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New England dramatists (from 1750-1860)

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(from 1750-1860)

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American Quarterly
(6:169) W. H. Page: Shall we have American Dramatists?

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FOREWORD.

This is a work on New England Dramatists, and on New England Drama, written in the hope that the student of American Drama may see what part New England environment and education have taken in the dramatic work of America.

In the various collections of American Plays, three New Englanders have appeared; Tyler, representing the comedy of Life; Willis, the tragedy of Love; and Gillette, the romance of Mystery and Adventure.

Now, America sees comedy in life, and romance in adventure, but is the tragic note in love truly American, or is it Continental? Tyler we understand. He writes "with his tongue in his cheek", and a "dramatic twinkle in his eye". Americans glory in Gillette. They feel perfectly at home with him; there is "something happening" all the time! Gillette's inspiration, it has been said, was Bronson Howard. But from whom did Tyler learn? And why should Willis write so differently? What drama preceded theirs, back of 1800? What were the lives of the lesser dramatists whose plays these dramatists went to see? The answer is here. In most cases, their lives are fleeting; we find one an actor from Concord, another a Boston school mistress, a doctor, or a journalist.

Much searching has disturbed the repose of some thirty playwrights. Eight of these form a Connecticut Group, and are the earliest to give expression to the drama at Yale. They are:

Barnabas Bidwell (1765), James A. Hillhouse (1789), James Gates Percival (1795), Thomas Day (1748-1789), David Humphreys (1752-1818), H. J. Conway (1800-1860), David Trumbull (1819-1889), and J. P. Adams (1855- ). There are others whom I chanced upon, whose plays are worthy of notice, but who because their plays never received professional production, will have to be omitted here. The best of
these are Elizabeth Oakes Smith (1806), Harriet H. Robinson (1825), William Leighton (1833), and Henry Ames Blood (1838). Of the remaining dramatists, it has seemed best to choose ten as most significant, either because their plays are still "extant" and "readable", or because they are so constantly mentioned in the annals of the stage as to lead us to believe that they have contributed much to the American Drama of yesterday, and of today.

Wherever it has been possible, the existing plays of each dramatist have been read. The survey has been largely original, and is therefore largely faulty. No one's estimate of a play has been taken where it has been possible to find the original.

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NEW ENGLAND DRAMATISTS
(1750-1855)

According to Augustin Daly, there has been a National American Drama almost from the time that America commenced to have a national existence,—which began in 1775.

William Archer, on the other hand, asserts that American Drama did not come to life until 1879, and 'although the rapidity of its development has been in some respects one of the most remarkable in dramatic history, as a whole, it is still on a journalistic level.'

Undoubtedly each is right, only one is a liberal, the other a conservative. Daly refers to the dramatic spirit, Archer to the dramatic form.

Again, we have been told by Lawrence Hutton that even yet America has no National Drama. There has been a voice from the Frontier and from the South, from New York City and from Cape Cod, but no one voice of the country has yet been heard. If then, America is sectional, should not our New England dramatists display New England characteristics? Should they not by their interests and spirit prove themselves to be New Yorkers? We can only ask ourselves, "Are these men reflective of New England life? Do they give, in dramatic form, tongue to New England thought, and insight into New England character? Then---are they not New England Dramatists?

This brings us to the vital question,—"What constitutes a dramatist?" or "When is a dramatist not one?"
Mr. Arthur H. Quinn (in his History of American Drama) seems to have satisfactorily defined his dramatists as 'those who have had their plays published, or produced, or, in some cases, bought; those who have written plays of literary value; and those whose plays have had continued, or even contemporary popularity'.

The definition of a New Englander is not so easily accomplished. There are New Englanders by birth, and by adoption, and by education. Harriet Beecher Stowe is called, and called herself, a New Englander, yet her people moved into New York State the year before her birth, and, geographically speaking, New York may claim her. There are westerners of New England parentage with such strong New England tendencies that they might well have been born there. Again, a dramatist may have happened to write his play during a brief sojourn in Boston, but most of all, if a play is New England in its interests and theme, or if it reflects an intimate knowledge of New England life, we needs must put it with New England Drama.

I feel, too, that we should break away from the tendency to look upon Boston as the whole of New England and should place special emphasis on heretofore neglected sections of New England. To so many of us there is no New England south of Boston, no New England west of Boston, though we do include some literary lights from Portland, Maine.

Perhaps it were best before beginning to inquire what New England drama there was in 1770, to explain why there was not more.
In New England the drama has never been the leading field of literature. Early New England interest was centered in religious, political, and poetical writing. At that time "our strongest minds, and best thoughts were at work on how to win wars and govern men." The religious repression of that period was so great that dramatic self-expression, the instinct for play, had no natural outlet. Political writings and poetry supplied a substitute, and were the "sop" thrown to us to take the place of drama. A closer examination of New England's political literature shows much of it to be "dramatic journalism." Everything about early New England political life was dramatic, from the Red Coats and the Lantern to the firing on Fort Sumter and the freeing of the slaves. Then, too, we were borrowers from Europe. The classicist influence is easily traceable through all our literature of that period, in drama as well as in other fields.

Previous to the American Revolution, we find but four American dramatists, three of whom do not come into the New England Group. George Cockings, an Englishman, wrote the "Conquest of Canada" while staying in Boston in 1773; Colonel Thomas Forrest of Philadelphia, published a comic opera, "Disappointment" in 1767; and Mrs. Charlotte R. Lenox, although born in America, moved to London at the age of 15, where her play "The Sister" came out in 1769. Major Robert Rogers, however, may truly be called the first New England Dramatist. He was born in Dunbarton, New Hampshire, in 1753. His play "Ponteach", or "The Savage of America", was the first play written on a native subject, the American Indian, and was published in London in 1766. It has been described as a
"fairly readable tragedy." Ponteach, the Indian chief, is the central figure and when the end of the play finds him with his children dead and his schemes against the English all in vain, he rises to a real greatness in his last soliloquy.

