then most popular in that country; if, indeed, their Plautus and Terence and the rest did more than translate or adapt the then most popular pieces of the Greek stage." About the year of Rome 514 the dramatic poem, enjoying at this time its highest celebrity in Greece, was introduced into the Roman commonwealth by Livius Andronicus, a Greek slave. Theatrical representations became a popular amusement among the Ro-

mans just as they lost their stern love of virtue, yielded to luxury, and grew weak. The enormous expense attending them indicates their powerful hold upon the popular mind. "The ruins which are most conspicuous to-day, with here and there an exception, are the theaters, the circuses, the amphitheaters. Their vast extent and massive walls, seating variously from thirty to eighty thousand people, are the astonishment of the world."

This hold which the theater gained upon pagan Rome is strong circumstantial evidence in proof of the fact that this institution was antichristian in its tendency at that period of history. For we must conclude that it catered to the depraved taste of these pagans, otherwise it would not have captivated them to such an extent as history proves to have been the case. Moreover, the testimony of some of these pagans themselves proves how utterly antichristian and immoral the theater of that age was.

The historian Livy says: "A theater was being erected under the direction of the cen-

sors, and Scipio Nasica urged, in a motion or decree before the senate, that the theater was a useless establishment, and its exhibitions destructive of good morals. By these and similar reasons the senate, feeling itself to be the guardian of the welfare and virtue of the citizens, passed a decree which leveled the walls of the unfinished theater to the ground." What an outcry there would be in any of our modern Christian cities if the city council should abolish the theater! What an infringement of "personal liberty" it would be considered! Gibbon, the portrayer of the downfall of Rome, names the corruption of the people by theatrical exhibitions and shows as one of the causes effecting this result. At the beginning of the fifth century, when the Goths were knocking at the gates of Rome, the vast and magnificent theaters were filled by three thousand female dancers and as many singers.

Again, the attitude of the early Church toward the theater, as she found it existing in Rome and other cities, clearly proves that she

considered this institution as antagonistic to the teachings and principles of the Christian religion. The Church very early introduced into her formulas for the reception of members an express prohibition of attending at the theater. At baptism the candidate was called upon to say, "*Vanis mundi pompis renuntio*"—"The vain pomp of the world I renounce." Regarding this formula Dr. Taylor Lewis declares: "It can be clearly shown that this word 'pomp' was employed with special reference to theatrical shows." The early Church excluded both actors and spectators from her sacraments.

The fathers of the Church denounced the theater in the strongest terms. Theophilus, Bishop of Antioch, who taught in the second century, said: "Neither dare we presume upon the liberties of your shows, lest our sense be tinctured with indecency and profaneness." Clement called it "the chair of pestilence." Augustine designates it "a cage of uncleanness, and a public school of debauchery." Tertullian says: "Such exhibi-

tions excite all sorts of wild and impure passions, anger, fury, and lust; while the spirit of Christianity is a spirit of meekness, peace, and purity." Cyprian asks: "What business has a Christian at such places as these?" In regard to the attitude of the early Church to the theater Dr. Schaff declares: "The prevailing sentiment of the early Church went further than gladiatorial shows, and rejected all kinds of public spectacles, tragedies, comedies, dances, mimic plays, and races—they were so closely connected with the immoralities of the heathen." All these testimonies conclusively prove that the early Church discovered in the theater, as then existing, an antichristian and demoralizing institution. Hence it is not surprising that when the faith of the Christian Church was acknowledged as the religion of the Roman Empire the doom of the theater was sealed.

Now, this has been, on the whole, the characteristic of the theater in all ages and in all lands. The Church of the Middle Ages instituted dramatic representations for the blend-

ing of amusement with instruction. But it is well known that the Church of that age was sadly corrupted. The preaching of the Gospel in its simplicity and purity did not satisfy the intellectual relish and the depraved desires of that age. Hence, we are not astonished to find that the corrupted Church spread her protecting wings over the stage. These theatrical representations were called in high-sounding terms, "mystery plays," or "sacred plays." They were brought into use about the twelfth century, and continued to be performed in England even to the sixteenth century. They were antichristian in their tendency and influence, although a so-called "Christian" Church favored them with her fostering care.

