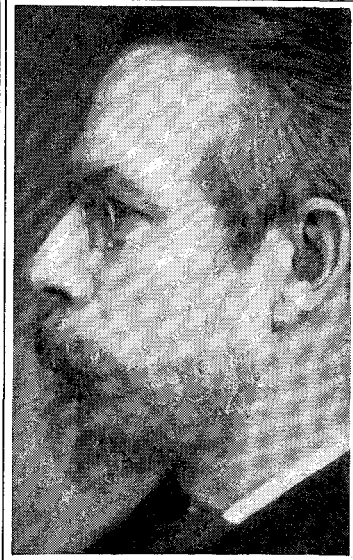


# PLAYS TO READ

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Comparatively Seldom Can One  
See on the Stage Great Dramas  
Well Acted—Hence the Demand  
for the Best Classical and Modern  
Plays in Book Form.



NO competent critic of modern literature is now inclined to deny, or even to doubt, that the drama is once more alive in the English language, and that both in Great Britain and the United States there are playwrights whose works are not merely destined for the two hours' traffic of the stage, but are also worthy of a longer survival in the study. There is no more irrefragable testimony to this revival of the drama in our native tongue than the fact that we are recovering the lost art of reading plays. To many of us this increasing willingness of the public to read plays, although not quite so readily as novels are read, seems like a new departure; yet it is but a return to a long-established practise, which had fallen into innocuous desuetude only because there were practically no new plays in English worth reading.

In France the habit of reading plays has never been allowed to lapse, because there has never been in France any divorce between literature and the drama, such as had been decreed in England toward the end of the eighteenth century. But the English-speaking peoples on both sides of the

Atlantic have only recently resumed the practise of their forebears a hundred years ago, before the novel achieved its overwhelming modern vogue.

It was not until Walter Scott published "Waverley" in 1814, and swiftly followed it with a score or more of other stories, that the novel succeeded in establishing itself as the triumphant rival of the play. In the eighteenth century in England the tragedies and the comedies produced in the theater were immediately published to be read in the library; and that they were read is proved by the fact that the best of them went speedily into successive editions. The plays of those days were better worth reading than the novels, and there were more of them. "To read a good comedy," so Hazlitt wrote in the early part of the nineteenth century, "is to keep the best company in the world, where the best things are said, and the most amusing happen."

## THE ECLIPSE OF THE ENGLISH DRAMA

All through the nineteenth century, when English dramatic literature was an arid desert with only here and there an oasis, French dramatic literature was flourishing

EDITOR'S NOTE—Previous articles in this series of talks upon current literary topics, by Brander Matthews have been as follows: "Who's Who in Fiction" (published in MUNSEY'S MAGAZINE for March), "Books on the Drama" (April), "Modern Essays" (May), "A String of Short Stories" (June), "Concerning Cook-Books" (July), "American Character in American Fiction" (August), and "American Biography" (September).

luxuriantly. Victor Hugo was followed by the younger Dumas and by Emile Augier; and they have been succeeded by Hervieu and by Rostand. The sale of one of Rostand's plays, "Cyrano de Bergerac," has exceeded three hundred thousand copies—a sale achieved by no novel published in France in the past half-century. The circulation of Maeterlinck's plays has certainly been far larger than that of his essays. There has been no day in the past half-century when the playwrights have not been as many in the French Academy as the novelists.

A French dramatist publishes his plays as a matter of course, as soon as they are performed. He submits them first to the ordeal by fire before the footlights, and then he sends them forth to undergo the chemical test of time. It is on the stage that a drama must prove its value, first of all; and then it is in the study that it must establish its title to be taken seriously as a contribution to literature.

#### A QUESTION OF COPYRIGHT LAW

Although the English-speaking peoples had the habit of reading plays a century and more ago, they lost it naturally enough when the superior profit of prose fiction tempted away the men who might have become dramatists. The superior profit of prose fiction was due to the fact that there was then no international stage-right, and that the theatrical managers could take for nothing the plays of foreigners—those of Kotzebue, at first, and later the works of the indefatigable Scribe.

