

# Some Tendencies of the Modern Drama

WITH the passing of Shakespeare's genius it was inevitable that the standard of the drama should decline, but the deterioration of a form of literature which so completely dominated the beginning of the seventeenth century was swifter than the fading of a single genius justified. The eighteenth century had scarcely dawned when the essay at the skilful hands of Addison and Steele blossomed into its full vigor, and up to the first quarter of the nineteenth century the essay continued to be the greatest medium of expression. In this entire period but two dramatists are worthy of notice—Goldsmith and Sheridan. With Scott, Dickens, Thackeray, and George Eliot, the novel wrested the supremacy from the essay, so that in the nineteenth century prose fiction attained a popularity as complete as that of the drama in the days of Elizabeth. As the old century drew to a close, however, the short story in the capable hands of Poe, Hawthorne and Kipling was gradually winning over many former adherents of the novel. With the advent of the present century the revolution is completed, for the drama is once again in the ascendancy.

This rejuvenation of the drama is first to be noticed in the period from 1892 to 1895. Robinson, the principal dramatist of the previous generation portrayed a limited London society in a dialogue that was hopelessly dull. So when in 1892 following such a dearth of ideas a drama noted chiefly for its clever dialogue—"Wilde's *Lady Windermere Fan*" was produced, it resulted in a truly great sensation.

Oscar Wilde and Henry Arthur Jones are the predecessors of the modern drama. Now when we look back at *Lady Windermere's Fan* we can see readily enough its defects. Except for the brilliance of dialogue the play, especially in the soliloquies, looks thin. His own generation vastly overestimated his abilities, not realizing that since Wilde never subdued his art to his

hand, the play is untrue to life, theatrical, and of mediocre characterization. In "Michael and His Lost Angel" Henry Arthur Jones made an honest attempt at characterization, successful for two acts, after which the play goes to pieces. As a result of this weakness and of the offensive nature of the play, it was an immediate and absolute failure. Yet these two efforts were not wholly in vain. Inadequate as were their labors, Wilde and Jones paved the way for the modern drama.

More successful than either Wilde or Jones was their contemporary, Pinero. In *The "Second Mrs. Tanqueray"* he depicted a modern English tragedy, convincing and right, in a style that was deeply moving and gripping. Only in the ending is the play unsatisfactory, but at that time an illogical conclusion did not hurt it. Even though the play can only be considered as a transitional one, Pinero accomplished more than anyone else of his time to give to the English drama freedom.

What is this freedom of the drama and why is it desirable? To the first question I should answer that it is the privilege of a playwright, limited only by the confines of good taste and decency, to treat any subject in any method he may choose. It is desirable because it extends the scope of the drama and thereby opens new fields to cultivation and consequent enjoyment. Few of us would care to subsist on a single article of diet, yet how many of us demand that our dramatic tastes be satisfied with a solitary type of drama? Have your favorites if you must, prefer the drama with the "heart interest" if you insist, but do not shut out from the confines of your enjoyment all plays which fail exactly to meet the test of your preferment, do not withhold your patronage from plays that touch problems other than those of romance. This has been and is the desire of contemporary drama; this has been the goal toward which the struggle has been directed. Unconsciously at first and then deliberately, the modern drama has sought for freedom of form and subject.

By no means were the English playwrights the leaders in extending the narrow confines of the drama. On the contrary, the continental authors have been much more vigorous in promoting its freedom. While Ibsen first showed that the love story could be subordinated, later authors such as Bjornson,

Hauptmann, Maeterlinck, and Brieux, excluded it entirely. "Beyond Human Power" which Bjornson introduced in Norway in 1883, really begins the entire movement for freedom of form. In the face of the five act play of tradition, this has but two; in a time when characters changed off the stage, and when plays were witnessed for sheer entertainment, the characters of "Beyond Human Power" developed before our eyes, while it contained no love affair whatsoever.