In one of these sacred plays of the twelfth century, which is entitled "A Play of the Old and New Testaments," Adam and Eve are introduced upon the stage naked, and conversing in very strange terms about their nakedness. A very edifying spectacle for the cultivation of Christian virtues, I should

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say! These plays were, of course, not all so grossly indecent; but this one instance shows that even under the fostering care of the Church this institution could not deny its antichristian and indecent character. Many more of these sacred mystery plays, however, contained great absurdities and very gross indecency.

Lecky says that after the thirteenth century these so-called sacred plays assumed a popular form, their religious character speedily declined, and they became at last one of the most powerful agents in bringing the Church, and indeed all religion, into disrepute. In gross indecency they well-nigh equaled the worst days of the Roman theater. More than once the government of France suppressed the sacred plays on account of their evil effects upon morals. As an amusement, the churchly theater cannot be designated a success. As a method of preaching, it was not an improvement on the apostolic models. It should teach the Church a lesson for all time. She should avoid all at-

tempts in this direction. I heartily applaud the action taken by the Methodist Preachers' Meeting of San Francisco a few years ago. It unanimously adopted the following :

“ *Whereas*, Certain societies have adopted dramatic exhibitions as a means of advancing the cause of benevolence, and even of the Church ; be it

“ *Resolved*, That we regard such societies as a preparatory school to the theater, and that as such they have no place in the Church, and should have no indorsement and patronage from members of the Church.”

That is the platform upon which the Church every-where ought to squarely place herself in regard to the theater.

The modern theater is the offspring of those sacred plays in the mediæval age, in Italy, Spain, and England. Let us listen for a few moments to the testimony respecting the character of the earlier English stage. Knight, the historian, testifies of the English theater of the seventeenth century : “ Not the least of the opposing influences against the

promotion of Christian knowledge was the licentiousness of the stage. In 1697 Sunderland, as Lord Chamberlain, had issued an order to prevent the profaneness and immorality of the acted drama." And of the theater of the eighteenth century the same author says: "In theatrical representations of life there was scarcely an attempt to exhibit a woman of sense and modesty."

Macaulay writes, in regard to the theater in the times of Charles II.: "The profligacy of the English plays, satires, songs, and novels of that age is a deep blot on our national fame." Under Cromwell and the Commonwealth the theaters were deemed so corrupting that they were closed. Regarding this act of the Puritans, Green, the historian, says: "It was, in the main, the honest hatred of God-fearing men against the foulest depravity in a poetic and attractive form." Archbishop Tillotson, speaking of parents who take their children to the theater, says: "They are such monsters—I had almost said devils—as not to know how to give their

children good things. Instead of bringing them to God's church, they bring them to the devil's chapels, play-houses, places of debauchery, those schools of lewdness and vice." John Wesley declares: "The theater not only saps the foundation of all religion, but also tends to drinking and debauchery."

Judge Bulstrode, in charging a jury in London, on April 12, 1718, said: "One play-house ruins more souls than fifty churches are able to save." Lord Kames writes: "In the play-house contempt of religion and a declared war upon the purity of the female sex are converted from being infamous vices into fashionable virtues."

A committee of the British Parliament, after a full investigation of the subject, reported that the only way to reform the theater was to burn it down. Our own Congress, soon after the Declaration of Independence, adopted the following resolution:

"Whereas, True religion and good morals are the only solid foundations of public liberty and happiness;

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“Resolved, That it be and is hereby earnestly recommended to the several States to take the most effective measures for the encouragement thereof, and the suppression of theatrical entertainments, horse-racing, gaming, and such other diversions as are productive of idleness, dissipation, and a general depravity of principles and manners.”

All these voices proclaim unanimously that the theater was, in former ages, antichristian in its tendency and highly demoralizing, and as such was condemned by the wisest and best of men. Thus far we have found that the poet has truly said :

“The theater was from the very first
The favorite haunt of sin; though honest men,
Some very honest, wise, and worthy men,
Maintained it might be turned to good account;
And so, perhaps, it might, but never was.
From first to last it was an evil place;
And now such things were acted there as made
The demons blush; and from the neighborhood
Angels and holy men tremblingly retired.”