In 1774 the Continental Congress passed a law to discontinue plays, and it was twenty years before Boston opened a theatre. During this time, however, plays were written and were produced—nor can one fairly say their writers were not dramatists—simply because there was no native stage on which their dramas could be played. The so-called Revolutionary Drama is largely confined to the works of Mercy Warren, and occurred from 1775 to 1790. These have been called heavy, tiresome, dull, and political, yet compared with other 1775 writings, they do not suffer. Mercy Warren, sister of James Otis, the statesman, was born in Barnstable, Mass., Sept. 25, 1728. She lived there until 26 years of age when she married James Warren, a merchant of Plymouth, who later became President of the Provincial Congress, and Paymaster-General of the American Army in Cambridge. Mrs. Warren, it is said, carried on a spirited correspondence with the Adams and Jefferson families, and was urged by John Adams to commemorate the Boston Tea Party in verse. Besides her dramatic contributions, she was the author of considerable poetry and a well written and valuable history of the American Revolution (1805).

Her first play "The Aduluteur" was a satire against Thomas Hutchinson, who held three offices and worked for and
against England at the same time. She calls it a three-act tragedy of "Upper Servia". It is short, vigorously written, and far from dull, but it has little plot. In Act I, Brutus (James Otis), Cassius (John Adams), Junius (Samuel Adams), and Porteus (John Hancock) decide to strike for liberty. Rapatio (Thomas Hutchinson) longs for the day when he will be governor. He conspires with Captain Bagshot (Preston, of His Majesty's 29th) to fire on the people. Act II follows---the Boston Massacre! Act III, in Faneuil Hall, the Town decides the troops must be withdrawn. Rapatio (Hutchinson) confers with the Council and is forced to obey. The play ends with his soliloquy of remorse, beginning, "I dare not meet my naked heart alone."

Her second play, "The Group", written in 1775, was inspired by the taking away of the Massachusetts Charter and the appointment of the Council through royal mandate instead of through election by the Assembly. Of course, everyone who accepted this appointment to the Council was considered an enemy. Mrs. Warren named them Meagre, Humbug, Hateall, Spendall, Mushroom, Sapling, Crusty, Crowbar, Dupe, Fribble, and Trumps. In Act I, the group reveal themselves, their characters are fairly well drawn. Act II shows a banquet, wine, and cards. Trumps argues that patriotism is 'useless', 'it gets you nowhere'. There is good irony in his line, "Nought's to be gained save solid peace of mind!" In Act III, General Gage appears. He is well drawn, a large-minded, generous man. He realizes the justice of the Colonial cause, but has his duty as a soldier of His Majesty,
"And shall I rashly draw my guilty sword,
And dip its hungry hilt in the rich blood
Of the best subjects that a Brunswick boasts?
And for no cause, but that they nobly scorn
To wear the fetters of his venal slaves!"

The plot of this play exceeds the earlier one and the characters are much more clearly drawn.

Next came "The Motley Assembly", a farce of 1779. It satirized that portion of Boston society, who gave only a half-hearted allegiance to General Washington and to their country. They call Washington "provincial", "well-meaning", "honest", "but", one lady adds with a shrug, "as a general, he has, doubtless, his equals!"

Her last two plays "The Sack of Rome" and "The Ladies of Castile" were published together in 1790. They are both "tragedies in verse", and "more carefully constructed than her earlier works."

This seems to be the only notice they have received from critics, yet Mrs. Warren herself puts her chief claim to being a dramatist upon these last two plays. "The Sack of Rome" is slow reading and rather dull. So much villainy, and so uncalled for, is unforgiveable.

Rome is at war with the Vandals but the Emperor Valentian stays at home in luxury and vice and ease.

Just before the play opens, he throws dice for Ardelia, the pure wife of his soldier Maximus, and wins. Aetius, the great Roman general, and his son Gaudentius, betrothed to the Emperor's daughter, win a victory, and are summoned to Rome by the Emperor. Valentian, realizing the general is becoming too popular in Rome,
plots to kill him and his son,—and Maximus!

The Emperor, preparing to receive Aetius alone, tells his sword rather proudly, "No vulgar soul we'll send the gods this day, His is a life worthy of Caesar's sword!" . . .

In the next scene we hear through the Emperor's daughter Eudocia, that Aetius has been murdered by her father, but that her sweetheart Gaudentius has escaped. She wishes that with her own blood she could atone for her father's crime. Ardelia, in the meantime, kills herself, and her husband Maximus is forced to flee without revenge. In his discovery that his wife has perished, Mrs. Warren shows real poetic beauty,—occasional flashes of which appear in all of her plays—

"Ardelia dead! The funeral pile burned down, Her ashes gathered in a golden urn"—
So does she in her description of Maximus' place of refuge—

"Beside the margin of the Tuscan shore In a small villa of the Anician name He's gone to weep his folly and his fate."

The avenging of Aetius' death falls on his son Gaudentius, who is torn between love of Eudocia and hatred of her father, the Emperor. He is urged on to revenge by his barbaric friend, whose speech is characteristic of Mercy's vigor;—
"What hast thou got by all thy lovesick dreams?  
Go--show the mighty Goths thy baby face  
And see if one would know it was Gaudentius  
Who fought and conquered on the Danube's banks."

