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## Foreign Literature

## Merejkowski Tales

MICHEL ANGE. A translation into French by Dumesnil de Gramont from the Russian of Dmitri Merejkowski. Paris: Arthème Fayard et Cie. 1926.

Reviewed by WARREN WILMER BROWN

HAVING long cherished the memory of Merejkowski's "Leonardo da Vinci," it was with keenly whetted anticipation that I started to read "Michel Ange." Nor was I disappointed, for this romance of Michael Angelo's life held attention as closely as that based upon Leonardo's. It does not, however, cover as much ground, being indeed quite short. The volume it opens contains three other Merejkowski stories—novellets of the same, or approximately the same, era as "Michel Ange," all with an Italian *mise-en-scène*.

M. de Gramont, it would seem, has done the translation well. His style is unmanipulated and one does not constantly feel that some indefinable and essential thing is missing, as is so often the case in translations.

\* \*

If Merejkowski is skilful in any one direction—and he is skilful in many—it is in endowing his works with the spirit of time and locality—the very life, as it were, of the periods of which he writes. "Michel Ange" is further evidence of his understanding of the Renaissance, its methods of thought and of living. The novel is intimately biographical, but not in the psycho-analytical manner characteristic of so much recent biography, especially that written under the influence—the tendency in dark moments is to say "curse"—of Freud and his school.

"Michel Ange" is not in any way clinical. It is a narrative logically conceived and, while episodic, smoothly developed, starting with the mid-career of the artist and continuing until his death. The youth of such a man must have had tremendous bearing upon his maturity and it is a pity that those early experiences were not woven into the story. But as it is, the portrait is done with highly sensitized touch and with that strength and subjective suggestion that gives one the sensation of actual contact with a remarkable personality. The gross indifference, the impertinent arrogance to which Buonarrotti was subjected by his Pontifical patrons, their sycophants and his own rivals; the eccentricities of the four Popes under whom he served, notably Julius II; his burning enthusiasm for his work (the flame of genius itself); his complete detachment from the life about him—all this is presented in a way that puts sympathy on the alert.

There are many arresting side-lights on other great or notorious personages of the period—Bramante (shown as vain, jealous, and bitterly envious of Buonarrotti); Julius II, Leo X, Clement VII, Paul III; Vittoria Colonna, Marcantonio, Vasari, Raphael, and Pietro Aretino, to mention a few. The scope of the work made it necessary to compress these sketches into thumb-nail dimensions, but how vivid they are! That of Aretino, who has been called the father of blackmailers, is particularly successful. One wonders how this precious villain was tolerated at all, even in a corrupt society. That he flourished, grew rich and assembled a priceless collection of art without spending a cent for it, is just a bit more proof of what *homo sapiens* will endure (and pay for) when he is in danger of being shown up or ridiculed.

\* \*

Michael Angelo, according to Merejkowski, was about the only master of his day out of whom Aretino could not wheedle a souvenir. And because of that, he spread a tale that brought an order from the Vatican that the figures of "The Last Judgment" could be clothed, "especially the angels." Buonarrotti refused to do any such thing, but the mandate was nevertheless carried out by one of his students, Daniel de Volterra.

One of the later chapters is devoted to the famous "affair" with Vittoria Colonna. Merejkowski says she "allowed" Michael Angelo to love her but that he "never forgot she belonged to another, her dead husband, the only man she had ever loved."

While this was the great passion of his life, it was curiously non-possessive in impulse. Apparently it was completely sublimated and spiritualized. In a letter to Ascanio Condivi he confessed that even when Vittoria was in her coffin he dared not kiss her forehead, only her hand!

The other stories in the volume are more

original in treatment than in subject matter. "La Science de l'Amour" is the most brilliant. It is satirical high comedy with a touch of farce and at least one episode that derives from the Shakespeare of "The Merry Wives of Windsor." "L'Amour Plus Fort Que la Mort" is more Russian than the others—none has much flavor of the author's nationality—a morbid theme similar to that of Andrejev's "Lazarus" but relieved with macabre humor. The last of the group "L'Anneau de Fer," is a "fairy-prince" sort of tale with a *cinq-cento* background.

## A Rhineland Heritage

EIN ERBE AM RHEIN. By RENE SCHICKELE. Munich: Kurt Wolff. 1926.