But let us now turn to the theater of our own time. I am sorry to say that we still find

it in its unregenerate state. The stage is to-day, as it always has been, outrageously irreligious and profane. Dr. W. P. Breed declares: "Profanations of the name of Almighty God are and always have been a staple article in trade with play-writers and play-actors." The pages of Shakespeare abound with them. A recipe for a modern play given in a number of the New York *Round-Table* demands, among other morsels, "three hundred oaths and sixty-four pages of blasphemy." Can it be otherwise than fearfully demoralizing to utter and listen to blasphemy as an amusement?

Dr. J. M. Buckley, the present editor of the New York *Christian Advocate*, carefully examined more than sixty plays produced in the "best" theaters of New York during three years. The results of his investigation he gives in a book bearing the title, *Christians and the Theater*. I quote him here for the purpose of proving that the stage of our day is antichristian in its character and influence. The doctor says:

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“Nearly every play of popular reputation is open to the following charges: (a) Christian principles are not accepted as the rule of morals. (b) True religion is never praised, but usually ridiculed. (c) Wickedness is made to give amusement. Crimes that would call down the wrath of God on their perpetrators are systematically made to provoke laughter. (d) Oaths and profane expressions abound. (e) Where there is a moral, it is, as a rule, hastily disposed of in the fifth act.”

The plays produced on the stage of the present day are just as indecent and immoral as they ever were. Dr. Buckley found that of the sixty or more plays which he, as has already been said, thoroughly examined, fifty were corrupt. He sustains this assertion by giving the names and outlines of some of the most popular of this number. He briefly analyzes some of them as follows: “‘She Stoops to Conquer’ contains profaneness, vulgarity, and several sneers at temperance and religion. ‘Money’ is a succession of hypocrisy, covetousness, drinking, jealousy, and infidelity.

The 'Belle's Stratagem' is full of attempted adultery, licentious allusions, and is thoroughly demoralizing. 'East Lynne' consists of infidelity, adultery, murder, remarriage, and subsequent return of first wife to die in the house. 'The Critic' abounds in obscene allusions to women and profaneness. 'School for Scandal' is a play the whole of which no woman could read to any man, not her husband, without giving him cause to suspect her purity." Here we have an analysis of some of the most popular plays in the most respectable theaters of New York for three consecutive years, and by a very judicious critic.

Dr. Herrick Johnson examined the plays of the four leading theaters of Chicago for September, October, and November, 1881, with the following result: "At Hooley's thirteen evenings were given to the so-called standard drama (Keene), and seventy-six evenings to trash. At McVicker's, twelve evenings were given to Miss Anderson, six to Joe Jefferson, twelve to Denman Thompson, and forty-eight to trash. At Haverly's, eighteen evenings

to the standard drama (McCullough), and fifty-one to trash. At the Grand Opera all the seventy-nine evenings to trash." Further on he explains in what sense he uses the term "trash" in regard to theatrical plays. "Trash," he says, "may be an insult to intelligence and an offense to taste, but not an affront to morals. But this trash of the theaters is all three. Very much of it is vile and vicious, appealing to what is base in human nature, and foul in its origin, exhibition, and inspiration."

Now, let us remember that both Buckley and Johnson speak of the plays produced on the stage of the best theaters in New York and Chicago. If, however, the best theaters are thus corrupt, what must be the condition of the so-called "low theaters and bawdy play-houses?"

Dr. S. M. Vernon, who, in 1882, wrote a little book on "Amusements," and who has made the character of the theater of to-day the subject of careful investigation, gives expression to some of his views as follows:

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"You will find the majority of these popular pieces for a season in any of our cities studies in vice, shrewd apologies for crime, an attempt to make shame honorable, to give lying and falsehood the respect due to truth, to give robbery and theft the immunity and protection claimed for honesty, to elevate the profligate rake of society, to make the seducer a gallant hero, and to subvert the whole order set in God's law, and by pure Christian society. . . . Vice is hailed with applause, virtue with hisses. Gambling, drunkenness, profanity, and libertinism are considered as chivalric weaknesses, rather to be regretted, and yet to be expected in a really good fellow, while intelligence is ranked as cool villainy, honesty as stupidity, virtue as an outward garb for greater security in vile practices, and religion is a sham and a pretense. . . . Such teaching tends to destroy the very idea of virtue, to wreck all confidence in human nature, to obliterate moral distinctions, and infiltrates in this soft and subtle way the ideas of debauchery and crime."