The laborer is worthy of his hire; and if he knows that he will not get his hire, he refuses to labor. The dearth of drama in English in the early nineteenth century is due mainly to the fact that the dramatist in English had to vend his wares in competition with stolen goods. It is small wonder that he turned from the play and took to the novel, wherein his reward was certain in case of success.

As soon as the laws were changed, which happened toward the end of the third quarter of the nineteenth century, the drama in English started at once to revive, until now it is tempting away men of literary ability who began their career as novelists—Mr. Shaw, for example, and Sir James Barrie, Mr. Galsworthy, Mr. Bennett, and Mr. Tarkington. This is the exact opposite of what used to happen in the past,

when men of letters naturally began as dramatists and later ventured timidly into prose fiction. Cervantes and Le Sage, Fielding and Smollett, all wrote plays before they wrote novels; and their novels show clearly the result of this earlier experience in writing for the theater. The characters in their stories are not related intimately to the background, as they have been since Scott and Balzac showed how this could be done effectively. The personages of Cervantes, and even those of Fielding, live, move, and have their being starkly detached from the environment in which they are placed.

#### THE NOVEL AND THE PLAY

Now it is just this stark detachment of the characters of a play which makes a play harder to read than a novel. The novelist describes his creatures and tells us not only what they do, but also what they feel and what they think. The dramatist can tell us only what they say, although he can also indicate succinctly what they do. What they feel and what they think can be expressed only in the dialogue itself. The difference between the two forms of narrative, in each of which characters are set in motion before us to take part in a story, has never been more clearly declared than by Edmond Got, long time a leading comedian at the Théâtre Français:

The novel has explanations, descriptions, digressions, goings back, and so forth—and also dialogue. The play has only dialogue—with scenes and costumes, no doubt; but after all the dialogue has to do the whole work swiftly, with a rhythm which is skilful and unsuspected, effect after effect, scene after scene. By dialogue the characters must be drawn and contrasted, the movement must be varied and sustained, the action must advance unceasingly, the situations must disclose themselves and grow in interest, the bold strokes must explode sometimes with the aid of a single word.

In the theater the single word explodes effectively, and we are in no danger of not hearing the report, the echo of which we may perhaps fail to catch when we are in the library and are aided by the eye only, and not by both eye and ear. The difficulty in reading a play so as to get at its complete dramatic effect is due to the fact that it was not devised primarily to be read. It was devised primarily to be seen and heard, and only secondarily to be read.

We may admit that a drama which cannot be perused with pleasure has little claim to literary merit. It is for the theater only, and there it lives for a brief space before it dies forever, whatever the temporary success it may have won when it first appeared. But none the less must we remember always that it was primarily for the theater that all the masterpieces of dramatic literature were originally composed.

"A play," said the late Ferdinand Brunetière, the most authoritative of French critics at the end of the nineteenth century—"a play has this particularity and distinction—that being written to be acted, it is not complete in itself; and it cannot be detached from the material conditions of scenic representation and from the nature of the public for which it is destined."

This is true not only of the dramas of to-day, but of the plays of the past. Sophocles and Shakespeare and Molière wrote their plays to be acted in the theater before their own contemporaries, and not to be read by posterity—that posterity to which Shakespeare, for one, seems never to have given a thought, since he did not publish a single one of his plays. The most devoted student of the masterpieces of dramatic literature, when he has the good fortune to see any one of them on the stage, is likely to discover effects the existence of which had not been revealed to him until he was privileged to behold the characters of the play bodied forth before his eyes by actual human beings.

In fact, it is scarcely too much to say that any attempt to judge a play solely by perusal is not unlike trying to gage the merit of a picture from a photograph only. Of course, if a painter is essentially a draftsman, the camera may reproduce his work not unfairly. But if he is essentially a colorist—that is to say, if he is truly a painter—then the best of photographs can be little better than a betrayal. So if a dramatist is essentially a lyric poet, or a rhetorician, a mere reading may put us in possession of the best he has to give us. But if he is truly a playwright as well as a poet, he has thought in terms of the theater, and what he has wrought must needs be displayed on the stage itself if it is to disclose all that it contains.

