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MATTHEW ARNOLD AND THE DRAMA

BY BRANDER MATTHEWS

I

THOSE of us who are now sexagenarians and who had the good fortune to make acquaintance with *Essays in Criticism* in our undergraduate days and to read the successive collections of Matthew Arnold's later criticisms as they appeared one by one, in the score of years that followed, can never forget the debt we owe to the critic who opened our eyes to the value of culture, to the purpose of criticism and to the duty of "seeing the thing as it is." We felt an increasing stimulus as we came to know Arnold's writings more intimately, as we absorbed them, as we made their ideas our own, as we sought to apply their principles and to borrow their methods. The influence of Arnold's work upon the generation born in the middle of the nineteenth century was immediate and it has been enduring.

"Without in the least over-rating himself," so Mr. Brownell has finely phrased it, Arnold "took himself with absolute seriousness, and his work from first to last is informed with the high sincerity of a consistent purpose—the purpose of being nobly useful to his time and country by preaching to men precisely the gospel he conceived they most vitally needed. For the consideration of his public and his era he deemed energy

less important than light, earnestness less needful than sweetness, genius less beneficent than reasonableness, erudition less called for than culture." He preached always persuasively, making his points sharply and often tipping them with wit that they might penetrate the more swiftly. He knew so certainly what he wanted to prove that it was easy for him always to be clear. His style, one of the most delightful in the whole range of English literature, is ever limpid, pellucid, transparent.

As he was directly addressing the public of his own era, he constantly dealt with the themes of immediate interest to his contemporaries in his own country. So it is that a large proportion of his writing, always indisputably literary in its treatment, is now discovered to be sometimes journalistic in its theme. Whatever interest his discussion of the Burials Bill, the Deceased Wife's Sister's Bill, the law of bequest and entail, the Irish Home Rule question, may have had when these topics were being hotly debated in the House of Commons, has evaporated now that the passage of years has deprived them of their pertinency. Moreover even in writing his essays on questions of permanent importance, the question of secondary education, for example, and the question of the classics

against the sciences, Arnold was so eager to catch the attention of his contemporaries that he never hesitated to make use of illustrations from the happenings of the moment, likely to be a little unintelligible to readers of a later generation.

To say this is to suggest that he yielded a little too much and a little too often to the temptation of an instantaneous and fleeting effect, and that there are passages in his writings, and not a few of them, which will be obscure to readers of the twentieth century without an annotation almost as abundant as that which does not prevent Pope's *Dunciad* from being unreadable. The fact is that Arnold, although essentially a man of letters, had a hankering after the newspaper, after the direct and evanescent impression of journalism. His essays were all published in magazines and reviews, and the magazine,—and the review also—is always alert to capture the element of timeliness; it is at best only a bridge between literature and journalism. *Friendship's Garland*, one of the most amusing of Arnold's books and one in which he most completely expressed certain of his opinions, was originally contributed to a daily paper, the *Pall Mall Gazette*, at irregular intervals during the years 1866 to 1870. It is true that the *Pall Mall Gazette*, while under the control of its founder, Frederick Greenwood, and afterward when it was edited by John Morley, was the most literary of London journals, rivalling in this respect the *Temps* and the *Débats* of Paris. To this evening journal, appealing to the better sort of newspaper readers, Arnold continued to contribute from time to time brief articles on literary and educational topics, most of which he did not care to preserve in his successive volumes, and only half a dozen of which have been included even in the more or less complete *édition de luxe* of his prose and verse published in fifteen volumes in 1903-4 and limited to seven hundred and fifty copies.

Among these newspaper contributions

rescued in this limited edition are a valuable note on George Sand (whom he rated higher than Balzac), and a series of five letters from "An Old Playgoer," written between December, 1882, and October, 1884. These five letters represent his sole venture into the field of theatrical criticism,—excepting only the very interesting paper on the "French Play in London," evoked by the visit of the Comédie-Française to England in 1879. This single essay and these five brief letters are the only evidences of Arnold's keen interest in the theatre. He was a constant playgoer,—unlike Sainte-Beuve, in whose footsteps he followed loyally and who seems to have cared little for the acted drama, although he was always characteristically acute and felicitous in his criticism of Molière and of the other masters of the French stage.