In the meantime, the Empress sends a message to the Vandals to come to her rescue—which they do, with a vengeance; slaying her family, sacking Rome, and bearing the Empress off in golden chains to slavery.

"The Ladies of Castile" is a far better play and much more truly tragic. The characters are few, clearly drawn, and therefore interesting.

Don Velasco,—the Regent of Spain, a tyrant.  
Don Haro,——his son.  
Don Juan,——the General  
Donna Marie,——his wife, who is the best second to Lady Macbeth I have seen!

Our interest in her is aroused by the general's saying that, when finances were low,

"By strategem she gained an ample sum  
To quiet mutiny and pay the troops."

We wonder how,—until she finally admits that she "dismantled all the shrines", as she "thought the spirit of the gifts would please the gods enough, and the soldiers needed the gold."

Louisa, the Regent's daughter, is a dainty, tender-hearted girl. Don Francis and Don Pedro are two Spanish noblemen, both in love with her. Louisa loves Francis who is on the General's side and opposed to her father and brother. Before the battle, she gives him her signet ring in case he falls into her father's hands. His farewell to her is almost Shakespearean:
"Description would but beggar love like mine:
Measure the earth, and mount beyond the stars,
There's nought below can bound its full extent,
Nor death itself can blot thee from my heart."

So is Don Haro's reply to Louisa when she begs him not to kill Don Francis:

"Great souls--formed in the same etherial mould,
Are ne'er at war! . . . They different paths
Of glory may pursue, with equal zeal,
Yet not a cruel, nor malignant thought
Or rancorous design, deforms the mind!"

The General's army is defeated. Don Haro, although he loves the General's wife, pleads with his father for Juan's life, but is refused. He visits Don Juan in prison and allows him a last visit to his wife, in disguise; and he gives his signet to Don Francis, bidding him flee to France for pardon.

In the meantime, Louisa pleads for her lover, but to no avail. Her father bids her prepare to marry Don Pedro.

Maria, heartbroken over the death of Juan, listens indignantly to Haro's offer of love and protection:

"Give me a sword -- I'll measure it with thine
For by the powers above, to thee I swear
Maria lives but to avenge his death" . . .
"I scorn to live upon ignoble terms
A supple courtier fawning at the feet
Of proud, despotic nobles, or of kings." . . .
She is finally convinced that he was fair to Don Juan, and flees under the protection of his guards to Portugal. Then follows a "scene" between Haro and his father, interrupted by the return of Francis with a pardon from King Charles. He has also slain Don Pedro on the way home, and now claims Louisa. But Louisa has just stabbed herself, and dies in Francis's arms. Her lover promptly falls on his sword and follows her, saying:

"I'll catch in ether that last, balmy breath
And meet her gentle spirit in the skies."

Somewhat similar in mood is Donna Maria's prayer for her departed husband:

"When his great soul ascends the broad expanse,
Let angels guard him through the widened dome."

The lines are all dignified, yet not stilted nor bombastic. They have more real pathos than is generally found in any early tragedy.
Mrs. Suzanna H. Rowson was born in England in 1762, and came to America with her father at the age of two years. They lived in Nantucket until 1784 when he was banished for his political views. His daughter went back to England with him, married William Rowson, bandmaster of the Royal Guards, and returned to America in 1793. She was a good actress, a better novelist, but a most successful educator. She kept a girls' school in Boston for years. According to her own statement, she "devoted 25 years of her life to the cultivation of the minds of the youth of her dear adopted country, America, particularly the young females of Boston". She wrote several successful novels, the best known of which, "Charlotte Temple", had over 15 editions. Thomas Wentworth Higginson says, "Her books had an enormous circulation,—went through edition after edition both in England and America, being read more than the Waverly Novels." In 1822 she published a History for the Use of Schools which followed the plan of the New England Primer,—the question and answer method. It embraces the History of the Greeks, Romans, Hebrews, English, French, Poland, and Turkey,—and ten pages of it are devoted to America,—going even into the administration of Monroe in 1817. Strangely enough, her five plays, written between 1794 and 1799, have all been lost. They were "Slaves in Algiers" or "A Struggle for Freedom", an opera; "The American Tar", a farce; "The Volunteers"; "The French Patriot", a comedy; and "Americans in England". She acted in several of these herself. Mrs. Rowson died in Boston, March 2, 1824.
The third one of the Boston Revolutionary group can only be mentioned. He was the elusive J. Robinson whose first name cannot be found, but who, nevertheless, wrote a two-act farce, entitled "The Yorker's Strategem" or "Banana's Wedding." Mr. Foley in his "American Authors" says J. Robinson was an actor who played the part of Banana himself. The play was published in 1792, five years after Tyler's "Contrast", and has the same Yankee Character. The play concerns itself with a New Yorker who disguises himself as a 'rube' in order to win the hand of an heiress. The play introduces negro characters for the first time.

Mr. J. Horatio Nichols—presumably of Salem—is also unknown. He wrote "The Essex Junto", a political satire produced in Salem in 1802; "The New England Coquette", a three-act tragedy based on the story of Eliza Wharton; "Jefferson and Liberty"; and "others". The New England Coquette, as it is printed on the title page, must have been the first of those New England home life stories, of which "Way Down East" was the last (I hope!) It is the first New England drama to be found written in prose, and begins in truly Homeric language!

Eliza, (in a garden):

"Soon as Aurora ushered in the dawn, long ere the morrow's sun had traced his blushing beauties with exulting gaze, in the transparent mirror of your blue laving sea" ... and again:

"The ebon bed of sunken night", and "the courteous fruit trees' waving heads" ... 