#### NOT MANY GREAT PLAYS CAN BE SEEN

Unfortunately, we cannot command at will a satisfactory performance of a series

of the masterpieces of dramatic literature. Even in Great Britain and the United States, only a dozen of Shakespeare's best comedies and tragedies are likely to be visible in the theater in the course of half a dozen years. At least half of Shakespeare's plays are performed only at rare intervals; and some of them are never seen at all on the modern stage. In default of actual performance in the theater, we have to do the best we can by reading in the library.

It may be added that we are little better off so far as modern plays are concerned. They are produced as novelties; they have their run, longer or shorter as the case may be; and then they disappear, except that a few of them may have casual and infrequent revivals. Even in London and in New York there is no repertory theater like the Théâtre Français in Paris, where in the course of the winter season a diligent playgoer may profit by the opportunity to see actually performed a dozen or a score of the best plays of the language, both classic and modern.

And it is only in London and in New York—or at least it is only in the larger cities of the British Empire and of the American republic—that any large number of the more important plays of the past or of the present is likely to be represented in the course of any one theatrical season. Those who happen to dwell in the smaller towns are denied the privilege of seeing good plays adequately acted, except very infrequently. And yet the dwellers in the smaller towns may be as desirous of keeping up with the drama as it advances as the inhabitants of the larger cities. And they have to make the best of their unfortunate situation.

If they cannot behold the more important plays of the more important dramatists on the stage, they can at least read these pieces in the study. In default of the full-colored picture, they have to content themselves with the paler photograph.

#### RECENT PLAYS SOLD AS BOOKS

Now, it is to meet this new demand that the publishers are issuing plays as books. Some of these plays some of these publishers are pushing as energetically as they are in the habit of pushing novels. There is already a sale over the counters for the plays of Mr. John Galsworthy, Mr. Arnold Bennett, and Mr. Booth Tarkington as

there is for their novels—a sale as ready, even if it is not yet so large. In the case of Mr. George Bernard Shaw, it is safe to say that the circulation of his plays has been far larger than the circulation of his novels, for the excellent reason that the plays represent a riper and more mature artist than the novels.

Not only are our modern plays in English sold over the counter as books; they are even invading the magazines, sometimes as a serial, the successive acts appearing month by month, and sometimes compacted into a single number. In this magazine, for example, the three-act play "Milestones" was published complete in a single number for the benefit of the countless rural readers who could scarcely hope to see it in the theater. There are probably very few popular magazines that would not jump at the chance of printing one of Sir James Barrie's plays—"Peter Pan," "What Every Woman Knows," or "The Admirable Crichton."

There are a host of plays, performed on the stage and published for the study, that are worth seeing in the theater and worth reading in the library. Some of these are translated from the French or the German or the Scandinavian; and some of them are written originally in the English language, by British and American playwrights. They are of varying value, of course; masterpieces are not many; and yet there are plays not a few which deal honestly with life, and which demand to be read as insistently as any novel which discusses one or another of the burning questions of the day.

#### PLAYS BOTH ACTABLE AND READABLE

Half a century ago the scant plays which got into print were unactable; and the many plays which got performed were unreadable. Now at last we have not a few plays which are bothactable and readable.

Sir James Barrie has at last been induced to allow his delightful comedy "Quality Street" to appear in print. Mr. Henry Arthur Jones has been tempted to publish a characteristically clever play, "The Divine Gift," even before it has been performed in the theater. Three or four of Mr. Galsworthy's plays are now issued in a single volume, which allows us to form a solid estimate of the value of his work as a playwright. Lady Gregory has recently collected into a single volume half a dozen of her later pieces, in which she in-

terprets Irish life and Irish character with its commingled humor and pathos. Several of the tonic and astringent dramas of Björnson have recently been issued in English; and we may now compare his contribution to the Scandinavian drama with that made by his austere compatriot, Ibsen—to whose international vogue we may attribute the discovery by many readers that a play could be perused with pleasure as well as with profit.