Dr. Howard Crosby says of the theaters: "As they are, I pronounce them satanic and soul-destroying." Dr. Marvin R. Vincent declares: "The theater, as it now is, is no place for a Christian." Dr. Prime says of the theaters of New York: "They are all degrading and corrupting. Not one of them confines itself to what is by common courtesy styled the legitimate drama, and there is much that is loose enough for that."

Dr. W. P. Breed, who has written a little tract on the theater, says, in concluding: "The stage is outrageously profane, unblushingly indecent, and terribly immoral; the character of actors, male and female, is, with few exceptions, one of licentiousness; and the stage is to-day making desolating inroads upon the delicacy of our female society. The stage is therefore the foe of purity, of piety, of the nation, of man. It is the place where thousands of our precious youth form their first acquaintance with vice, whence they go, step by step, along the downward road, breaking the hearts of parents, making virtue weep,

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piety mourn, and constraining the republic to cry out with Augustus to Varus: ‘O give me back my legions!’”

Thus testify these ministers of God. The testimony of others could be produced, all denouncing the theater of to-day as an anti-christian and immoral institution. However, there are people who think that clergymen are prejudiced against the theater to such an extent as to incapacitate them to sit in judgment and render a sober and judicious verdict in the case. Hence we shall call to the witness-stand some of the theatrical critics of the secular press. Listen we to their testimony regarding the character of the stage in our own day.

This is what one of them has to say respecting the introduction of a play entitled “The Black Crook,” at Niblo’s, New York, in the *Northern Monthly Magazine*, for March, 1868: “The initial evening saw the theater packed—but with men, very few women having the temerity to go to an exhibition so very questionable. The second evening the small fem-

inine element was increased, and before the second month had begun city dames of position and carefully reared damsels ventured to gaze at the wanton dances and lewd tableaux, in spite of the blushes that covered them to their finger-tips! Even the demon dance, which no man, however *blasé*, could see for the first time without some sense of shame, was accepted as a thing of course. The first night of its presentation even New York was astonished, and after a few seconds would have hissed the lascivious exhibition but for the *clacquers* carefully posted through the house."

Hear the dramatic critic of the *Inter-Ocean* describing the secret of the success of "Michael Strogoff:" "Spangles and tights are the charm; low-cut bodices reveal the interest. Two-score women and girls who look very pretty across the footlights, clad in an amazing economy of materials, winding gracefully in and out the figures of the dance, or coyly lifting neatly-booted feet above the straight line of sight, are attractive creatures to the average sense." Mr. Henry F. Boyn-

ton, writing from Chicago to the *Tribune*, February 9, 1882, says: "The mess of rot and rubbish which is constantly being offered for the delectation of Chicago theater-goers is simply appalling. . . . The pabulum offered to-day at most of our theaters—nay, more, at all of them, from London to Hong Kong, right around the world—is little better than trash, . . . which contaminates the innocent, and disgusts the discerning spectator." An American writer for the *Contemporary Review* of London, speaking of the New York theaters, says: "A friend of mine who made a tour of them all was inclined to think that those patronized by the roughs in the Bowery were less immoral than those patronized by the residents on Fifth Avenue." He adds, respecting the theater-going New Yorkers: "It is a matter of dispute whether they honestly enjoy good music as much as they enjoy immoral plays." Similar testimony of other dramatic critics could be added; however, it is not necessary.

We will now listen to the testimony of some
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of the *actors*. No one can reasonably charge that they are prejudiced against the stage. Hence their opinions ought to have considerable weight. When Dr. Herrick Johnson's indictment first appeared there was in Chicago a talented star-actor of national reputation. After reading Johnson's array of charges and proofs, he said : " Would to God I dared say all I know and feel about this matter! But Johnson is right, only he has not told half the truth."