Born in 1822, Matthew Arnold was old enough to have witnessed the final appearances of the last of the Kemble brotherhood; and in one of the *Pall Mall Gazette* letters he recorded his opinion that the Benedick of Charles Kemble was superior to that of Henry Irving. "I remember how in my youth," he confessed in his paper on the performances of the Comédie-Française, "after a first sight of the divine Rachel at the Edinburgh theatre, in the part of Hermione, I followed her to Paris, and for two months never missed one of her performances." And it was this intensive study of the great actress which inspired his three noble sonnets on Rachel.

One can glean from his published correspondence a sparse record of his occasional visits to the theatre in England and on the continent,—records often accompanied by his off-hand judgments of the plays and of the players whom he beheld. In February, 1861, he saw Charles Fechter as Othello: "the first two acts I thought poor (Shakespeare's fault, partly), the next two effective, and the last pretty well." In April, 1864, he accepted an invitation to see Miss Bateman as Leah, adding that he had already seen "most of the things

that are being given now." In March, 1865, he went with his family to see Sothorn as Lord Dundreary. In November, 1874, he writes that he much wanted to see *Hamlet* (which Irving was then acting); and in February, 1876, he tells his sister that he is going to see "that gibbering performance, as I fear it is, Irving's *Othello*." Nearly ten years later in November, 1885, he saw *Othello* at the Royal Theatre in Berlin:—"horrid! but I wanted for once to see Shakespeare in German." And a year after, in March, 1886, when he was again in Germany, he reported that he was going "a great deal to the theatres, the acting is so good" (this was in Munich).

II

In 1856, when he was thirty-four, he seems to have planned a closet-drama on a Roman theme; "I am full of a tragedy of the time of the end of the Republic—one of the most colossal times of the world, I think. . . . It won't see the light, however, before 1857." It never has seen the light; and when 1857 arrived it found him at work on a closet-drama on a Greek theme, the *Merope* which he was to publish in 1858. As he was engaged in rehandling a story already dealt with by Euripides, Maffei, Voltaire and Alfieri, Arnold wisely undertook an analysis of the dramaturgic methods of the greatest and the most skilful of all the Attic dramatists: "what I learn in studying Sophocles for my present purpose is, or seems to me, wonderful; so far exceeding all that one would learn in years' reading of him without such a purpose."

In the preface to his collected *Poems*, issued in 1853, he had discussed the poet's choice of a theme. He did not cite but he echoed Voltaire's assertion that the success of a tragedy depends on its subject. In fact, Arnold is discussing poetry at large and not dramatic poetry only, yet the principle he laid down applies with special force to the drama: "the poet has in the first place to select an excellent action; and what ac-

tions are the most excellent? Those, certainly, which most powerfully appeal to the great primary human affections: to those elementary feelings which subsist permanently in the race, and which are independent of time."

In the preface to *Merope* itself, written five years later, Arnold sought to justify his selection of a Greek action, and his attempt to present this action as he imagined it would have been presented by a Greek dramatist. He described the origin and development of Greek tragedy, proving his knowledge of its principles. Yet in the play itself he was unable to apply these principles successfully. He lacked both the native dramatic genius and the acquired theatrical talent. In a letter of February, 1858, to his sister, he expressed his dissatisfaction with the adverse criticisms of his dramatic poem, which were the result largely of his own argumentative preface: "Instead of reading it for what it is worth, everybody begins to consider whether it does not betray a design to substitute tragedies *à la Grecque* for every other kind of poetical composition in England, and falls into an attitude of violent resistance to such an imaginary design. What I meant them to see in it was a specimen of the world created by the Greek imagination. This imagination was different from our own, and it is hard for us to appreciate, even to understand it; but it had a peculiar power, grandeur, and dignity, and these are worth trying to get an apprehension of."