"Beyond Human Power" is the story of the members of a religious sect who despondingly felt their faith weakening because it seemed that they were denied some signs or miracles which their ancestors had. Then one of their ministers in a small town, Pastor Sang, acquired a reputation for his apparent power of healing. With the ardent hope that the profound longing of their hearts might be realized, his associates flock to see him attempt the cure of his own wife, a bed-ridden invalid for many years. Never before had he felt equal to this great task. At the appointed hour the ministers assemble in the parlor, thousands gather outside the modest home, and Pastor Sang goes into his church to pray. The period of waiting is tense. Then the wife rises from her bed and walks into the room where the ministers are seated. The ministers jump to their feet with words of thanksgiving, the immense crowd outside bursts forth into a jubilant Hosanna, the church bell rings out in sustained tolling, and Pastor Sang, his heart overflowing with emotions, enters the room, advances towards his wife, and embraces her. At the height of the zealous jubilation, while the chorus swells higher and higher, the bell peals louder and louder, she suddenly becomes limp in his arms and dies. Overcome by such a tragedy at the zenith of his triumph, the husband too falls dead. The joy of the pastors is turned to consternation. Outside the singing ceases, but the bell rings on, no longer with its note of exultation, but with a depressing, overpowering, and cynical irony. The climax is tremendous. The tragedy is not in the death of Pastor Sang and his wife, but in the despair of the living. If only in the handling of the bell at the end, Bjornson shows himself a consummate artist. This is a play which breaks down tradition, which neglects the "heart

interest," which, though it may be repellent and distasteful, is yet powerful and emotional, and finally a play which settles nothing, but which at the end leaves the audience completely bewildered. "Beyond Human Power" is the beginning, and a worthy beginning, of the movement for freedom of form and for realistic characterization.

Maeterlinck developed dramatic freedom in a totally different direction than did Bjornson. At a time when beauty was supposed to be dead, he put into "Pelleas and Melisande," and *The Blue Bird* a prose as responsive and delicate as any verse.

His plays, which have been popular with a limited audience in England and America, help prove that the drama could treat any subject in any individual way.

Since "Pelleas and Melisande" was written the same year as "The Second Mrs. Tanqueray,"—that is 1893—and ten years after "Beyond Human Power," we can see how much the continental drama was advanced beyond our own. Indeed it was not until ten years later that the English tongue could boast of a play rivaling Maeterlinck's in beauty of speech. Then it was not in cultivated England nor in progressive America that the awakening first took place, but in untutored Ireland. The story of the Abbey Theater where these Irish plays were first produced, is the story of a direct effort of Irishmen to create an Irish stage. An old building was turned into a theatre where the authors joined amateur actors in producing the plays they themselves had written. The three leading figures are Lady Gregory and William Butler Yeats the founders, and John Millington Synge, their greatest dramatist. At a time when the world was absorbed in industry, commerce, and aggrandizement, Ireland had not lost her keen imagination nor her feeling for beauty in speech. The aim of these playwrights was not to depict Irish life as it appeared to others, or as they thought it should be, but as it actually existed. To accomplish this they frequently segregated themselves from the outside world and lived among the simple Irish peasants, training their ears to the delicate rhythm of the Irish tongue. The success was remarkable. From an obscure group of experimentalists, they became one of the most widely known companies speaking English. Their fame

spread to England and America, and they toured both of these countries. Of more importance, however, than this wide popular success, was the highly commendable dramatic and literary merit of their work. The dialect is nicely and surely written, the characterization excellent, the fashion compelling. Many of the works of this group are short one act plays, such as Yeats' "The Hour Glass," "Lady Gregory's" "The Rising of the Moon," and "Synge's Riders to the Sea." The latter especially is a masterpiece in style, swiftness of events, and dramatic intensity. The power and beauty of the modern drama in the English tongue first arose to its full significance in Ireland, and it is doubtful if the Irish drama has been excelled in either England or America.

It was not until 1909, with the works of Galsworthy, Baker, and Maisfield, that England began to attain a rank equal to that of Ireland, or the continent. Employing the repertory the atre to bring out their plays, these dramatists experimented in various types. The advantage of these small repertory theatres is that experimental plays which the general public will not patronize, may be tried out and supported to some extent by the limited audience which is interested in the progress of the drama. The repertory theatre has been a constant stimulus to the development of the modern drama.

