

The Actor's Dilemma

TO have high principles is conceded to be important in life, but among actors, at any rate, it is equally important not to have the wrong high principles. It is nearly twenty years now since Bernard Shaw accused Mary Anderson of morality. "Mary Anderson is essentially a woman of principle, which the actress essentially is not." It was an effective but a bourgeois way of putting it. The great actress does not believe in the same principles as Mary Anderson, but she has principles of her own, principles by which Mary Anderson seemed immoral.

According to Shaw, the trouble with Mary Anderson was her refusal to let herself go. "The notion that all bravery, loyalty and self-respect depend on a lawless and fearless following of the affectionate impulses—which is the characteristic morality of the artist, especially the woman artist of the stage—is, to her, simple immorality." But the real trouble with Mary Anderson did not reside in her personal virtue. It resided in her attitude toward the projection of life on the stage.

A svelte figure may be beautiful, but a woman who is going to have a baby is a criminal if she aims to look slim. A natural complexion is the best complexion, but it is sickly in the glare of the footlights. Clean hands are desirable, but not in a coalheaver. Clean finger-nails are attractive, but for a sculptor they are not the first consideration. To attain the highest end in certain directions it may be essential to abandon some excellent conventions. It isn't rude for an invalid to stick out his tongue. It isn't impertinent for a masseur to slap the Pope on the back. A great deal of the trouble in this world comes from the effort to obey old traditions in the pursuit of a novel goal. It is admirable for actors to be men of principle, or for actresses to be women of principle, but in the degree that they subordinate acting to the conventions of another sphere or another condition they are the enemies of their art. And that they are prone to such treachery, especially in America, only the reverential will deny. In America especially there is a respectability that shapes our drama, rough-hew it how we may.

In my favorite handbook, "Etiquette for All Occasions," there occurs the following passage: "A word anent bathing suits. Why cannot a man wear a fairly decent garment when bathing, instead of the sleeveless, almost backless, garment that is now so generally affected? If a man cannot swim with a sleeve that covers his shoulder, he should give up bathing in company that includes women." The difficulty, you see, is not with the attitude toward the human form. It is nudity that is at fault, not at all the etiquettical attitude.

To bait respectability became a European convention some years ago, and I do not mean to echo that cant. But the more one studies America, the more evident seems the perverted notion of all art that persists in the heart of the country. The moral of any art is not inconsequential. There is a relation between art and conduct. But if there is a single thing that kills an art it is its direct observance of moral or didactic intention. For the very young it may be necessary that the moral be pointed. Platitude and truism may be as necessary for youth as milk and mush. But when people are mature they should be freemen in the city of life. Their morality should be in the air they breathe, not in the air other people have breathed. They should, so far as possible, be given the run of life—at their own peril, for their own honor and satisfaction. A nursery is an excellent place for a child.

For a man it is a prison. And it is vicious to ask our artists to be nurserymen. In a thousand ways the moralists encroach upon art. In a thousand ways their solicitude about conduct intrudes on literature and the drama. It is for this reason that the writer, the artist and the actor must be prepared to array himself against custom. It is not that he disdains principle. It is merely that he has a different allegiance.

When an actor tries to keep his personality in line with the moral prejudices of his audience the result is a grotesque perversion. There are numerous women in America calling themselves actresses who, for example, decline to act "bad" women. The gospel according to life is the least of their ambitions. Theirs is the gospel according to Marc and Abe. They wish the public to respect them not as artists but as personalities. They wish to be regarded as nobly autobiographical. Instead of taking the contempt for their histrionic "badness" as the highest tribute to their art, they take it as a suspicion of their reputation. When the audience recoils from them, they feel personally deprecated. They do not realize that the robust actress should be as familiar with degrading realities as a priest is familiar with sin. They resent this assumption, though they are perfectly ready to admire a creator of cowards like Joseph Conrad or a specialist in cads like H. G. Wells.

Under an anaesthetic nuns are said to gabble of unmentionable horrors. This is certainly no discredit to nuns. However active moral censorship may be, every living being is aware of impulses he would rather not mention. To express these impulses is not, perhaps, the only way of dealing with them, but to pretend that they do not exist is to live as a liar and a fraud. It is a hypocrisy peculiarly unhealthy in an actor. The best actors come invariably out of societies where the whole of life is accepted and understood. And they have no more shame in acting out their knowledge of realities than a doctor has shame in probing disease or a lawyer shame in probing disgrace. Their art is a furnace great enough to transmute anything that man can do or be.

How pitifully weak the fire is, if the actor has his eye on the audience, is a matter of too frequent observation. In a recent modern comedy there was a satire on the henpecked husband. The actor who took the part was evidently unhappy in it, and when questioned about it revealed a monstrous confusion of mind. He was not taking his role as an actor. He was taking it as a man. It was his masculinity that was troubling him. He was a genuine red-blooded American and it distressed him, it pained his masculinity, to act as a henpecked husband.

When a man can be such a fool as this, the marvel is that he became an actor at all. High principles of masculinity are all right in their place, but they are a monstrosity in a comedian. His first business is to live down his private principles. To do this he must, as Shaw suggested, abandon many preconceptions of his bringing-up. He must free his mind.

The principles by which an artist lives are necessarily in conflict with the ordinary routine morality. But it is the duty of all who love art to stand by the artist in his revolt. To flout current morality is not the object. Very often current morality is the best morality for the majority. But a false uniformity is unfair to the artist, and it is this that has to be learned in America. It is not fair to ask the actor to serve ideals directly. It is his function to represent life. To ask him to be "regular" is to ask the night-worker to rise with the lark.

FRANCIS HACKETT.