Reviewed by A. W. G. RANDALL

SUPERLATIVES are generally dangerous, but after a pretty exhaustive survey of German novels during the current year I have formed the opinion that this is the most notable piece of fiction to issue from Germany in 1926. It is—so we learn from a recent interview with Herr Schickele—the first part of a trilogy, the whole of which, it was intended, should bear the title of "Das Erbe am Rhein." In the meantime this instalment stands easily by itself and calls insistently for notice.

Herr Schickele is not so well known outside Germany and France—for he is an Alsatian several of whose sketches of Paris are a sheer delight—as he deserves. He was born in 1883 and has, perhaps, a dozen books to his credit, poems, essays, short stories, a novel, two plays. As an Alsatian who lived in Paris before the war, and in Switzerland during it, making no secret of his opposition to German imperialism, his reputation has probably suffered in Germany, and this novel may run the risk of partial failure to secure recognition. Yet its whole text—the least important thing about it—is the magnetism of the Rhine, the irresistible siren-call of the German forests for the Alsatian, however much he may feel and for a time succumb to the fascination of the South.

\* \*

Of plot the book has little. Such concrete story as there is, however, is constructed with great skill. With a sure feeling for maximum effect Herr Schickele begins his tale at the end, and into the first chapter puts all his gifts of impressive writing, a wonderful description of the death of his German wife, Doris, at the bottom of a crevasse in Switzerland into which they had fallen. Then comes the transformation-scene, to Venice, where the hero, a boy of fourteen, has his boyish love-affair with the young and delightful Marchesa Maria Capponi, and participates, without entirely understanding, in the tragic passion of his young aunt, Sidonia, for a Russian admiral. Thence to the Riviera, a succession of brilliant pictures, both of landscape and of cosmopolitan types. Then back to the Rhine, where he marries Doris, a vaguely-drawn character, perhaps because only a symbol for the German river and forests (although this is not at all a symbolist novel)—and Maria realizes that he has never really loved her. The book closes with a sketch of Alsace after the Armistice, but it seems unfair to place these pages of beautiful prose, these brilliant impressions of landscape, these appealing renderings of national homesickness, in relation to contemporary events. Even Herr Schickele's own suggestion, that his work is the German counterpart of Maurice Barrès's Lorraine stories, seems to bring it too near controversy. The book will be kept alive by the sheer poetry in it.

The magazine *Advertising and Selling* has been graphically showing the great growth of newspaper and magazine circulation since 1919. In the rare book world this too has been a wonderful period. The auction houses in London and New York, that specialize in the sale of literary property, have been very busy disposing of an unprecedented number of important libraries with prices generally advancing each season for the genuinely rare and much sought after material. Early this year a copy of the Gutenberg Bible brought \$106,000 at auction and was soon sold by the dealer who purchased it for \$120,000; and now comes the report of the sale of a vellum copy of the same book for \$275,000, which with export taxes and commission will make it cost \$305,000. Sensational advances are made and broken sometimes in the same season.

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## The New Books

### Biography

#### LEAVES FROM A SECRET JOURNAL.

By JANE STEGER. Little, Brown. 1926. \$2.

The chapters of this book were taken from a sort of diary kept over a long period of years and printed some time ago in the *Atlantic Monthly*. Miss Steger is an invalid whose illness has caused her to withdraw more and more into herself. From the way she writes of her spiritual life, this can be no great hardship. This sick woman gets more out of the world than the most perfect athlete with all his physical horse-power.

Miss Steger is a mystic, and we'd better admit right off that she believes in God. She's a New Englander too, but God isn't the usual New England combination of county judge, truant officer, and dog-catcher. He's an unqualified asset. To him are delegated none of the disagreeable duties of moral law enforcement. Miss Steger feels that he's much above that sort of thing. She glories in him as a particularly sympathetic friend. She sees him in every beautiful aspect of nature and talks to him through every pleasant person she meets.

But it's no use to give in outline a mystic's idea of God. All mystical writings deal with this one subject and require all their space and every literary device to accomplish their end. An outline of Miss Steger's work could no more serve its purpose than a printed program could give the feeling of a high-church cathedral service. The spirit is a shy thing. It must be approached, as Miss Steger does it, through poetry, love of beauty, and sympathetic understanding, not through the cold, automatic machinery of logic.

Mysticism needs beauty of literary expression to make it seem more than sour lack of appreciation of natural pleasures. This is why so many mystics are misunderstood and also why so many shallow preachers can pretend to be mystics when they are really nothing but bossy meddlers. Miss Steger's literary ability is of the very first rank. Her use of simple direct phrases makes the reader feel that she is talking quietly and smilingly to him from behind the page. The little bits of verse which she inserts from time to time are good—some of them extremely good. And her prose approaches poetry at numerous points.