What Arnold himself failed to perceive is that the peculiar power, grandeur and dignity of the Greek imagination can best be apprehended by a study of the tragedies written by the Greeks themselves and that there was no need for him or for any other Englishman to try to beat the Attic tragedians on their own ground and with their own weapons. After all, the most satisfactory Greek tragedies are and must be those written by the Greeks, as the most satisfactory Elizabethan dramas are those written by the Elizabethans. The

action of *Merope* might be excellent; it might "most powerfully appeal to the great primary human affections"; but it could exert this appeal upon a modern audience only if it were presented in accord with modern conditions. The theme of *Merope* might have a universal and perennial interest, but the form which Matthew Arnold gave it was only local and temporary, however superb it might have been when it had evolved spontaneously from the special conditions of theatrical performance in Athens. Furthermore, with all his liking for the acted drama, Arnold in composing *Merope* was not thinking of performance in any theatre, he was creating only a closet-drama, a still-born offspring of the Muse. A play which is not intended to be played is a contradiction in terms; it is an overt absurdity, no matter how greatly gifted the poet may be who deceives himself in the vain effort to achieve the truly dramatic without taking into account the theatre, in which only can the true drama be born.

Eight years later he seems to have been on the verge of repeating his blunder and of again wasting his effort in an attempt foredoomed to failure. In March, 1866, he wrote to his mother that he was troubled to find that Tennyson was at work on a subject, the story of the Latin poet Lucretius, which he himself had been occupied with for some twenty years: "I was going to make a tragedy out of it. . . . I shall probably go on with it, but it is annoying, the more so as I cannot possibly go on at present so as to be ready this year, but must wait till next." Fortunately for himself he did not go on; and before the next year came the project of a tragedy on Lucretius had joined the earlier project of the tragedy "of the time of the end of the Republic." In the first planned dramatic poem there might have been the stuff out of which a true tragedy could be made, even if Arnold was not the man to make it; but the subject of the later Roman men seems hopelessly infertile. It is true

that Molière was intensely interested in Lucretius, and Molière was a born playwright; but all that Molière planned to do was to make a French translation of the great work of Lucretius; and the Latin poet would never have suggested himself to the French dramatist as the possible hero of a tragedy.

III

With Arnold's persistent desire to use the dramatic form, with his lively curiosity as to the principles of play-making and with his unfailing interest in the art of acting, we may well wonder why it is that no one of his more elaborate critical studies was devoted to any of the great dramatists. There are the lofty sonnets on Sophocles and on Shakespeare, but there is no single study of Sophocles or of Shakespeare or of Molière. Scattered through his essays are many penetrating bits of criticism upon one or another of the playwrights of Europe. In the essay, "A French Critic on Goethe," for example, there is an illuminating comparison of Goethe's "Goetz von Berlichingen" with Schiller's "Robbers." Arnold quoted the assertion of a British critic that "there was something which prevented Goethe from ever becoming a great dramatist; he could never lose himself sufficiently in his creations." And on this Arnold commented that it is in "Goetz" that Goethe loses himself the most. "Goetz" is full of faults, "but there is a life and a power in it, and it is not dull. This is what distinguishes it from Schiller's 'Robbers.' The 'Robbers' is at once violent and tiresome. 'Goetz' is violent, but it is not tiresome."

The one long article devoted exclusively to things theatrical is the "French Play in London," written in 1879, and reprinted in *Irish Essays and Others*,—a volume in which it finds itself strangely out of place in its enforced companionship with half a dozen sprightly specimens of political polemic.

The "French Play in London" is one of the cleverest of Arnold's essays, and one of the most charming. It is also one of the most valuable, rich in matter, graceful and urbane in manner, witty in expression and wise in outlook. It reveals Arnold's genuine appreciation of the drama as a literary form,—and it discloses also his understanding of the art of acting, by which only is the drama made vital.