As one might readily guess from her language, Eliza is in love,—not with the man she is engaged to, however, but with a Major. Her clandestine meetings with him are discovered and her betrothed
one renounces her. Then her Major marries another "to mend his fortune", but still wishes to win Eliza. He persuades the foolish damsel to elope with him. She flees to Bell Tavern in Danvers, where she dies. The Constable tries to arrest the Major, and is shot. The Major's wife then leaves him and he stabs himself. Eliza's friend and mother read in the papers of Eliza's death, remarking:

"In deep repentance she made a change of worlds." There are a few good touches. Eliza's chum, Lucy, has some good lines, such as:

"Say,—what gay spark here pays his court to you?"

And when Eliza says:

"I am the slave of disappointed love; and Sorrow, a bloody despot, sways my heart," Lucy tells her to "revolutionize her heart's government and establish a republic with its legislature elective, and guillotine despair!"

Evidently Mr. Nichols knew his Shakespeare, for mention is made of "John Falstaff, making his escape in a clothes basket down the river Thames", and once the author reminds us that,

"One may smile and smile and be a villain."

Two ingenious stage directions are given:

(1) Two characters are given an 'aside' to be uttered at the same moment, one on each side of the stage. It is written thus:

Eliza (aside) Sanford (separate)

and again,

(2) "A noise of walking behind the scene,—then the scene changes from a room to a post chaise." (How did they do it!)

For all its faults, it is very human, and we see the dramatic sense is growing.
ROYALL TYLER (1757-1826)

Royall Tyler was born in Boston July 18, 1757, attended Harvard, became a lawyer, and participated in the American Revolution. He attained the rank of Major in 1778 and served as aide, first to General Sullivan and later to General Lincoln. He was at one time engaged to John Adams' daughter Abby, but it was broken off while that young lady was travelling "abroad", and Tyler later married Miss Mary Palmer. In 1787 his "soldiering" brought him to New York City where by sheer chance he attended the theatre and met the actor Thomas Wignell. Within a month Tyler had written his first play "The Contrast" for his new friend, Wignell. The play was a great success, and played in New York, Baltimore, and Philadelphia, but not in Boston until 1792; Even then the prejudice against plays was so strong that "The Contrast" had to be advertised as a "moral lecture in five parts".

Tyler returned to New England, evidently not greatly impressed by his dramatic success. He was a very successful lawyer and practiced first in Portland, Maine, later in Quincy, Massachusetts. He was appointed Justice of the Supreme Court of Vermont and occupied the bench for six years. He also taught law at the University of Vermont. Tyler died in Brattleboro, Vt. August 26, 1826. He wrote one novel, "The Algerine Captive" (1797) and a series of letters entitled "The Yankey in London", but nothing he wrote brought him such notice as did "The Contrast".

Tyler is generally given first place among our American dramatists because his play "The Contrast" was the first play written by an American to be produced on the regular stage by a professional company of actors, and because he first introduced
to the stage the character of "Jonathan", our Stage Yankee.

"The Contrast" is a satire on the European "title" who wishes to marry the American heiress, and the American "mamma" who tries to affect French "language" and "fashion", and fails. It is a comedy in 5 acts, not brilliant but amusing. It has been called weak in plot, incident and dialogue, but it is a joke "on" Americans as well as "for" them -- and they ought to enjoy it.

Tyler's other plays are not easy to find. His "Mayday in Town," an opera, came out in 1787, and "A Georgian Speculation" or "The Land in the Moon" in 1797.

Some authors hold him responsible for "The Farm House, or the Female Duellist" but a footnote in Mr. Quinn's History seems to revise this statement and a copy existing in the Boston Public Library says it is a farce written in 1796 by John P. Kemble, the English actor.

Four other plays of Tyler's, said to be in the possession of his descendants, exist in manuscript form. Three of these are sacred dramas, "The Feast of Purim", "Joseph and his Brethren", and the "Judgment of Solomon", written in blank verse. The fourth is "The Island of Barrantaria", or Tantalization, or Governor for a Day", said to be a dramatization of certain chapters of Don Quixote.

It is interesting to note here that "The Contrast" was successfully revived in New York in 1894, and in Brattleboro, Vt. in 1912, and again in Philadelphia in 1917. Mr. Quinn mentions that Mrs. Otis Skinner supervised the staging of Tyler's "Contrast" in Philadelphia. This fact leads us to wonder if in Otis Skinner's "Sancho Panza", produced in 1924, we were not seeing a revision perhaps of the original of Tyler's "Island of Barrantaria", or Governor for a Day."
At all events, Tyler puts American life, manners, and customs on the stage in a delightfully easy manner. His humor is that of character, and if we recall the popularity of Rip Van Winkle, Davey Crockett, Shavings, and Lightning, I think we will admit that it is America's favorite kind.
JOHN AUGUSTUS STONE
(1801-1834)

We come next to Dr. John Augustus Stone, born in Concord, Mass. in 1801, who (every biographer seems to enjoy telling us) drowned himself in a fit of insanity in Schuylkill, Pennsylvania, in 1834. The great actor, Edwin Forrest, erected a monument there in his memory. Stone was the author of seven plays,—the most famous of which is "Metamora", an Indian tragedy which was purchased by Forrest for $500, and in which Forrest made several memorable appearances. This was followed by "The Ancient Briton" in (1830) for which Forrest is said to have paid $1000; "Fauntleroy, the Banker of Rouen"; "The Knight of the Golden Fleece," or "The Yankee in Spain"; "Tancred"; "The Demonic"; and "La Roque."
All but two of these have perished.

