

# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## Shakespeare Cut to Size

SIR: Without entering into the heat of the discussion about the comic-book "Macbeth" [EDITOR'S NOTE: See pages 13-14], may I contribute a word on John Mason Brown's side?

To one child Lamb's "Tales" did a definite harm. They served as a delightful introduction to Lamb, not Shakespeare. Her first youthful reaction to the real Shakespeare was: "Just talk. No story." For many years the great playwright was a closed book to her. Only in middle age did she come to a realization of how she had been cheating herself; only gradually did she arrive at some conception of the towering majesty of the Elizabethan writers.

Call it, if you wish, a case of slow development, yet the fact remains that in her case the Lamb approach acted in reverse. Not unnaturally, she has a strong conviction that to offer youthful minds any cut-to-size introduction to great literature is to give them the bare bones of the masters' works instead of their flesh and blood, entirely omitting the very quality that entitles them to their pre-eminence.

HELEN MORTON TODD.

Palo Alto, Calif.

## Doom and Gloom

SIR: Waldo Frank in his "Fallacy of the Liberals" [SRL Oct. 28] says that although Huxley, Heard, Orwell, and Toynbee despaired that intelligence could promote Utopia, "none dug into the problems of the bearing of the intelligence, as it was commonly defined, on the doom of the historic world."

I suggest he rummage once more in the pages of Spengler's "Decline of the West." He should now be safely weaned from liberalism's breast-fed diet of "trivial optimism" as Spengler called the many mouthings of dogooders and world-improvers so that he can recognize the great historian-philosopher as more than a "poet of defeat," as Mr. Frank pigeon-holed him some years ago. He will find that Spengler had diagnosed the aches and infirmities of Western civilization as symptoms of decay and disintegration, when he and other hopesters dismissed them as growing pains and urged us on to Utopia.

J. S. ELMORE.

Eastlake, Colo.

SIR: Please let me protest Waldo Frank's mention of the "anemia" of our generation and its "finding literary leadership in T. S. Eliot, whose thin voice of iridescent sighs rises from impotent nostalgia for an archaic dogma." Eliot's voice in his "The Cocktail Party" is anything but thin. His character Celia exemplifies the very essence—archaic and modern—of living Christianity, the sacrifice of self for the good of others.

CLARE LYON HARDMAN.

Hollywood, Calif.

SIR: May I congratulate your magazine on the publication of "The Fal-



THROUGH HISTORY WITH J. WESLEY SMITH

"I just can't seem to find time to burn all these old papers of yours, Mr. Boswell. Would it be all right to lock them in the storeroom until I get around to it?"

lacy of the Liberals," by Waldo Frank. In my judgment this is the most important piece to have seen the light in *The Saturday Review* or any other magazine in many a long year.

Our ability to extricate ourselves from the combination of perils in which we are now involved will, I think, depend upon a broad consensus with the views expressed by Mr. Frank. If, as he says, "Our civilization is threatened from within . . . because our trifling values, concepts, definitions are themselves dead reactions," the crucial question is, can we turn to something living in time?

EDGAR ANSEL MOWRER.

Washington, D. C.

## O Rare Philip Wylie!

SIR: Philip Wylie rings the bell every time! A thousand cheers for his magnificently intelligent reply to Ernest O. Melby [SRL Oct. 7]. Here is a rare mind that refuses to compromise to the detriment of Truth.

E. KILPATRICK.

Philadelphia, Pa.

SIR: Philip Wylie's answer to Ernest O. Melby's article made my heart sing. I am glad that so worthy a magazine as yours had the privilege of printing this classic.

MRS. LLOYD J. HENDERSON.

New York, N. Y.

## Editorial Approval

SIR: I am heartily in accord with the views of Curtis G. Benjamin [LETTERS, SRL Nov. 4]. I should like very much to know it as the "Saturday Review" and with somewhat less of the book reviews. . . . Let me say that I buy the review principally for

the editorial page, which to me is worth the price of admission.

JOHN GLYNN.

Cincinnati, O.

SIR: . . . A collection of SRL editorials would furnish the student and the thinker with some of the best critical writings of our times.

SHIRLEY WELLER.

Ann Arbor, Mich.

## Actuarial GBS

SIR: In the deluge of sentiment, we should note that Bernard Shaw did not die; he encountered the "statistically inevitable fatal accident."

GORDON JAYNES.

Cambridge, Mass.

## Behn Misspelt

SIR:

If the burner's named for Buhnsen And the lighter's made by Rohnsen, Then when all is said and done, son, "To Celia" is by Johnson.

(See SRL, Nov. 4, page 45)

MARITZA M. LONGYEAR.

Falmouth, Mass.