From Scandinavia also we have had imported half a dozen of the morbid and dispiriting pieces of Strindberg, a decadent egotist who took delight in proving to his own satisfaction that this is the worst of all possible worlds. Over against this may be set the strangely exotic "Yellow Jacket," a Chinese story shown in accord with the conventions of the Chinese stage, so unlike those to which we are now accustomed in our picture-frame theaters, and so like those to which our Tudor ancestors were accustomed in the platform-stage playhouses.

#### HOW SHOULD A PLAY BE READ?

Here, then, are half a score of volumes each containing one or more plays of very varying appeal and of very varying value. Here are all kinds of dramas for all sorts and conditions of readers. Other volumes of plays had preceded them on the shelves of our bookstores; and other volumes will follow. Perhaps the time has come for some expert to explain how new plays ought to be read so as to get the utmost profit out of them. Novels we all know how to read, but plays are not novels; and they make a different demand upon us. This may seem to some an unnecessary suggestion; and some may deny that there is any art of play-reading to be acquired.

In the "William Henry Letters" of Mrs. Diaz, which delighted the boyhood days of many of us whose hair is now grayer or even whiter than it was then, a healthy and unabashed youngster does not understand why he has to go to dancing-school in order to gain ease of movement and to learn how to enter a room. He protested that he did not see anything so very difficult in entering a room.

I told 'em, "Walk right in!"

Many of us would echo this frank outburst; and yet not a few have profited by attendance at dancing-school, and have thereby gained ease of movement. After



all, is it so very easy to enter a room—to enter it as it ought to be entered? And is it really so very easy to read a play as it ought to be read? Is there no difference between reading a play and reading a novel? Was the late Richard Grant White justified in the response he gave to the letters he frequently received asking him how to read Shakespeare?

"My answer," the Shakespearian scholar asserted, "would naturally be, the way to read Shakespeare is—to read him! The rest follows as a matter of course."

Yet White seemingly failed to find this answer, simple as it is, wholly satisfactory, for he proceeded to compose three careful essays, one after the other, in order to guide the footsteps of the novice who is about to explore the Shakespearian forest for the first time. The way to read Shakespeare is—to read him, of course. But how is Shakespeare to be read to the best advantage? How is any other playwright of the past to be read so that we may get out of the perusal the utmost that his plays may be made to yield? How are the dramatists of to-day to be read so as to derive from the reading as much as possible of the delight and the stimulus we get when we see their plays acted?

To these questions there is only one answer. The best way to read a play is to read it as a play and not as a novel—that is, to read it with a deliberate desire to call up in the mind's eye an actual performance; to read it with a lively imagination which will help us to visualize the characters and to see them moving before us as they speak the words set down for them on the printed page.

#### FULL STAGE DIRECTIONS NEEDED

What a character says in a play is of first importance, of course, but almost equally important is how he said it, and how he looked when he said it, and what he did just before he said it and just after. Only less significant than what is spoken by one character is the way in which his utterance is received by the other characters. The author tells us what these other characters say and he may suggest what they do; and it is for the reader to round out these suggestions for himself, to color the outlines and to fill in the movement. It is for the reader to make "an effort of imaginative sympathy," to use the apt phrase of the late Sir Richard Jebb.

In this effort he ought to be sustained by the author, who should supply all possible aid to the imagination. No playwright has any right to phrase his stage directions in the old-fashioned shorthand technical phrases of the so-called "acting editions." He must eschew the outworn method of recording stage business:

Enter Mary R. U. E. as John exits door in flat L.

