

A Greek Romance

Iphigenia in Tauris, translated from the Greek of Euripides by Gilbert Murray and presented for the Yale Dramatic Association by Granville Barker, Yale Bowl, New Haven, May 15, 1915.

GOOD weather could not be decoyed in a pleasanter spot than the Yale Bowl. The turf there is a resplendent green in color, the shape of the Bowl is restful, the New Havenese are a quiet and self-eliminative people. Had Mr. Barker allowed nothing to play there last Saturday but the wind, the performance would still have been beautiful. He was a fortunate man in the first of his open air performances, and he had twelve thousand spectators who rejoiced that nature was kind.

The part of the Bowl occupied by Mr. Barker's stage and his audience was not very large. A dime laid on a quarter would exaggerate it. And yet this half-occupied oval was most suitable for an open air performance. The severity of the stadium lent itself sympathetically to the severe lines of the great temple. The black and white circle which had the altar for its center was in keeping with the picture, and the empty green space behind the temple was also in concord. The only color in the marble walls was the barbaric gold of the central gates, with black bosses and waving vertical lines, and the waving horizontal lines on the side gates. Apart from this color, all was a grayish white, a perfect background for the human figure. The dignity of the setting, both that arranged by Mr. Barker and that conferred by the sun, could not well have been heightened.

Miss Lillah McCarthy, dressed as the priestess Iphigenia, was the first character to appear outside the temple. It was a question how the human voice would sound, but she had not uttered, "Child of the man of torment and of pride," before one realized that beside the pleasure of seeing one was also to have the pleasure of hearing. Nor did the voice have that lonely, homeless, orphan tone which is so common out of doors. It was complete, sugar-crusted and all, as if the temple prevented its disintegrating.

With the conditions, then, superb, and the audience responsive, the only further thing that mattered was the performance—and the play. As for the play, I confess the thought was intimidating. The first performance was in the year 414 B.C., and the stage in those times, they say, was run with a rather different end in view. All Greek tragedies, as Gilbert Murray asserts, were intended to explain some ritual or observance or commemorate some great event. The Iphigenia is not a tragedy. It is really a very old-fashioned romantic play. But a good deal of it, in spite of its romance, is ritualistic in interest. A good deal of it is nutritious only to the archeologically prepared. This is no real obstacle to its enjoyment, of course. There is not one tenth the ritual about it that there is about a baseball game. But of that one tenth I give my word that only a very small proportion meant anything to me. To a well-prepared mind the feast of the Anthesteria should be full of meaning, and a passing reference to Agamemnon should give its emotional thrill. But for myself, and as I imagine for most of the audience, the play resolved itself into ordinary human romance. We prepared ourselves, after the fashion of our age, by rubbing against Mr. Murray's translations, in the hope that some of the quality would come off. But we only prepared a few hours ahead, after the fashion of our age, and it takes a little longer to capture Euripides. What resulted, therefore, was what so often results at grand opera or the foreign theatre. We got from "Iphigenia"

just what human romance is simply and obviously revealed. Of the inner revelation we got as much as we gave.

But even if "Iphigenia" has an esoteric interest, it is quite clear that it has enough of the other kind to live its life to-day. Only, unfortunately, that life was not fully achieved. There is about Miss Lillah McCarthy a good deal more of the declaimer than of the actress. She vocalizes perfectly but she does not realize warmly. In her humanness she fails. Her performance of Iphigenia gave promise at one time of living up to the dramatic moment, but as the play progressed, as the deep possibilities developed, it was inescapable that Miss McCarthy lacked the imagination, the sympathetic inflection, which marks the difference between a marble and a wax model. There is something needlessly bland about Miss McCarthy, something needlessly honeyed and needlessly dulcet. Once or twice she lost this tone. She was ringingly imperative in her "Watch them, ye servitors"; but the sympathetic necessities of Iphigenia did not suit her. The part was wasted on her and she on it, and it was the chief imperfection, the chief juicelessness, of the performance.

