entertainment in the hands of few ; newspapers did not exist ; and the modern relief of incessant public meetings was, fortunately perhaps, an unknown luxury. And yet, amidst the plenitude of national life centred in London, the need for some common organ of expression was never more urgent or imperious. New and almost inexhaustible springs from the well-heads of intellectual life had for years been gradually fertilizing the productive English mind. The heroic life of the past, in clear outline and stately movement, had been revealed in the recovered masterpieces of Greece and Rome. The stores of more recent wisdom and knowledge, discovery and invention, science and art, were poured continually into the literary exchequer of the nation, and widely diffused amongst eager and open-minded recipients. Under this combined stimulus the national intellect and imagination had already reacted fruitfully in ways that were full of higher promise. The material results of these newly awakened energies were, as we have seen, not less signal or momentous. The number, variety, and power of the new forces thus acting on society effected in a short period a complete moral revolution. The barriers against the spread of knowledge and the spirit of free inquiry erected and long maintained by mediaeval ignorance and pre­judice were now thrown down. The bonds of feudal authority and Romish domination that had hitherto forcibly repressed the expanding national life were effectu­ally broken. Men opened their eyes upon a new world which it was an absorbing interest and endless delight to explore, —a new world physically, where the old geo­graphical limits had melted into the blue haze of distant horizons—a new world morally, where the abolition of alien dogma and priestly rule gave free play to fresh and vigorous social energies; and, above all, more surprising and mysterious than all, they opened their eyes with a strange sense of wonder and exultation on the new world of the emancipated human spirit. At no previous period had the popular curiosity about human life and human affairs been so vivid and intense. In an age of deeds so memorable, man naturally became the centre of interest, and the whole world of human action and passion, character and conduct, was invested with irresistible attraction. All ranks and classes had the keenest desire to penetrate the mysterious depths, explore the unknown regions, and realize as fully as might be the actual achievements and ideal possibilities of the nature throbbing with so full a pulse within themselves and reflected so powerfully in the world around them. Human nature, released from the oppression and darkness of the ages, and emerging with all its infinite faculties and latent powers into the radiant light of a secular day, was the new world that excited an admiration more profound and hopes far more ardent than any recently discovered lands beyond the sinking sun. At the critical moment Shakespeare appeared as the Columbus of that new world. Pioneers had indeed gone before and in a measure prepared the way, but Shakespeare still remains the great discoverer, occupying a position of almost lonely grandeur in the isolation and completeness of his work.

Never before, except perhaps in the Athens of Pericles, had all the elements and conditions of a great national drama met in such perfect union. As we have seen, the popular conditions supplied by the stir of great public events and the stimulus of an appreciative audience were present in exceptional force. With regard to the stage conditions,— the means of adequate dramatic representation,—public theatres had for the first time been recently established in London on a permanent basis. In 1574 a royal licence had been granted by the queen to the earl of Leicester’s company “to use, exercise, and occupy the art and faculty

of playing Comedies, Tragedies, Interludes, and Stage Plays, and such other like as they have been already used and studied, as well for the recreation of our loving subjects as for our solace and pleasure when we shall think good to see them ” ; and, although the civil authorities resisted the attempt to establish a public theatre within the city, two or three were speedily erected just outside its boundaries, in the most convenient and accessible suburbs,—the Curtain and the Theatre in Shoreditch, beyond the northern boundary, and the Blackfriars theatre within the precincts of the dissolved monastery, just beyond the civic jurisdic­tion on the western side. A few years later other houses were built on the southern side of the river,—the Rose near the foot of London Bridge, and the Hope and Swan further afield. There was also at Newington Butts a place of recreation and entertainment for the archers and holiday people, with a central building which, like the circus at Paris Garden, was used during the summer months for dramatic purposes. These theatres were occupied by different companies in turn, and Shakespeare during his early years in London appears to have acted at several of them. But from his first coming up it seems clear that he was more identified with the earl of Leicester’s players, of whom his energetic fellow townsman, James Burbage, was the head, than with any other group of actors. To Burbage indeed be­longs the distinction of having first established public theatres as a characteristic feature of metropolitan life. His spirit and enterprise first relieved the leading com­panies from the stigma of being strolling players, and transferred their dramatic exhibitions, hitherto restricted to temporary scaffolds in the court-yards of inns and hostelries, to the more reputable stage and convenient appliances of a permanent theatre. In 1575 Burbage, having secured the lease of a piece of land at Shoreditch, erected there the house which proved so successful, and was known for twenty years as *the* Theatre, from the fact that it was the first ever erected in the metropolis. He seems also to have been concerned in the erection of a second theatre in the same locality called the Curtain ; and later on, in spite of many difficulties, and a great deal of local opposition, he provided the more celebrated home of the rising drama known as the Blackfriars theatre. When Shakespeare went to London there were thus theatres on both sides of the water—the outlying houses being chiefly used during the summer and autumn months, while the Blackfriars, being roofed in and pro­tected from the weather, was specially used for perform­ances during the winter season. In spite of the persistent opposition of the lord mayor and city aldermen, the denunciations of Puritan preachers and their allies in the press, and difficulties arising from intermittent attacks of the plague and the occasional intervention of the court authorities, the theatres had now taken firm root in the metropolis ; and, strong in royal favour, in noble patron­age, and above all in popular support, the stage had already begun to assume its higher functions as the living organ of the national voice, the many-coloured mirror and reflexion of the national life. A few years later the com­panies of players and the theatres they occupied were consolidated and placed on a still firmer public basis. For some years past, in addition to the actors really or nominally attached to noble houses, there had existed a body of twelve performers, selected by royal authority (in 1583) from different companies and known as the Queen’s players. The earl of Leicester’s, being the leading company, had naturally furnished a number of recruits to the Queen’s players, whose duty it was to act at special seasons before Her Majesty and the court. But within a few years after Shakespeare arrived in London the chief