Edwin Booth, who has been called "the most distinguished modern representative of the dramatic profession," in a letter to the *Christian Union*, says : " My knowledge of the modern drama is so very meager that I never permit my wife or daughter to witness a play without previously ascertaining its character. This is the method I pursue ; I can suggest no other unless it might be by means of a dramatic censor, whose taste or judgment might, however, be frequently at fault. If the management of theaters could be denied to speculators, and placed in the

hands of actors who value their reputation and respect their calling, the stage would at least afford healthy recreation, if not indeed a wholesome stimulus to the exercise of noble sentiments. But while the theater is permitted to be a mere shop for gain—open to every huckster of immoral gimcracks—there is no other way to discriminate between the pure and base than through the experience of others.” This is the verdict of a great actor. It is needless to look for a more sweeping condemnation of the character of the theater.

The great tragedian, W. C. Macready, made it an invariable rule that “none of his children should either go to the theater or have any visiting connections with actors or actresses.” Has the preacher ever lived who made it the invariable rule that none of his children should either go to church or have any visiting connections with the families of clergymen?

Before resting the case, I will call one more witness. It is a man to whom all the

pure-minded people of this country are under great obligations, for he has for a number of years waged an uncompromising war against obscene literature. I mean that fearless man Anthony Comstock. He says of the theater: "Here the story of crime is illustrated. Scenes of bloodshed, of domestic infidelity, of atrocities and lewdness that surpass the worst stories, are enacted by painted wretches, whose highest boast is shame, and who seek loud applause by the most ribald jokes. Vulgarities that should cause a blush to mantle even a harlot's cheek are the stock in trade, the means by which the masses are to be entertained."

This gentleman tells us that in the city of Brooklyn alone not less than one thousand boys under twenty years of age attend the theater every night. In one of these criminal places, where seldom, if ever, a woman's face is seen in the audience, he has seen hundreds of boys in a single evening. The play was of the most beastly character. These theaters he calls "the sinks of hell."

However, it is time to rest the case. I believe the evidence produced overwhelmingly convicts the theater of the past and the present as, on the whole, an abominable institution. I think the testimony given in the case proves to the exclusion of all reasonable doubt that the theater was and is antichristian in its nature and influence, and a corrupter of good morals. How, then, dare Christian men and women patronize the theater? How dare a child of the heavenly Father spend money, time, and energy in the support and furtherance of an institution which is manifestly antichristian in its nature and influence, and a corrupter of good morals?

No; a Christian cannot consistently patronize the theater as it is to-day and always has been. Hannah More speaks with great truth and force when she says: "Light and darkness are not more opposed to each other than the Bible and the play-book. If the one be good the other must be evil. If the Scriptures are to be obeyed, the theater must be avoided. The only way to justify the stage, as it is, as

it ever has been, and is ever likely to be, is to condemn the Bible; the same individual cannot defend both."

Hence, every Christian ought to take a decided stand against this institution. He ought to think and speak as did Dr. Rush. "What! madam," said he to a Christian lady who spoke of the pleasure she anticipated at the theater in the evening, "what! madam, do you go to the theater?" "Yes," was the reply; "and don't you go, doctor?" "No, madam," said he, "I never go to such places." "Why do you not go? Do you think it is sinful?" said she. He replied: "I never will publish to the world that I think Jesus Christ a bad master, and religion an unsatisfying portion, which I should do if I went on the devil's ground in quest for happiness."

And now, my brethren, let us imitate the Christian heroism and fidelity of Canon Wilberforce in Westminster Abbey on the occasion of Sarah Bernhardt's visit to London, when he said: "She has dared to come to London, bringing her illegitimate children with her,

and flaunting her very skirts in the face of royalty." Then, turning to the Prince of Wales, he said: "It is the nation's disgrace that Britain's future king could so far forget what belongs to the dignity of his station that he should meet this woman in the theater green-room, and speak face to face to her in flattering words." Closing, the canon said: "O how deeply virtuous England regrets the premature death of the good Prince Consort! Had he been living to-day this could never have happened." Thus let us denounce the theater as an ungodly institution without fear of man.

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