As Orestes, on the contrary, Mr. Ian Maclaren came into his own. He did not succeed in the beginning in giving the impression of one broken and dependent, one recently mad, but when the time came to emphasize himself he did so richly. Aided excellently by Mr. Leonard Willey's Pylades, he made much of the scene leading up to his recognition, and it was in this passage that Iphigenia was also inspired. The unconfined open seemed to give Mr. Maclaren an abandon and verve which he does not possess indoors. And no less should be said of Mr. Claude Rains' herdsman and Mr. Phillip Merivale's messenger. The marble floors trembled like insecure planks under Mr. Rains' emphatic foot. He made the most of a mighty speech. As King Thoas Mr. Lionel Braham roared gloriously. So surprising was his voice, even in the Bowl, that the audience greeted it with unanimated laughter, and while it reduced Thoas to burlesque it served the good purpose of relieving the chorus's inevitable solemnity. That solemnity, after all, was a little ritualistic and depressing. The reunion of Iphigenia and Orestes was really not a dour event. Orestes had treated his mother badly, had in fact killed her, but his sister was very homesick and in helping him to escape she acted like the most spirited of women. It was a happy release from the barbarism of the temple. It came as an unexpected crisis in a life bitter and vengeful and bleak. With these values partly lost, it was permissible for the audience to enjoy Thoas, although Euripides would hardly have known him.

It was Mr. Norman Wilkinson, the designer, who earned this belated mirth. Mr. Barker had treated Euripides austere. Professor David Stanley Smith, of Yale University, had composed music for the choruses that reverently carried out the poetic intentions of Gilbert Murray. But Mr. Wilkinson had known so little embarrassment that he turned the costumes of Tauris into uproarious farce. Of all kings probably a barbaric king is the uttermost example of propriety. But for Mr. Wilkinson Thoas could only be a joke. He wore a cloak as big as a carpet, sported a weird headdress and waved a wildly ornamental staff. The thinness and shrillness of this sartorial extravaganza were not in keeping with Euripides, but such flippancy did not seriously matter. It was a small eccentricity in a brave and sober theatrical adventure.

FRANCIS HACKETT.

Books and Things

HIS plan, as he unfolded it, was quite simple. He believed a good way of teaching children to write English was to make them translate. You have heard of this plan before? Perhaps you have—but let him finish. They were not to translate from the classics or from the best hundred books in German or French. His plan was to supply them with samples of English prose done into French or German, have them turn these into English, compare their versions with the original English, take time to forget the originals, and then have another go at their own versions. How much rewriting were they to do? That would depend on circumstances—on the pupil, on the kind of author they had in hand, on human patience, on time. Such a game might be made amusing, he believed, to children who really wanted to learn something about writing English.

Yes, he had samples. Number one: "The Catholic Church maintains that, if the sun and moon fell from the sky, if the earth crumbled, if the millions of men who inhabit it died of hunger in the horrors of the most painful agony, and if temporal affliction had reached its climax, this would be a lesser evil than if a single soul, I will not say were lost, but committed a single venial sin, told one deliberate lie, or stole without legitimate excuse one wretched farthing." Did I recognize the passage? It was Newman, he said, in the "Apologia," and he read aloud the original: "The Catholic Church holds it better for the sun and moon to drop from heaven, for the earth to fail, and for all the many millions on it to die of starvation in extremest agony, as far as temporal affliction goes, than that one soul, I will not say, should be lost, but should commit one single venial sin, should tell one wilful untruth, or should steal one poor farthing without excuse."