The Comédie-Française was then in the plenitude of its superiority over all other histrionic aggregations. It possessed a company of comedians probably unequalled in France before or since, and certainly unequalled in England,—except possibly at Drury Lane in the early years of Sheridan's management, when the *School for Scandal* was "in all its glory," as Charles Lamb said. The boards of the Théâtre Français were nightly trod by Got and Coquelin, by Thiron, Barré and Febvre, by Sarah Bernhardt and Croizette, by Barretta and Jouassain. In comedy, in Molière, Beaumarchais and Augier, it was incomparable; in Hugo it was superb; and even if it was not so superb in Corneille and Racine, it was at least far more than adequate.

Although Arnold began by declaring that he did not propose to analyse the artistic accomplishment of the several members of this galaxy of stars, he did allow himself one excursus into purely histrionic criticism,—an excursus which proved both his insight and his foresight. He pointed out—and this was in 1879—the fatal defect in the equipment of Sarah Bernhardt, a defect which was to be made painfully manifest in the ensuing thirty years:—"One remark I will make, a remark suggested by the inevitable comparison of Mlle. Sarah Bernhardt with Rachel. One talks vaguely of genius, but I had never till now comprehended how much of Rachel's superiority was purely in intellectual power, how eminently this power counts in the actor's art as in all arts, how just is the instinct which led the Greeks to mark with a high and severe stamp the Muses.

Temperament and quick intelligence, passion, nervous mobility, grace, smile, voice, charm, poetry,—Mlle. Sarah Bernhardt has them all. One watches her with pleasure, with admiration,—and yet not without a secret disquietude. Something is wanting, or, at least, not present in sufficient force, something which alone can secure and fix her administration of all the charming gifts which she has, can alone keep them fresh, keep them sincere, save them from perils by caprice, perils by mannerism. That something is high intellectual power. It was here that Rachel was so great; she began, one says to oneself as one recalls her image and dwells upon it,—she began almost where Mlle. Sarah Bernhardt ends."

A little later in his essay, Arnold, as was his wont, and in accord with what Mr. Brownell has called his "missionary spirit," asked what was the moral to be drawn by us who speak English from the opportunity to study the best that the French stage had to offer. He digressed to point out that Victor Hugo is not "a poet of the race and lineage of Shakespeare" as Swinburne had rashly asserted in one of his characteristically dithyrambic rhapsodies. Arnold dwelt also on the inferiority of the rhymed French Alexandrine as a poetic instrument for dramatic use to English blank verse and to the Greek iambic. "Victor Hugo is said to be a cunning and mighty artist in Alexandrines, and so unquestionably he is; but he is an artist in a form radically inadequate and inferior, and in which a drama like that of Sophocles or Shakespeare is impossible."

Then Arnold, writing in 1879, it must be again recalled, declared that "we in England have no modern drama at all. We have our Elizabethan drama" and eighteenth century comedy. "Then we have numberless imitations and adaptations from the French. All of these are at bottom fantastic,"—because the result of putting French wine into English bottles is to give to the attentive observer "a sense of incurable

falsity in the piece as adapted." To this point Arnold was to recur again in one of the "Letters of an Old Playgoer." Yet even at this moment when the English language had no drama dealing with life of the English-speaking peoples, these peoples were revealing a steadily increasing interest in the theatre. "I see our community turning to the theatre with eagerness, and finding the English theatre without organisation or purpose, or dignity,—and no modern English drama at all except a fantastical one. And then I see the French company from the chief theatre of Paris showing themselves to us in London,—a society of actors admirable in organisation, purpose and dignity, with a modern drama not fantastic at all, but corresponding with fidelity to a very palpable and powerful ideal."

