UNDRAMATIC CRITICISM

BY BRANDER MATTHEWS

I

As criticism has to find its material in the work of the creators it is not surprising that the masters of the craft have appeared during periods of abundant creation or shortly thereafter. Aristotle was not separated by many years from Sophocles and Euripides; Boileau was the most intimate friend of Molière; and Sainte Beuve was the contemporary of Hugo and Balzac (although he did not greatly care for either of them). Coleridge lived in an epoch of ample productivity; and so did Matthew Arnold. Lessing was stimulated by Voltaire and Diderot; and he prepared the way for Goethe and Schiller. And these are only a few of the critics who hold their own by the side of the creators.

But when the creative impulse relaxes, when there is no longer a succession of masterpieces demanding appreciation, then is it that the criticasters have their turn, the pigmies who promulgate edicts for those who are still striving to attain the twin summits of Parnassus. It was not in the rich abundance of Athens but in the thin sterility of Alexandria that the laws of poetry were codified with Draconian severity. It was not under Louis XIV but under Napoleon, when French literature was dying of inanition, that Nepomucène Lemercier declared the twenty-five rules which the writer of tragedy must obey and the twenty-two to which the writer of comedy must conform.

There was no living Latin drama when Horace penned his epistle on poetry, and the theatres of Rome were given over to unliterary spectacle. It is unlikely that Horace had ever had occasion to see a worthy play worthily acted. No doubt, he had read the works of the great Greeks; but that could not disclose to him the full emotional force of their dramas revealed only

by actual performance. To judge a play by reading it, is like judging a painting by a photograph. The greater the drama the more completely does it put forth its power when it is made to live by the actor in the theatre and before the audience. As a result of Horace's lack of experience as a spectator what he has to say about the principles of playmaking has little validity. He is not exercising his own keen critical faculty, he is merely echoing the opinions of Alexandrian criticasters. His advice to aspiring dramatists was not practical; it was "academic" in the worst sense of the word. In fact, Horace was only going through the motions of giving advice, since there were no aspiring dramatists in Rome, as there were then no stages on which a play could be acted and no company of actors to perform it.

A comparison of the *Poetics* of Aristotle with the *Art of Poetry* of Horace is as amusing as it is profitable. Aristotle is the earliest and the shrewdest of dramatic critics. Horace had no intimacy with the theatre; he is sketching from a lay-figure in a studio, whereas Aristotle is drawing from the living model in the open air. When Aristotle discusses the effect of an episode upon an audience, we can be sure that he himself was once one of that audience, and that his memory had retained the intonations and the gestures of the actors as well as the unformulated response of the spectators to the emotional appeal of the plot. Aristotle is as insistent in taking the audience into account as Sarcey was; and his dramatic criticism is as technical as Sarcey's. Horace had never thrilled to a situation as it slowly unfolded itself in the theatre; and therefore what he has to say about the principles of playmaking is more or less beside the mark. It is hit or miss; it may be right or it may be wrong; it is supported by no understanding of dramaturgy; it is undramatic criticism.

The theories which Horace took over second-hand from the Alexandrian criticasters, the supersubtle Italians of the Renaissance took third-hand from him. They suffered, as Horace had suffered, from the lack of a living dramatic literature in their own tongue. In the pride of their new-found learning they looked with contempt upon the unliterary types of drama then popular, the Sacred Representations and the Comedy-of-Masks. They never suspected that in these artless exhibitions there were the

germs out of which a noble dramatic literature might be evolved. They could not foresee that the Elizabethans would develop their tragedy from the English Mystery-Plays which were no cruder than the Italian Sacred Representations and that in *L'Etourdi* Molière would lift into literature the loose and lively Comedy-of-Masks. And because they refused to do what Shakespeare and Molière were to do, they left Italy barren of drama for centuries. The most of the dramatic poems which are catalogued in the histories of Italian literature were unacted and unactable, —although now and again one or another did achieve performance by amateurs before an audience of dilettants.

So it is that the host of theorists of the theatre in Renaissance Italy are undramatic critics, not because they lacked acuteness, but because they knew nothing of the actual theatre, the sole region where drama can live, move and have its being. Only infrequently does one of them,—Castelvetro, for example,—venture to give a thought to the audience for whose delight a drama ought to be prepared. As they had no acquaintance with any stage, except the sporadic platform of the strolling acrobat-comedians whom they despised, they had no concrete knowledge as a foundation for their abstract speculations. They were working in a vacuum. And it is small wonder that they complicated their concepts until they had elaborated the Classicist doctrines of the Three Unities and of the total separation of Comedy from Tragedy. The Classicist code was so hampering to the free expansion of the drama that Corneille cried out against its rigor, that Lope de Vega paid it lip-service but disregarded it unhesitatingly, and that Shakespeare never gave it a thought.