Here, he admitted, the translator was not singly to blame, for the French version of Newman contained one considerable inaccuracy. The Frenchman hadn't understood "as far as temporal affliction goes." But didn't I think such inaccuracies in the French or German could be removed, without too much trouble, if the scheme were ever tried in school? And he went on to his second example, from a German translation of Macaulay's "Warren Hastings": "In spite of all his faults—and those he had were neither few nor small—there was only one burial place worthy to receive his mortal frame. In that temple of silence and reconciliation where the enmities of twenty generations lie buried, in the great abbey which for many centuries has afforded a quiet resting-place to all who were broken in mind or body by contests in the great hall—there should the dust of the illustrious accused have mingled with the dust of the illustrious accusers. But this could not happen." Next came Macaulay himself: "With all his faults—and they were neither few nor small—only one cemetery was worthy to contain his remains. In that temple of silence and reconciliation where the enmities of twenty generations lie buried, in the Great Abbey which has during many ages afforded a quiet resting-place to those whose minds and bodies have been shattered by the contentions of the Great Hall, the dust of the illustrious accused should have mingled with the dust of the illustrious accusers. This was not to be."

"Your second pupil," I said, "sounds better than the first." "Oh, I did all the translating myself, and of course Macaulay is easier than Newman. But listen to the hash

I made of Stevenson—from 'Prince Otto' in French: 'A little further on the road crossed with a single arch above a brook of a certain size. Along this chattering water, at the bottom of a gorge that was turning green, a foot-path led down, rocky and rough here, clinging to the side of the ravine, there encumbered with bushes, or stretching for a few paces along fresh and level turf, a veritable place of resort for elves.' " Yes, it was certainly pretty bad. What did Stevenson write? My friend found the place: "A little below where they stood, a good-sized brook passed below the road, which overleapt it in a single arch. On one bank of that loquacious water a footpath descended a green dell. Here it was rocky and stony, and lay on the steep scarps of a ravine; here it was choked with brambles; and there, in fairy haughs, it lay for a few paces evenly on the green turf."

Well, you couldn't expect any translator to do much with "fairy haughs"—the French was "*véritable rond-point des lutins*." He had one more sample of his method—this one from the German: "The sun shines glaringly, the wind blows from the east, the sky is clear without a cloud, and out-of-doors everything is as hard as iron. One makes out the windows of the Crystal Palace from all parts of London. The excursionist enjoys delightedly the glorious day, and the painter turns away and shuts his eyes. How little this is understood, and how dutifully chance in nature is regarded as something sublime, may be measured by the boundless enthusiasm which is excited every day by a thoroughly insignificant sunset. The secret dignity of a snow-covered peak is destroyed if it is too distinct, yet it is the joy of the tourist to discover the climber on the top. The wish to see, merely for the sake of seeing, is for the crowd the only wish to be fulfilled, hence its delight in detail. And when the evening cloud covers the river bank with poetry as with a veil, and the mean buildings fade away against the troubled heaven, when the high chimneys become slender bell-towers, and the warehouses glimmer in the dusky night like palaces, and the whole city seems to hang in the sky, and fairyland opens before our eyes—then the traveler . . ." But this was too much. "Your method may be useful," I said, "and for all I know it may be new, but you ought to be careful. You're in danger of spoiling some of my favorite bits of prose. No good writer's clean lines ought to be smudged in public." "Agreed. But the inferior substitutes won't be seen outside the schoolroom." And he read the original Whistler aloud:

"The sun blares, the wind blows from the east, the sky is bereft of cloud, and without, all is of iron. The windows of the Crystal Palace are seen from all points of London. The holiday-maker rejoices in the glorious day, and the painter turns aside to shut his eyes. How little this is understood, and how dutifully the casual in nature is accepted as sublime, may be gathered from the unlimited admiration daily produced by a very foolish sunset. The dignity of the snow-capped mountain is lost in distinctness, but the joy of the tourist is to recognize the traveler on the top. The desire to see for the sake of seeing, is, with the mass, alone the one to be gratified, hence the delight in detail. And when the evening mist clothes the riverside with poetry, and the poor buildings lose themselves in the dim sky, and the tall chimneys become campanili, and the warehouses are palaces in the night, and the whole city hangs in the heavens, and fairyland is before us—then the wayfarer . . ."

P. L.