Books and Things

ABOUT twelve years ago Gilbert Murray published his first translations from Euripides—the “Hippolytus” and the “Bacchae.” From time to time he has added others—the “Medea,” the “Trojan Women,” the “Electra,” the “Iphigenia in Tauris,” the “Rhesus.” Now we have the “Alcestis,” which has just been published in New York by the Oxford University Press, and may be bought for seventy-five cents. Rossetti has said, in the preface to his “Early Italian Poets”: “The lifeblood of rhymed translation is this—that a good poem shall not be turned into a bad one. The only true motive for putting poetry into a fresh language must be to endow a fresh nation with one more possession of beauty.” From these words it is easy to compile a description of Professor Murray’s translations from Euripides. He has not turned good poems into bad ones. He has endowed English-speaking nations with one more possession of beauty. When he deals with Aristophanes’ “Frogs” or with Sophocles’ “Oedipus the King” the result is not nearly so happy. His sympathy with Euripides is special. It enables him to disturb us his readers. We are excited by the beauty of Euripides and by his thought, we are eager to understand him and his world and his way of looking at his world and judging its beliefs. We feel both the poetry and the excitingness. While Professor Murray thus does his age a noble service he also leaves, upon at least one of his readers, an impression that he would not have been a considerable poet if he had taken to writing what we call original verse.

In the saga which was familiar to fifth century Athens, and upon which Euripides worked his will, it was taken for granted that any prosperous man would let his wife save his life by dying for him if she were willing, and if the thing could be arranged. By the fifth century this saga had taken shape in two forms. Wilamowitz has reconstructed one of these—a lost poem which was once attributed to Hesiod. Pelias of Iolchos would give his daughter Alcestis in marriage to no man who could not yoke wild boars and lions to his car and make them draw it. Apollo, whose son Asclepius had taken to restoring the dead to life, and had been killed by Zeus, had killed the Cyclops who forged the thunderbolt. For this he was condemned to serve a mortal, Admetus of Phærae. Apollo helped Admetus to fulfil the conditions imposed by Pelias and thus to win Alcestis. Artemis, to whom Admetus had forgotten to sacrifice, required his death. Apollo persuaded her to let Admetus live if he could find a substitute. His parents refusing to die for him, Alcestis offered herself, died on the wedding day, and was sent back to life by the gods of the lower world. In a play by Phrynichus, an older contemporary of Aeschylus, Euripides had before him another form of the Alcestis story. It was by making the Three Fates drunk that Apollo obtained for Admetus freedom to live if a substitute could be found. Persephone did not of her own accord send Alcestis back to life. Heracles obtained this favor by going to the lower world, wrestling with Death and overcoming him.

Euripides treated this material freely. Asclepius disappears, except for one reference in the prologue, spoken by Apollo, and another in the first chorus. Of the struggle between Heracles and Death Euripides says only so much as is necessary to explain the restoration of Alcestis to life. The most significant change in the events themselves, according to Wilamowitz, was this: Alcestis, instead of

dying on her wedding day, has lived long enough thereafter to bear Admetus two children, of whom the boy is old enough to feel the pain of losing her. She has lived for years knowing that she must die on the appointed day. After she has renounced life, time has been given her to learn the value of life. Euripides, says Wilamowitz, always tried to give his heroes an inner credibility. He therefore could not ignore the question of Admetus’s conduct. On the contrary, he deliberately raised this question. Admetus is a representative of a landed aristocracy in the grand style. His position in Phærae encouraged him to regard his own life as one exceptionally worth saving. He has many likable traits. He is liked by such different characters as Heracles and Apollo. Wilamowitz says Euripides intended us to like Admetus well enough to think he deserved to have Alcestis brought him from the grave. Admitting that not everybody will agree with him, Wilamowitz believes Euripides has succeeded. Even Wilamowitz, however, doubts whether Admetus would have kept his promise not to marry again, and wishes he had said less, when he is hesitating to enter his empty house after the funeral, about the dust and disorder the loss of Alcestis will cause him, and more about their intimate life together. Upon the whole, Wilamowitz is easy on Admetus.

Professor Murray’s comment is this: “Euripides seems to have taken positive pleasure in Admetus, much as Meredith did in his famous Egoist; but Euripides all through is kinder to his victim than Meredith is. True, Admetus is put to obvious shame, publicly and helplessly. The chorus make discreet comments upon him. The Handmaid is outspoken about him. One feels that Alcestis herself, for all her tender kindness, has seen through him. Finally, to make things quite clear, his old father fights him openly, tells him home-truth upon home-truth, tears away all his protective screens, and leaves his self-respect in tatters. It is a fearful ordeal for Admetus, and, after his first fury, he takes it well.” With regard to this scene between Admetus and his father Wilamowitz’s opinion is not very different. “I think that a careful reading of the play,” Professor Murray goes on, “will show an almost continuous process of self-discovery and self-judgment in the mind of Admetus. He was a man who blinded himself with words and beautiful sentiments; but he was not thick-skinned or thick-witted. He was not a brute or a cynic. And I think he did learn his lesson . . . not completely and forever, but as well as most of us learn such lessons.”

This comment, too, strikes me as a little overkind to Admetus. One of the first things he says, after he has “learned his lesson,” is this:

Behold, I count my wife’s fate happier,

Though all gainsay me, than mine own.

The Comic Spirit was visiting Euripides when he wrote those lines. Indeed, what I wonder at most of all, when I’ve finished this “Alcestis,” is that the presence of so much poetry should have left the Comic Spirit so free a hand. I wonder, too, that the play has not suggested a comedy to some modern writer. A man who invites other people to die for him, who allows his wife to do so, and who returns from her funeral saying her lot is happier than his, is only an exaggeration of that egotism which is one of comedy’s main subjects. Few egotists are ever shut up to just this sharp choice, but many of us do choose to let other people die, here a little and there a little, for our ego’s sake.

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