This is all well enough in plays printed from the prompt-book for the benefit of actors, professional or amateur. For the reader, it is the abomination of desolation. What the reader wants, what the reader needs, is a simple but clear statement of the action which necessarily accompanies the dialogue, unencumbered by technicalities. With this statement as a basis, he can give free rein to his imagination; he can reconstruct the scenery; he can form a visual image of every character; he can move these characters about at will under pressure of the dialogue; he can give himself the pleasure of a special performance for his sole profit.

No modern playwright has paid more attention to the wants of the reader than Mr. Shaw. The stage directions of his plays are quite as amusing as the dialogue itself. And in the main these stage directions are helpful to the reader; they aid him to visualize a performance; they stimulate him to the needful effort of imaginative sympathy.

Yet even with the assistance of directions as lively as those to be found in Mr. Shaw's plays, the task of the reader is not easy. The art of visualizing a play is, as Stevenson declared, comparable to the art of reading a score—that is, of procuring for ourselves the pleasure of an orchestral concert by studying the composer's complete instructions to the performers of the several instruments. Probably the reader of a musical score is called upon for a more difficult feat than the reader of a play. Certainly the ability to visualize a performance by the aid of the printed page is one which can be acquired more or less by any one who resolutely cultivates the art. And the attempt to visualize, even if it is only partly successful, is well worth while, for it enables us to enrich our solitary perusal in our own home with not a little of the specific pleasure for which we go to the crowded theater.

# THE LIGHT OF WESTERN STARS \*

BY ZANE GREY

AUTHOR OF "RIDERS OF THE PURPLE SAGE," ETC.

## XXIV (*continued*)

AS the thunder boomed and died away, Madeline reflected with surprise upon Stewart's admission that he was afraid. Something in his face had made her ask him what she considered a foolish question. His reply amazed her. She loved a storm. Why should he fear it—he, with whom she could not associate fear?

"How strange! Have you not been out in many storms?"

A smile that was only a gleam flitted over his dark face.

"In hundreds of them—by day with the cattle stampeding; at night alone on the mountain, with the pines crashing and the rocks rolling; in flood on the desert."

"It's not only the lightning, then?" she asked.

"No. All the storm."

Madeline felt that if this iron-nerved man feared a storm, there must be something about a storm to fear. And suddenly, as the ground quaked under her horse's feet, and all the sky grew black, crisscrossed with flaming streaks, and between thunderous reports there was a strange, hollow roar sweeping down upon her, she realized how small was her knowledge of the mighty forces of nature. Then, with that perversity of character of which she herself was conscious, she was humble, submissive, reverent, and even fearful while she gloried in the grandeur of the cloud-shadowed crags and cañons, the stupendous strife of sound, the wonderful, driving lances of white fire.

With blacker gloom and deafening roar

came the rain. It was a cloudburst. It was like water tumbling down.

For long Madeline sat her horse, her head bent to the pelting rain. When its force lessened, and she heard Stewart call for all to follow, she looked up to see that he was starting once more. She shot a glimpse at Dorothy, and as quickly glanced away. Dorothy, who would not wear a hat suitable for inclement weather, nor one of the sticky yellow slickers, was a drenched and disheveled spectacle.

Madeline did not trust herself to look at the other girls. It was enough to hear their lament; so she turned her horse into Stewart's trail.

## XXV

GLAD indeed was Madeline to be lifted off her horse beside a roaring fire, and to see steaming pots upon red-hot coals. Except about her shoulders, which had been protected by the slicker, she was wringing wet. The Mexican women came quickly to help her change in a tent near by, but Madeline preferred for the moment to warm her numb feet and hands, and to watch the spectacle of her arriving friends.

Dorothy plumped off her saddle into the arms of several waiting cowboys. She could scarcely walk. Far removed in appearance was she from her usual stylish self. Her face was hidden by a limp and lopsided hat. From under the disheveled brim came a plaintive moan:

"O-h-h! what an awful ride!"

Mrs. Beck was in worse condition; she had to be taken off her horse.

"I'm paralyzed—I'm a wreck. Bobby, get a roller-chair!"

\* This story began in the May number of MUNSEY'S MAGAZINE