He asked "What is the consequences which it is right and rational for us to draw? Surely it is this: 'The theatre is irresistible; *organise the theatre.*'" And then he outlined a method of organisation which would provide London with a company of actors worthy of consideration by the side of the company which had come over from Paris. When this is once done a modern drama "will also, probably, spring up;"—that is to say, Arnold hoped that an adequate and working organisation of the theatre would bring about a new birth in the English drama. And the event proved that the second of these hopes was to be fulfilled without being preceded by any effort to attain the first. The English theatre is not yet "organised" in accord with Arnold's suggestions; but the English language has developed a modern drama, not adapted from the French and therefore not fantastic at all, but corresponding with more or less fidelity to a palpable and powerful ideal. The beginnings of this revivification of the English drama were already visible in 1879, although they were a little more obviously visible five years later, in 1884, when Arnold wrote the fifth and final of his "Letters of an Old Playgoer."

IV

The first of these letters was the result of an invitation from Mr. Henry Arthur Jones to attend the first performance of *The Silver King* on November 16, 1882; and the other four followed at irregular intervals during the next two years, called forth by one or another of the "current attractions" at the London theatres. It is plain enough that he enjoyed writing them, pleased at the new opportunity to apply the old doctrine and glad to note the signs of the coming of a modern English drama, slowly purging itself of fantasticality. When Morley expressed his liking for these letters, Arnold called them "the last flicker of a nearly exhausted rushlight." Yet they still have illumination for us, more than thirty years later. They deal with both of the aspects of the double art of the drama, with the plays themselves and with the performers who made them live at the moment. They disclose Arnold's constant sanity, his penetrating shrewdness, his ability to see the thing as it is, his cogency of presentation, his power of drawing out the principle from the practice, and his insistence on finding the moral latent in every manifestation of art.

In the performance of *The Silver King* Arnold noted "the high general level of the acting" and he contrasted this with his memories of thirty-five years earlier when Macready was acting his great Shakespearian parts, supported by two or three middling actors, "and the rest moping and mowing in what was not to be called English but rather stage,"—a remark to be recommended to the consideration of those praisers of past times who still talk of the palmy days and who affect to believe that the level of acting is lower than it was when the old stock-companies strutted to half-empty houses in dingy and shabby theatres. He found that *The Silver King* was an honest melodrama, relying "for its main effect on an outer drama of sensational incidents," that is to say, upon its external action,

rather than on its characters. But melodrama as it is in its structure *The Silver King* was not melodramatic in its dialogue. "In general throughout the piece the diction and the sentiments are natural; they have sobriety and propriety; they are literature."

In the second and third letters he dealt with three comedy-dramas, *Forget-me-not* by Messrs. Grove and Merivale, *A Great Catch* by Mr. Hamilton Aidé, and *Impulse* by Mr. Charles Stephenson. The plays of Mr. Aidé and of Messrs. Grove and Merivale were evidences of the immediate development of a modern drama in England, far superior in veracity and in execution to the adaptations which had held the stage in London half a century earlier. Arnold credited *Forget-me-not* with dialogue "always pointed and smart, sometimes quite brilliant"; and he declared that "the piece has its life from its ability and verve." But with his usual insight he could not fail to see that its action lacked an adequate motive. In this respect *A Great Catch* was more satisfactory; yet once again he was able to put his finger on the defect; one of the most important characters was inadequately developed. Here Arnold's criticism is purely technical; and it is sound and useful. Then he gave high praise to the admirable acting of Miss Genevieve Ward, an American who had taken a foremost position on the English stage.

Impulse, he did not like at all: "a piece more unprofitable it is hard to imagine." Mr. Stephenson's play was a flagrant example of the fantasticality, of the incurable falsity, likely to result from the dislocation of a plot essentially French in an absurd effort to adjust it to social conditions essentially English. The story no longer represents French life and it misrepresents English life; it becomes "something half-true, factitious and unmeaning." So the play is "intensely disagreeable," achieving success because of the acting of the two chief parts, because of "the singularly attractive, sympathetic and popular personalities of Mr. and Mrs.

Kendal; while they are on the stage it is hard to be dissatisfied."