II

Horace's mistake was in his adventuring himself beyond the boundaries of his knowledge; and the blunder of the Renaissance critics was caused by their scornful disregard of the contemporary types of drama in their own time, inartistic as these might be. But nowadays the theatre is flourishing and every man has frequent opportunity to see worthy plays worthily performed and to acquaint himself with the immediate effect of a worthy per-

formance upon the spectators. No apology is acceptable for the undramatic criticism which we discover in not a few of the learned treatises which profess to expound and explain the masterpieces of the mighty dramatists who lived in Periclean Athens and in Elizabethan England. Some of the scholars who discuss Sophocles and Shakespeare deal with these expert playwrights as if their pieces had been composed not to be seen in swift action in the theatre but to be read at leisure in the library. In their eyes *Oedipus the King* and *King Lear* are only dramatic poems, and not poetic dramas. They study the printed page under the microscope; and they make no effort to recapture the sound of the spoken word or to visualize the illustrative action.

The undramatic critic of this type has no apprehension of the principles of playmaking as these are set forth by Aristotle and by Lessing, by Sarcey and by Brunetière. He has made no effort to keep abreast of the "state of the art" of dramatic criticism. He seems never to have considered the triple influence exerted on the form and on the content of a play by the theatre for which it was composed; by the actors for whom its characters were intended, or by the audience for whose pleasure it was written. It is only occasionally that we have proffered to us a book like the late Professor Goodell's illuminating analysis of *Athenian Tragedy*, in which we are agreeably surprised to find a Greek scholar elucidating the masterpieces of the Greek drama by the aid of Brunetière's *Law of the Drama* and Archer's *Playmaking*. Professor Goodell firmly grasped the fact that the art of the drama is unchanging, no matter how various its manifestations may be in different centuries and in different countries. And he was therefore able to cast light upon the plays of the past by his observation of the plays of the present.

Less satisfactory is the almost contemporary volume on *Greek Tragedy*, which covers the same ground. Although Professor Norwood has not found his profit in Brunetière or Archer, he makes a valiant effort to visualize actual performance in the Theatre of Dionysus more than twenty centuries ago. He deals with Greek plays as poetic dramas and not merely as dramatic poems. But he has fallen victim to the wiles of the late Professor Verrall, one of the most ingenious of undramatic critics; and in

his discussion of the *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus he gives Verrall credit for having solved a series of difficulties. Professor Norwood even goes so far as to declare that "Verrall's theory should probably be accepted."

I doubt if a single one of the alleged difficulties even occurred to any of the spectators present at the first performance of the play. The action of *Agamemnon* is swift, irresistible, inevitable; and the audience was allowed no time for cavil. As the story unrolled itself in the theatre it was convincing; and if any doubt arose in the minds of any spectator as to anything that had occurred, it could arise only after he had left the theatre; and then it was too late. As a play, performed by actors in a theatre before an audience, *Agamemnon* triumphs. Only when it is considered in the study do we perceive any "difficulties." In fact, when it is so considered, one difficulty is likely to strike many readers; and it repays consideration.

The play begins with a long monologue from a watchman of the roof of Agamemnon's palace. The King is at the siege of Troy; and when the beleaguered city is taken a series of beacons on the intervening hills will be lighted, one after another, to convey the glad news. Suddenly the watchman sees the distant flame, the wireless message, that Troy has fallen and that the monarch is free to return home. In real life it would be two or three weeks before Agamemnon could arrive; yet in the play before it is half over the king comes in; he enters his palace where he is done to death by his guilty wife and her paramour Aegisthus. The exigencies of the two hours traffic of the stage often compel a playwright to telescope time; but no other dramatist has ever dared so violent a compression as this.

And this is how Verrall solves the difficulty "with lucidity, skill and brilliance," so Professor Norwood tells us. The story of the series of beacons is a lie concocted by the wife and her lover. There is only one beacon which Aegisthus lights when he discovers the landing of Agamemnon; it is to warn his accomplice that she may make ready to murder her husband. And as Agamemnon is actually on shore when this single beacon flames up, he is able to arrive in the middle of the play. If we accept this solution of the difficulty we are compelled to believe that

Aeschylus wrote a play, instantly accepted as a masterpiece, which had to wait for more than two thousand years for a British scholar to explain away an impossibility. This explanation is undoubtedly lucid and skillful and brilliant; but none the less is it a specimen of undramatic criticism.