"Metamora" exists in manuscript form, but has not been printed and is available to but a chosen few. It is a five-act tragedy dealing with the treachery of Philip, son of Massasoit. It opens in the council chamber, outside an English fort. Philip is accused by the English of murdering Sassamon, their messenger and a spy. An Indian witness is brought in to testify, but before Metamora he dares not speak. Metamora draws his knife and sends him home to the Great Spirit. Then he dashes his tomahawk into the earth and defies the White Man. The play ends when Metamora returns to his wigwam, wounded, to take farewell of his little one, only to find it dead in its mother's arms. He says sorrowfully, "We are destroyed, not beaten", and plunges his knife into his wife's heart. As he is holding her in a last embrace, the enemy appear and fire upon him, and he falls, saying: "Nahmeokee, I come to thee."
Stone's other existing work is "Tancred", (published in 1827). Personally I like it very much. The story takes place during the First Crusade in 1097 and the opening scene is in the Christian Camp before Antioch. It is dedicated to Joseph Jefferson, who says of it, "The story is classical, the language elegant, and its effect purely dramatic." Tancred, the youthful chief, refuses to bow to Greece. Count Raymond has done so and so has Bohemond, but they lie ready to strike. Alexis, the Emperor of Greece, seeing their treachery, puts one against the other, but he can neither anger nor bribe Tancred.

Then--the beautiful Sultana is captured, and Alexis hits upon the scheme of having Tancred act as the captive lady's escort to "Port-St. Simeon--the-Sea, and guard her while there. Meanwhile Count Raymond and Bohemond quarrel and Alexis promises them:

"Who first shall scale the Citadel
   Shall be rewarded with the Victor's prize
   And hold the government of Antioch."

There is a love scene between Tancred and the Sultana, while playing chess, in which she playfully asks him if "Christians are not taught to love their enemies?"

The Sultan, disguised as a Turkish spy, enters to look for the Sultana. Odo, Tancred's faithful servant, receives him, pretending to be Tancred. (Odo, by the way, is a delightfully original character--he uses beautiful Latin and Greek proverbs, is interested in phrenology, and makes good comedy relief by discussing the shape of the Sultan's skull to divert him. He talks like a Yankee!) He saves Tancred's and the Sultana's life and captures the Sultan.
In Act II, the soldiers, hungry and discontented, learn of the Sultan's capture, and word is sent to the city that if they wish to save the Sultan's head, they must surrender Antioch. Then unfortunately, Odo's gullible brother, Hafez, is put to guard the Sultan. The Sultan shows him a magic phial, the contents of which, he says, will make the Sultana love the first one she sees on waking, (Shades of Midsummer Night's Dream!) and persuades him to give it to the Sultana "for a joke". The Sultana dies in agony, and the Sultan stabs himself. The first scene in this act, showing the hungry, discontented soldiers, reminds one strongly of the third act of Cyrano de Bergerac!

In Act III, Tancred is arraigned for disobedience, neglect of duty, murder, etc. Then the faithful Odo proclaims "the truth--'bout the dead lady and the stinking Turk"---, and there the play stops. The end is undeveloped. The character of Odo is new, and the play gains in tragic force by his presence; his humorous character offsets and intensifies the tragedy of the story. Tancred is proud, lovable, fair, upright, and honorable. He shows the same nobility of character that we see in Mercy Warren's "Don Haro", and later on in Sargent's "Velasco", but Tancred is more youthful, more proudly defiant. Stone strikes a new note in heroes; there is a touch of the Highlander about Tancred; he is a "Rhoderick Dhu" type of character.
NATHANIEL WILLIS (1807-1867)

Nathaniel Willis was born in Portland, Maine, on the 27th of February 1807, only one year before Longfellow; yet before Longfellow began to publish even so much as a magazine article, Willis was widely recognized as a poet, and was one of the most popular editors and foreign correspondents of his day. When Willis was six, his father moved to Boston to edit the Congregationalist and Boston Recorder. Here he originated the Youth's Companion and was its editor for over thirty years.

After two years at Dr. MacFarland's School in Concord, New Hampshire, Willis was sent to Boston Latin School, and thence to Yale in 1823. College did much for Willis. It changed him from a homely "schoolboy chrysalis" to a "beautiful butterfly". He joined the Limonian Society and a Freshman Debating club, and had tea with the ladies, but found few boys who were companionable. Two Yale men, however, who undoubtedly influenced Willis' literary development were James Gates Percival, professor, geologist, and poet; and James Abraham Hillhouse, poet, professor, and later a governor of Connecticut.

Of Hillhouse's "Hadad", played at Yale in 1825, Willis says, "To me it opened a new heaven of Imagination. The leading characters possessed me for months, and the bright, clean, harmonious language was constantly in my ears." Of its author he said, "In no part of the world have I seen a man of more distinguished mien."

Although Willis was no student, his "dash" and good taste and talent brought him the honor of valedictory poet to the class of 1827. On leaving Yale, Willis started his literary career by publishing a group of youthful poems entitled "Sketches". The next four years he spent in Boston, serving his term of apprenticeship as editor and journalist.
In 1829 he started the American Monthly Magazine which lasted two and a half years. This was his last work in Boston for many years. The next year he was excommunicated from the Park St. Church (of which his father was a deacon,) for absence from church and attendance at the theatre. As a result of this, his engagement to Miss Mary Benjamin was broken off. Finally, his magazine failed financially and in 1831 he left New England. He never forgave Boston. He united with George P. Morris and became associate editor of the New York Mirror with which he was identified for 36 years. Willis was sent abroad to write weekly letters at $10 the letter. He wrote 139 of these, entitled "Pencillings by the Way". Willis, like a chameleon, took color from his surroundings. He played over the surface of things. He had no genius for narrative or dramatic writing, but he excelled in travel descriptions, and impressions of peoples.