The three plays considered in the first two letters were evidences that dramatists were coming forward in England who were capable not only of invention and construction, but who were possessed also of a sincere desire to deal with life as they severally saw it; and the single play considered in the third letter was evidence that the public had not yet experienced a change of heart and still lingered in the condition when it could be amused by insincere adaptations. In the fourth and fifth letters Arnold had worthier topics. The fourth letter was devoted to Henry Irving's sumptuous and brilliant presentation of *Much Ado About Nothing*; and the fifth and final letter, the only one written after his visit to America, after his voyage across "the unplumbed, salt, estranging sea," was devoted to Wilson Barrett's ambitious presentation of *Hamlet*.

Arnold asserted that *Much Ado* was beautifully put upon the stage, which "greatly heightens the charm of ideal comedy." He declared also that it was "acted with an evenness, a general level of merit which was not to be found twenty-five years ago." He discovered in Henry Irving and also in Ellen Terry "a personality which peculiarly fits them for ideal comedy. Miss Terry is sometimes restless and over-excited; but she has a spirited vivacity which is charming. Mr. Irving has faults which have often been pointed out; but he has, as an actor, a merit which redeems them all, and which is the secret of his success: the merit of delicacy and distinction. . . . Mankind are often unjust to this merit, and most of us much resist having to exhibit it in our own life and soul; but it is singular what a charm it exercises over us."

Arnold begins his criticism on Wilson Barrett's *Hamlet* with a discussion of the tragedy itself and with the influence exerted upon Shakespeare himself at the very moment of its composition by Montaigne. This leads him to the rather

strange conclusion that *Hamlet* is "not a drama followed with perfect comprehension and profoundest emotion, which is the ideal for tragedy, but a problem, soliciting interpretation and solution. It will never, therefore, be a piece to be seen with pure satisfaction by those who will not deceive themselves. But such is its power and such is its fame that it will always continue to be acted, and we shall all of us continue to go to see it." Then the critic turned to the acting, praising E. S. Willard's Claudius and finding Wilson Barrett's *Hamlet* "fresh, natural, young, prepossessing, animated, coherent, the piece moves. All *Hamlets* I have seen dissatisfy us in something. Macready wanted person, Charles Kean mind, Fechter English; Mr. Wilson Barrett wants elocution."

V

As we read these "Letters of An Old Playgoer" we cannot help noting three things; first, Arnold's alert interest in the drama as an art and his insight into its principles; second, his equally alert interest in acting and his understanding of its methods,—an understanding quite unusual among men of letters, who are generally even more at sea in discussing

the histrionic art than they are in discussing the arts of the painter, the sculptor, and the architect. And it is significant that Arnold's own appreciation of dramaturgic and histrionic craftsmanship was not accompanied by any correspondingly acute appreciation of either pictorial or plastic skill, in the manifestations of which he seems never to have been greatly interested, even during his visits to Italy and France.

The third thing we note is that Arnold retained his openmindedness and his freshness of impression. He was sixty when he turned aside to consider the improving conditions of the English theatre, the advance in English acting and the beginnings of the modern English drama; but he revealed none of the customary sexagenarian proneness to look back longingly to the days of his youth, and to bewail the degeneracy discoverable in the years of his old age. He was quick to see progress and frank in acknowledging its presence. Perhaps his openmindedness in his maturity was in some measure due to his early and severe training in Greek and to his absorption of the free Greek spirit, which secured him against pedantry and kept his vision unimpaired.

INGRAM—DISCOURAGER OF POE BIOGRAPHIES

BY CAROLINE TICKNOR

EARLY in February there passed away in Brighton, England, a unique literary figure, John H. Ingram, whose life had been devoted to the study of Edgar Allan Poe. Since boyhood the Englishman had been a student and lover of Poe's work, as well as an enthusiastic collector of his letters, manuscripts and first editions, and it is understood that his decease has put upon the English

market one of the very best collections of Poeana in existence.

For over thirty years Ingram had been at work upon his final and exhaustive life of Poe, whose genius, he claimed, had failed to win proper appreciation in America. This work was practically complete at the time that the writer, once prominent in the world of letters, and of late quite forgotten,