A dramatist never tells lies to his audience; and the audience always accepts the statements of his characters as true—unless he himself expressly shows that a given statement is false. The play has to be taken at its face value. The characters talk on purpose to convey all needful information to the spectators. Aeschylus may make the queen lie to the king, but when she does this the audience knows the truth or surmises it. The dramatist never hesitates to let his characters deceive one another; but if he knows his business he never deceives the spectators. In real life Agamemnon could not arrive for a fortnight after Troy had fallen; but the Athenian audience could not wait in their seats two weeks, so Aeschylus frankly brings on Agamemnon; and the spectators were glad to behold him, asking no inconvenient questions because they were eager to see what would happen to him. It might be a contradiction of the fact, but it was not a departure from the truth, since the king would assuredly come home sooner or later. Everyone familiar with Sarcey's discussion of the conventions of the drama is aware that the spectators in the theatre are never sticklers for fact; they are willing to accept a contradiction of fact, if that contradiction is for their own profit—as it was in this case.

III

To say this is to say that Verrall, however lucid and skillful and brilliant, was a discoverer of mare's nests. And a host of undramatic critics have skillfully exercised their lucid brilliance in discovering mare's nests in Shakespeare's plays. Most of them are stolid Teutons, with Gervinus and Ulrici in the forefront of the procession. They analyzed the tragedies of Shakespeare with the sincere conviction that he was a philosopher with a system as elaborate as those of Kant and Hegel; and they did not seem to suspect that even if a dramatist is a philosopher he is—and

must be—first of all a playwright, whose invention and construction are conditioned by the theatre for which he is working. The most that a dramatist can do is to make philosophy a by-product; his main object is to arouse and retain and reward the interest of his immediate audience.

He must make his story plain to the comprehension of the average playgoer; and he must therefore provide his characters with motives which are immediately apparent and instantly plausible. Shakespeare is ever anxious that his spectators shall not be misled; and he goes so far as to have his villains, Richard III and Iago, frankly inform the audience that they are villains, a confession which in real life neither of these astute scoundrels would ever have made to anybody. The playwright knows that if he loses his case before the jury, he can never move for a retrial; the verdict is without appeal. It may be doubted whether any dramatist has ever cared greatly for the opinion of posterity. Assuredly no popular playwright—and in their own day every great dramatist was a popular playwright—would have found any compensation for the failure of his play in the hope and expectation that two hundred or two thousand years later its difficulties might be explained by a Verrall, however lucid and skillful and brilliant this belated expounder might be.

There are two Shakesperian mare's nests which may be taken as typical. One was discovered in *Macbeth*, in the scene of Banquo's murder. Macbeth incites two men to make way with Banquo. When the deed is done, three murderers take part in it. Two of them are the pair we have seen taking instructions from Macbeth. Who is the third? An undramatic critic once suggested that this third murderer is no less a person than Macbeth himself, joining his hired assassins to make sure that they do the job in workmanlike fashion. The suggester supports his suggestion by an argument in eight points, none of which carries any weight, because we may be sure that if Shakespeare had meant Macbeth to appear in person, he would have taken care to let the audience know it. He would not have left it hidden to be uncovered two and a half centuries after his death by the skillful lucidity of a brilliant undramatic critic.

It is reasonably certain that Burbage, who acted Richard III

and Hamlet, also acted Macbeth; and Shakespeare would never have sent this renowned performer on the stage to take part in a scene without justifying his share in it and without informing the spectators that their favorite was before them. Shakespeare was an actor himself; he knew what actors wanted and what they liked; he took good care of their interests; and we may rest assured that he never asked Burbage to disguise his identity. If he had meant the third murderer to be Macbeth, we should have had the stage direction, "Enter two murderers with Macbeth disguised." As it is, the stage direction reads "Enter three murderers."

The other mare's nest has been found in *King Lear*. It has often been pointed out that Cordelia is absent from a large portion of the action of the tragedy, although her presence might have aided its effectiveness. It has been noted also that Cordelia and the Fool are never seen on the stage together. And this has prompted the suggestion that the Fool is Cordelia in disguise. Here again we see the undramatic critic at his worst. If Shakespeare had meant this, he would have made it plain to the spectators the first time Cordelia appeared as the Fool,—otherwise her assumption of this part would have been purposeless, confusing, futile. Whatever poignancy there might be in the companioning of the mad king by his cast-off daughter all unknown to him, would be unfelt if her assumption of the Fool's livery was not at once recognized. The suggestion is not only unacceptable, it is unthinkable by anyone who has even an elementary perception of the wit of playmaking. It could have emanated only from an undramatic critic who was familiar with *King Lear* in the study and not on the stage, who regarded the sublimest of Shakespeare's tragedies as a dramatic poem and not as a poetic drama planned for the playhouse. Yet this inept suggestion can be utilized to explain the fact that Cordelia and the Fool never meet before the eyes of the spectators. The cast of characters in *King Lear* is very long; and quite possibly it called for more actors than there were in the company at the Globe. We know that in the Tudor theatre a performer was often called upon to sustain two parts. It is possible that the shaven lad who impersonated Cordelia was the only available actor for the Fool, and that therefore

Cordelia—at whatever loss to the effectiveness of the play—could not appear in the scenes in which the Fool had to appear. Cordelia did not don the disguise of the Fool; but the same performer may have had to double two parts. That much of supposition can be ventured, for whatever it may be worth.