Wherever he went, he made friends. At Paris he met Lafayette, Morse the inventor, Shelley, and King Louis. He was made an attache to the American Consul in France, and his uniform and button gave him admission to court society in every country he visited. He was a born diplomat. Before he had been in England three days, he made friends which lasted his lifetime. He liked the English and they treated him well. No American writer except Washington Irving was as popular socially or as widely read in London as Willis. His articles appeared in all English Magazines and his stories were acclaimed good.

In August 1835 he met Miss Mary Stace, "a general's daughter, and the loveliest girl he had ever seen!" A few weeks later they were married. Willis returned to America in May 1836, and tried in vain to procure a diplomatic post. They lived in Washington a year and Mrs. Willis became a great favorite, especially with Henry Clay. His
failure to get an international copyright law made Willis very bitter and on his return to New York, he started "the Pirate" and "took" English Literature. He spent 1840 in England and wrote a series of Pencilings on "Canadian Scenery" and "Ireland". Again in New York, he wrote regularly for Brother Jonathan, Graham's Magazine, and Godey's Lady's Book—receiving from $50 to $100 an article. From 1842-44 he published 40 stories. He was the most popular and best paid magazinist that America had seen— and was the first magazine writer to be well paid!

In 1846 he became editor of the Home Journal—which position he continued to hold for 21 years, an authority on good taste, good manners, and dress!!!

Willis cared little for finances, as long as he had enough on which to live. He was overliberal, and hospitable, not only at home but with his literary latch-key as well. He welcomed and helped each newcomer in the field of letters– and was one of the first to praise Aldrich, Poe, and Lowell.

His premature success caused his early literary decay. He spent no time on self culture—the last 15 years of his life he was an invalid. He bought a home on the Hudson and settled his family at Idlewild—but his finances forced him to spend much of his time in New York. During the Civil War he was sent to Washington as War Correspondent—but was not a success. Willis was never a politician. Then, too, he admired the Southerners—they were more polite and gentle. He met many of his former English friends, and because a favorite with Mrs. Lincoln—he also met and liked Hawthorne.

He died on January 20, 1867. He was taken to Boston and buried at Mt. Auburn. It is interesting to note that Fields, Longfellow, Holmes, Lowell, and Aldrich were among his pall bearers.
Thackary admired his "comfortable style". Poe said he "had good taste, but was not a good critic". His best criticism comes from Willis himself— he calls his writing "WHITE POPULAR LITERATURE"; "leaves that throw a pleasant shade while they flourish, and help others by the very speed of their decay".

I have taken pains to give a more detailed sketch of Willis' life because I have seen it so repeatedly stated that Willis was a Bostonian and a Puritan. No statement could be more misleading. Perhaps his parents were Puritans, but Willis—never! He loved beauty and gayety too well; he could not endure the cold, unemotional atmosphere of his Puritan surroundings. Knowing these points, it is far easier to understand his plays, of which we have only two.

"Bianca Visconte" is a marvellous play, but a horrible story! The beginning is "smart". Pasquali is writing poetry and Fiametta is mending his hose. We learn that Sforza, a general, is to attack Milan tonight unless he is given Bianca, the Duke's daughter, who has been his promised bride for twelve years. The wedding occurs, but he is led to believe she loves Lionel, a gracious courtier, not a gruff soldier like himself, so Sforza avoids his wife after the wedding, until she is almost heartbroken. There is a wonderful fencing scene between Sforza and Bianca's boy page, during which the boy unwittingly discloses the fact that he is Bianca's brother and heir to the ducal crown. The boy, by the way, is the best thing in the play—so loyal, fair and generous, and so admiring of his hero-general. Bianca's father dies and the truth about her page is revealed. She, thinking to win Sforza's love, contrives for her brother's murder. She is successful, but goes insane when she realizes what she has done. Pasquali, the poet, is whimsical, dreamy, yet chivalrous. Sforza is the true
soldier type, wrapped up in his profession, ambitious, but generous-hearted. Bianca's joy at marrying Sforza is touching. It is too great to last.

The other play, "Tortesa, the Usurer", is so well-known that it seems hardly necessary to give the plot. Tortesa "buys" a wife from the nobility by trapping her nobleman father financially. He hopes to humble her, but ends by loving her so much that he gives her up to the poor poet whom she loves. Tortesa is "a Shylock who reforms". Isabella, his fiancee' takes poison with a more fortunate awakening than Juliet had.

Character-portrayal and naturalness of conversation are Willis's two strong points. In neither play is the plot original with Willis.
JOSEPH STEVENS JONES (1811-1877)

Joseph S. Jones, besides being a physician, was both manager and playwright. He was born in Boston in 1811, and died in 1877, and during his life wrote over forty plays. He was manager of the Tremont Theatre in Boston from 1839-41. It is stated that "his plays, too numerous to mention, were very popular, especially his 'Surgeon of Paris'." Truly the list is appalling. These are a few of them:

The Liberty Tree
The Green Mountain Boy
The People's Lawyer
The Surgeon of Paris
Siege of Boston
The Brazier of Naples
The Usurper
Mall Pitcher, or the Fortune Teller of Lynn
The Wheelwright, or Boston Pride
The Silver Spoon
The Carpenter of Rouen
Captain Kyd, or the Wizard of the Sea

One glance at the names shows the variety of subjects he used, and his knack of dramatizing popular events. The only two available ones are Captain Kyd and Mall Pitcher, the Fortune Teller of Lynn. The former reminds us of Scott's Guy Mannering, and Elpsy, the witch, in her dealings with the pirates, is another "Meg Merriles". Mall Pitcher, however, has more of the American flavor.