John Galsworthy got his start in the Court Theatre, an experimental playhouse under Granville Barker. As a road-breaker, Galsworthy's *Strife* is an honest, direct, and simple attempt to depict the problem of the labor union and the capitalist. Much more satisfactory than the essay or lecture in bringing to our attention the realization of some unsatisfactory condition, is the drama. While the stage cannot preach, it may illustrate faults; while it cannot give a remedy, it may arouse our concern to the need of a remedy. This stirring up of thought in the minds of the audience is in some respects the greatest contribution of the modern play.

During this period the tendency of the American drama has been toward popular rather than literary success. Twelve years ago "The Witching Hour" by Augustus Thomas, and "The Great Divide" by William Vaughn Moody were playing to crowd-

ed houses in both the United States and Canada. The former is an excellently entertaining story of thought transfer, a play for acting and one of fair characterization. In "The Great Divide" Moody attempted a huge task in character development, and it must be admitted that the result is not convincing. It was a decided success in America, but when produced in Paris was a flat failure. One American play, however, was more successful abroad than in America, and that is "Shelden's Romance." First produced in 1914 it made a decided hit in the United States with Miss Doris Keane as Cavillini, was then transferred to England where this same star played in it for two years during the war. Early this year she returned to her native land to take part in a motion picture production of "Romance." "Romance" is popular in its appeal, yet of more literary, artistic, and dramatic merit than most plays of its kind.

While "Romance" was still drawing full houses in America, the English drama reached the highest point it had yet attained in both freedom of form and beauty of language. In "My Lady's Dress" Edward Knoblauch throws to the winds all ordinary conceptions of plot and sequence. The first and last scenes alone have any connection. In the first scene a woman decides to get a dress; in the last scene she gets it. Intervening are several distinct episodes in the lives of the different people who make the materials or furnish the workmanship going into the dress. These episodes have no connection with each other or with the first or last scene. It is a clever piece of technical ingenuity which clearly shows the result of the motion picture with the "flash back." Quite different is "The Faithful," written in 1915 by John Maisefield. With an old Japanese legend as a plot, in a curious kind of rhythmic, poetic prose, Maisefield combines the literary man and the dramatist. "The Faithful" is a play of disappointment, of high ideals, of enthusiasm, written in a mood of discouragement and disillusion, yet showing the strong faith in loyalty and ideals even to the greatest sacrifice. Although "The Faithful" may never be widely popular, in its own peculiar field it may never be excelled.

What does "The Faithful" lack that it may never attain popularity? The answer is not that "The Faithful" lacks the

qualities which should make it popular, but that the present day audiences are so narrowly prejudiced that they refuse to patronize anything except a certain favorite type of drama. The reason that the English and American drama is less thoughtful than that on the continent is that the public does not support the thoughtful drama. The public insists on certain types of plays, get them and nothing else. The American drama must have the feminine or "heart interest" as the central theme of every play. Now there are many interesting sides of life that do not concern theme of every play. Now there are many interesting sides of life that do not concern the feminine interest at all. To drag it into all plays distorts life, robs it of its honesty, and makes great dramatic art impossible under such conditions. In ancient Greece and in the days of Elizabeth the people went to the drama to learn about life enjoyable. In the twentieth century the more thoughtful type of plays are slowly but with difficulty forcing their way upward. What distinguishes these more thoughtful types of recent plays are their freedom and higher literary workmanship. "Beyond Human Power," "Pelleas and Melisande," and "My Lady's Dress" best illustrate the advance in freedom both of subject and of treatment. While "The Faithful" might also be placed with these it is more noteworthy as a literary masterpiece. Since the present plays cannot be compared with those of the Elizabethan period in literary value the great gain of the modern drama is its freedom from the restraining traditions of the past. Even more remarkable, however, is the fact that the drama of today is becoming international, while the drama of the past was national. How free or how literary this international drama is, depends not so much on the dramatists as on the audience.

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