IV

It is in England and in Germany that the undramatic critics have been permitted to disport themselves most freely and most frequently. In France they have never been encouraged to pernicious speculation. That the French have not suffered from this pest may be due to the honorable existence of the Théâtre Français where the masterpieces of French tragedy and French comedy are kept alive on the stage for which they had been written; or it may be due to the fact that in the literature of France the drama has been continuously more important than it has been in the literature of any other country.

In England and in Germany the drama has had its seasons of abundance and its seasons of famine, whereas in France, although there might be poor harvests for a succession of years, harvests of some sort there always have been. No period in French literature is as devoid of valid drama as that in English literature during the first three quarters of the nineteenth century. From 1800 to 1870 the plays of our language which were actable were unreadable and the plays which were readable were unactable. It is in the periods of penury, when there is a divorce between literature and the drama, that the undramatic critic is inspired to chase rainbows. As there is then no vital drama in the theatre, and as the pieces then exhibited on the stage have no validity, the undramatic critic is led to the conclusion that as the theatre can get along without literature, so the drama can get along without the theatre. And that way madness lies.

There is this excuse for the supersubtle critics of the Italian Renaissance that they lived not long removed from the middle ages in which all memory of the acted drama had been lost and in which the belief was general that the comedies of Plautus and Terence had been composed, not for performance by actors in a

theatre and before an audience, but for a single reciter who should deal with them as a modern elocutionist might stand and deliver *Pippa Passes* or *The Cenci*. But there is no excuse for the English-speaking expounders of Sophocles and Shakespeare, because they cannot help knowing that the plays of the Athenian were written to be performed in the Theatre of Dionysus and that the plays of the Elizabethan were written to be performed in the Globe Theatre.

The writer of the chapter on Shakespeare in the composite *Cambridge History of English Literature*, deals skillfully and cautiously with the dates of composition and performance of each of the plays; but he criticizes them with no examination of their theatrical effectiveness. It is scarcely too much to say that he considers them as dramatic poems intended to be read rather than as poetic dramas intended to be acted. And in one passage of his commentary he has given us the absolute masterpiece of undramatic criticism:

> It is, of course, quite true that all of Shakespeare's plays were written to be acted; but it may be questioned whether this is much more than an accident arising from the fact that the drama was the dominant form of literature. It was a happy accident, because of the unique opportunity this form gives of employing both the vehicles of poetry and prose.

BRANDER MATTHEWS.

MUSIC OF THE MONTH

CONCERNING MAHLER

BY LAWRENCE GILMAN

GUSTAV MAHLER and his symphonies continue to be a storm-centre of impassioned discussion wherever music is a factor in public taste.

In Europe they persist in the amiable habit of giving Mahler Festivals—week-long affairs devoted to serial performances of the Austrian's brobdingnagian scores; and in our own relatively benighted land we are not allowed to starve for lack of Mahlerian sustenance. Mr. Stransky with the Philharmonic Orchestra and Mr. Mengelberg with the National Symphony have served us in New York, this season, the First and Fourth Symphonies; Mr. Stock in Chicago has given the Seventh (for the first time in America), and in Philadelphia Mr. Stokowski, with his orchestra and Mr. Townsend's chorus, brought the season to a resounding close with a memorable performance of the huge Second Symphony.

But the "Mahler Question" is no nearer settlement than it ever was. Discussion concerning his qualities as a music-maker persists with unabated fury, dividing those who (like Mr. Mengelberg, Mr. Stokowski, and innumerable European musicians of eminence and experience) regard him as one of the great men of music, from those who (like most of our American critics) regard him as the abomination of desolation. Mr. Mengelberg, for instance, ranks him with the major symphonists—with Beethoven and Berlioz.[1] Mr. W. J. Henderson, for another instance, sees in him only the inspiration for a delectable pun, and deplores our affliction by "Mahleria." For ourselves, we choose to remain on the fence, for the simple reason that we know only four of Mahler's nine symphonies. Mr. William Winter, to be sure, once asserted that you do not have to eat the whole of an egg to tell whether it is bad or not. But the creative work of a

[1] The conception of Berlioz as a major symphonist is Mr. Mengelberg's, not ours.