Young William Gray is to marry Rosalie Elliston, when suddenly her father begins to oppose the match. He has received an anonymous letter threatening his daughter's death if she marries Gray. The new travelling minister, Mr. Maladine, also advises against it. Only the witch, Mall, sides with the lovers. Gray starts a quarrel with Mr. Maladine which Mall interrupts.
She recognizes Maladine as someone connected with her past.

The new minister rents a deserted house by the seashore, and sends for the Ellistons. He threatens to send the father to prison for some long-forgotten crime unless Rosalie becomes his wife. Mall, who has discovered a secret passage from the sea to the minister's house and learned that he is one of a pirate gang, rescues them.

That night the pirates attack Mr. Elliston on Charlestown Bridge and drop him overboard. This must have been a very funny scene, for according to stage directions, Mall and Jotham Hook, a cobbler, are sitting in a boat beneath, listening, and they catch the body as it drops in the boat.

Maladine establishes sufficient proof that Gray killed Elliston to have Gray arrested, but again Mall saves the day by producing the murdered (?) man and having Maladine arrested.

There are a few new touches of American comedy here, which are worthy of notice.

(1) Jotham Hook has an impudent son whose mildly intoxicated remarks help to lighten the second act. This is the first instance, by the way, of liquor on the stage, among any of these New England Dramatists.

(2) Young Jotham has a sweetheart, Nabby, who comes to see him at the cobbler's bench, and it is of interest to see that Jotham uses the same comedy device which was used by the plumber-hero in the 1924 musical comedy, LOLLYPOP.

"You pound, now," he says to his sweetheart, "to make mother think I am at work." . . . and she does pound at telling moments, while he proposes to her. His proposal is right in line
with his occupation, reading something like this:

"One part of a shoe isn't any good without the other. Will you be my sole? I'll be the upper; let's go to the minister's and get the strings tied."

(3) In the rowboat, Mall asks anxiously, "Are we going backwards?"

Jotham: "Well, that's the only way you can go forwards when you are in a rowboat."

In the introduction Jones states that the construction of "Mall Pitcher" occupied but two or three days, and he says it is a stage drama, relying on what is done more than on what is said. He devotes several pages to what the characters shall wear, and how the stage shall be set, and to the construction of the trap sofa, the trap floor, the ocean, and the secret panel in the bookcase. The scenery includes Nahant, Lynn, and Charlestown Bridge. A boat has to pass twice over the water. It shows a distinct step toward inventive drama.

Mr. Jones writes very bitterly over the pirating of plays. He says, "The Carpenter of Rouen was played over the entire United States and England, and never a dollar in return."

"We hope in vain to get as much protection as makers of cork-screws."
EPES SARGENT (1813-1880)

In the work of Sargent we have a distinct advance in dramatic technique. Epes Sargent was born in Gloucester, Massachusetts, in 1813. He was a famous journalist and literateur. After his graduation from Harvard, he became editor of the New York Mirror and later of the Boston Transcript. He is the author of a Standard Reader, a book on Arctic Adventure, and many poems, three of which won him particular fame. "The Woman Who Dared", the story of a girl who "spoke for herself" to the man she loved, and "Life on the Ocean Wave" had great popularity. "The Lampoon", which he calls a 'dramatic trifle', shows good style and depth of thought.

Sargent was also the author of four plays, "The Bride of Genoa", "Change Makes Change", "The Priestess", and "Velasco", the last mentioned being most generally conceded to be his best. Miss Ellen Tree played its heroine, Isidora, with considerable success. "The Priestess" reads as well, but would be harder to stage, since much of it takes place out of doors, or in a temple--and at times the cast reaches the proportions of an army, which perhaps accounts for the greater popularity of the other.

"Velasco" is a romantic story of impetuous Spain, based on the Cid, and concerned with the struggle between love and family honor. The play is very imitative of Greek tragedy, and of Shakespeare, yet it has originality and its language is both "powerful and adequate". The author's style is vigorous and progressive, his characters use few unnecessary words.

Servant: . . . . . "Twice in the last campaign
He saved our sovereign's life -- twice madly brave
Did he roll back the crimson tide of war
Upon our foes . . . . "
Velasco:—"Spare me thy herald's bombast, I would see
My father!"

Velasco, like the author, dislikes to waste words. Our hero is a very straightforward, precipitous lover when he first meets Isidora. At times his lines have the cadence of Portia's suitor, the Prince of Morocco:

Velasco:— "I have encountered perils ere today,
But never one so imminent as that
Which bids me now surrender."

and again,

"I have heard the neigh of steeds, the trumpets thrilling note,
They cannot stir my heart like thy sweet voice."

The men characters are all well drawn, except for the villain, who instigates quarrel after quarrel. He is too bad to be true. And has no redeeming features.

The hero, Velasco, though 'banished' for a year, has won several battles for his king, in disguise. On discovering this, the king pardons him and sanctions his marriage to Isidora, his childhood sweetheart. Her father is hostile to the match and in a quarrel strikes old Velasco in the face. Velasco promises his father to avenge the insult, not knowing who gave it, whereupon his old father kills himself. In the duel which follows, Isidora's father is killed by Velasco. She, on hearing of her father's death, asks Velasco to avenge it for her, and he reveals the fact that it was he who killed him. Isidora rushes to the king and demands revenge, which is denied. The King commands her to forgive Velasco
and she does, but her brother Julio takes up the feud and poisons Velasco's banquet cup. It is a thrilling last act. Julio reminds us of laertes in "Hamlet," and, as in Hamlet, they are all poisoned together, and die a "glorious death".