### Drama

#### TECHNIQUE OF DRAMATIC ART. By HALLAM BOSWORTH. Macmillan. 1926.

Mr. Bosworth sets out to assemble and classify certain rudimentary principles that concern the technique of acting and play production. Only from the point of view of acting is this book invaluable on the shelf of the amateur in the theater. When the author states that "Art is merely an imitation of Nature," one wonders what "Technique of Dramatic Art" means. Unfortunately the other arts of Play Production are only hastily and summarily dismissed. It is the two hundred and fifty pages of material rich in its simple analysis of fundamentals in acting for amateurs, and drawn from the author's own professional experience, that gives this book any certain degree of merit.

#### COMMUNITY DRAMA. Century. 1926. \$2.

This book has been prepared and published under the auspices of the Playground Recreation Association of America. Information on directing and managing dramatic work and other forms of amusement and entertainment is simply and adequately presented with few original suggestions or ideas on the subject. It is unfortunate that this book cannot be limited to members only, and kept within the walls of the Social Service Bureau and Settlement House. There it belongs and there is a definite place for it. For any group of workers interested in more than entertainment "Community Drama" releases a flood of bad precedents in technique, and a too easy treatment of genuine theatre practice.

#### STORIES AND DRAMAS. By LEO TOLSTOY. (Hitherto unpublished.) Dutton. 1926. \$2.50.

The thirteen samples of Tolstoy's hitherto unpublished work gathered here have little more than a certain biographical interest. With the exception of the fairly full-length comedy, "The Contaminated Family"

—a satire on high-brows—they are all fragments with the character of more or less preliminary sketches or author's notes.

The mood and even the manner is almost always unmistakably Tolstoy's, and it is not uninteresting to catch glimpses of his reaction to various political and social movements—the earliest bit goes clear back to 1851—and of ideas more completely or artistically worked out later on or in other places. In "How Love Dies," for example—the story of a young man's idealistic first love crushed by a shabby escapade into which the boy is lured by two older and disillusioned associates—we have the makings, not only of the Tolstoy of "Anna Karenina" and "War and Peace" but, in its final sermonizing, of the dry and didactic Tolstoy of his later days. The story is said to have been planned in 1853. But neither this, nor any of the other fragments, belong with his best work.

#### TISH PLAYS THE GAME. By MARY ROBERTS RINEHART. Doran. 1926. \$2.

The game that Tish plays is golf, and she plays it with her usual determination and scorn of formalities. She also does a great many other things in this book, most of them best enjoyed in private, unless one cares to make an exhibition of oneself by

laughing aloud in public. Of course by this time everyone must know about Tish (Miss Letitia Carberry), the absurd and delightful spinster who during the war captured a town single-handed from the Germans, while her friend, Aggie, sat on a nearby church steeple, and her Boswell, Lizzie, went back for reinforcements. In their most recent adventures, these sedately preposterous maiden ladies engage in hijacking for the benefit of their church, play golf with the mental reservation that doubtful methods are justified by righteous ends, go up in a baby blimp accompanied by an elephant which they eventually deposit on the roof of the First National Bank—and so on. Sometimes Tish, Aggie, and Lizzie are a good deal funnier than other times, but readers in search of entertaining nonsense will probably find them sufficiently amusing to justify the very slight amount of effort involved in following their extraordinary activities.

#### SNOW AND STEEL. By GIRALOMO SOMMI-PICENARDI. Translated by Rudolph Altrocchi. Appleton. 1926. \$2.

In this book, the Marquis Sommi-Picenardi, an officer in one of the crack organizations of the Italian army, the Alpini, tells one phase of the Italian part in the World War. There are eleven stories in the book that deal with various types of human character caught in the trap of war, often in dramatic and naturally enough

tragic circumstances. The peculiar nature of the fighting that went on amid the magnificent scenery upon the summits of the Alps provides an unusual background, the grandeur of which has not been neglected. The narrative is direct and realistic, and provides another document of genuine value for the fast growing record of the Great War told by its survivors. The author, however, brings little more to his volume than a sensitive awareness and an acceptable narrative comment not entirely equal to the occasion. The translation by Rudolph Altrocchi, Associate Professor of Italian at the University of Chicago, does full justice to the text.

(Continued on next page)

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