"The Priestess" shows the same vigor and vitality of pen which exists in "Velasco. Sargent says the idea for this play came from the fourth act of the opera "Norma", whose heroine was a priestess of the Gauls, and substituted floral and musical rites for the human sacrifice of the Druid priests. In Velasco's play, the Romans plan to strike at Gaul through her. They select Octavian as being "versed in things that catch a woman's heart".

At first he refuses to fool her, saying to his captain that he has a conscience, but finally he does ride away to win the lady. Norma's maid reports breathlessly that there is a man in the garden, who confesses to be a spy. His ready and gracious answers have the desired effect upon Norma in spite of her misgivings that it is all vain flattery. Her appeal to his sense of honor moves him to leave, saying

"Not to save ROME will I molest her more!"

but the unexpected return of her Gallic soldiers forces her to hide him in the sacred dwelling.

The second act opens with an excellent picture of soldier life, dice, drink, and duels—which reminds us of the fourth act of Rostand's "Cyrano de Bergerac". Norma has delayed the attack on Rome because of Octavian's (feigned) illness. There in her garden they exchange rings, and he goes, leaving her joyful at the thought that she and her Octavian will rule in Gaul for Rome.
She longs for civilized laws and advantages Rome can bring her people.

Norma goes on a mission to Rome and secretly marries Octavian, who is made proconsul. Arnulf, a traitor, tells her the marriage is only a stratagem of war; Octavian denies it, but—suspicion is planted. Home again, Norma's Gallic General, Ambron, confesses his love, and she finally tells him she is married to a proconsul. He is big enough to congratulate her, bids her farewell, and goes sadly back to his native mountains—

"...but should you ever need me, then call on Ambron."

Meanwhile Octavian falls in love with the maid, Adalgisa, who does not know, of course, that he and Norma are wedded. He is recalled to Rome and plans to flee with the maid, forsaking Norma.

Adalgisa innocently confesses her plan to Norma who, outraged, summons Octavian. He is at least honest enough to admit it, but he blames it onto "Rome". His speech to Norma, meant to be consoling, is a clumsy insult. He tells her she may be able to win his successor, the new proconsul, who is unmarried! Norma tells them to go before she desires revenge,—but the loyal Adalgisa refuses Octavian in scorn.

Adalgisa:— "There's such a separation twixt us twain,
That neither gods nor men can close it up."

A battle follows; Octavian is captured and brought to Norma, who frees him. But the Druid priests demand the death of both. Norma's last line, "........................Thee I forgive,
And count it happiness with thee to die"...

shows how deeply she loves him, and so overcomes Octavian that he begs her to wear his ring and be his wife in death. Ambron's
arrival stays the sacrifice. Then Arnulf, foiled, tries to stab Norma, but Octavian saves her, receives the blow himself, and dies.

Sargent shows that the New England dramatist has learned how to write a play. The divisions between the five acts are sharply drawn, yet the play is closely knit. It is logical, tragic, thrilling,—and human.
WILLIAM GILLETTE (1855- )

William Gillette, our most modern New England Dramatist, and the third New England Dramatist to be generally recognized, is so very much alive that he needs no introduction. He was born in Hartford, Conn., in 1855 and into a famous Senatorial family. He was educated at Yale, Boston University, and Massachusetts Art Institute, and has been among America's most successful playwrights.

His best known plays are:

Esmeralda
The Private Secretary
Secret Service
Held by the Enemy
Because She Loved Him So
Sherlock Holmes
Electricity
Too Much Johnson
Clarice

Mr. Moses says Gillette has no system, his plays are not well made and are "stagey". This seems to be a general criticism of his workmanship, for J. Corbin says "the fault with Gillette is with his technique or his constructive intellect. He uses mechanical devices rather than imagination; "the dark curtain at the end of the act, - the fluttering hand at the window - the lighted cigar entering an otherwise dark room."

William D. Howells has this word of commendation for Mr. Gillette, "that he has at least scattered the interest through the entire cast so that each character has something which it is worth his while to do."

Whatever these criticisms, the following facts remain. Gillette has a winning "way" of writing which grips and charms you. It is a "persuasive element" which makes you love his heroes, and his heroines, and his servants, and himself.
He "dotes" on historical romance and melodrama, but it is an adventurous sentiment which arouses more of your fire and enthusiasm than your inner and deeper emotions. In this respect Gillette is totally American.

His purpose is to amuse, but he has continued to raise American standards of amusement and pleasure because he has given us plays that are "healthy" and "sane".
SUMMARY

The New England Dramatists have made a definite and valuable contribution to the National Drama of America. As early as 1787 they showed originality of subject and character, contributing the first Indian play, the first negro character, the first American Yankee, and the first witch-heroin, or "mistress of all situations which arise".

New England's strong point is character - and most of our American dramatic humor lies therein. We are fond of caricaturing our types.

By 1838 they had developed a new style - careless, conversational-free from bombast. (This later led to a shabby structure, which American playwrights have not yet outgrown.) They began to use new stage devices, mechanical inventions, and a great advance was visible when the ingenious Yankee got to work on "scenic effects". As a result of this, America leads the world in spectacular drama today.

The New England Puritans gave us clean drama, and after they got the "wronged Leonoras" out of their systems, they wrote on healthier and "saner" themes. I think this Puritan influence is still felt and that as a whole, American drama leans toward "uplift" still.

I have tried to show - by "mirroring" their plays - how these New England Dramatists display these characteristics.