## The Right Art

SIR: Gilbert Seldes ["Life on the Tinsel Standard," SRL Oct. 28] apparently believes in the separation of what is generally considered entertainment and art. I think it hardly fair for him to imply that entertainment is something vulgar and isolated in respect to art. While all entertainment can by no stretch of the imagination be thought of as art, all art is, by any connotation you may prefer, a means for providing the highest type of entertainment and enjoyment.

Schiller once said: "All art is dedicated to joy, and there is no higher

and no more serious problem than how to make men happy. The right art is that alone which creates the highest enjoyment."

If there be another, more important criterion for recognizing a work of art, I would appreciate being advised of the secret.

JACK LINDEMAN.

Washington, D. C.

### No Cash Needed

SIR: As to Ernst Bacon's letter [SRL Sept. 2] about the use of contemporary poetry for song lyrics, there is seldom any need to pay cash for their use, unless there is some special reason for doing so. A royalty arrangement is fair to both parties, by which the poet may receive one-third, or sometimes one-half, of possible royalties. I have followed this method, both in setting the lyrics of others and in the setting of my poems by others.

SYDNEY KING RUSSELL.

New York, N. Y.

### Requiem to a Poetess

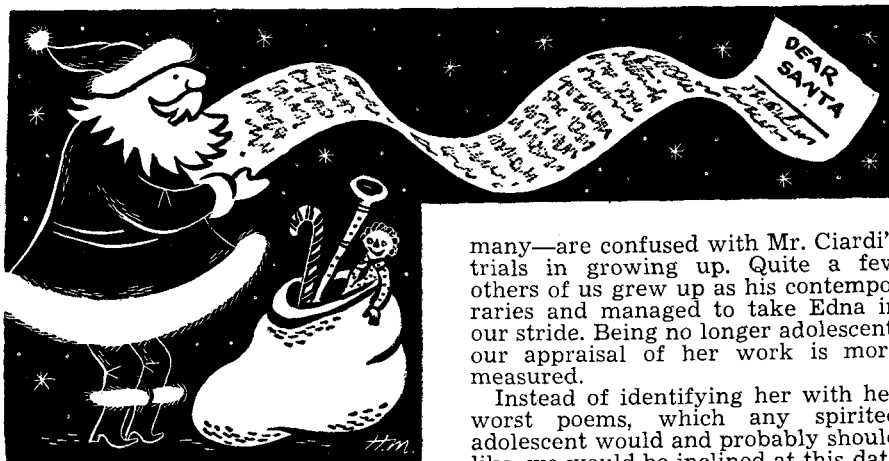
SIR: When I saw featured on the cover of SRL Nov. 11 an article about the late Edna St. Vincent Millay I was greatly excited. After reading it I am so angry and disappointed that I find myself writing to reproach you for printing such a petty and malicious requiem, which dwells insistently on the lesser works of a truly great lyric poetess.

John Ciardi intimates that at the time of Miss Millay's great fame only the adolescents and malcontents of humdrum living were moved by her poems. Had he read the critical estimate of her work at that time he would have realized that she was acclaimed by mature critics not for her attitudes but for the lyric perfection of her verse. It is unfair to dwell exclusively on or to quote only the mediocre.

E. W. PARAMORE.

East Norwich, N. Y.

SIR: John Ciardi's article betrays an almost neurotic eagerness to disclaim and deplore his early enthusiasm for a now unfashionable—but immortal—kind of poetry. Why is it any more "coy" for her to use some of the phrases he quotes (notably not her best work) than for him to present himself as a presumably appealing



adolescent in knickers in the Public Library of Medford? What in heaven's name have the "incredible" dresses of the period to do with the matter? The clothes of every age are incredible to the following one. He ignores Millay's best poems, her most poignant lyrics. With his estimate of the later socially-conscious works most persons of taste must agree. The article in general assumes an air of condescension difficult to justify. Because thou art harsh and obscure, shall we have no more silver jets of melody?

KATHARINE DAY LITTLE.

Boston, Mass.

SIR: I did not know Edna St. Vincent Millay personally and I was never a great admirer of her verse. But it seems to me that she was a true poet both in her earlier and later works. She at least possessed the lucidity which most of her contemporaries lack.

GEORGE SYLVESTER VIERECK.

New York, N. Y.

SIR: Edna St. Vincent Millay grew old as SRL's art director so pitilessly (and unnecessarily) demonstrated. And John Ciardi, too, has grown old, as he unwittingly reveals in his critique. But Edna's poems will forever remain new and fresh so long as we have new and fresh minds to read and to react.

EDMUND S. WHITMAN.

New York, N. Y.

SIR: Somehow or other, Miss Millay's faults as a poet—and she had

many—are confused with Mr. Ciardi's trials in growing up. Quite a few others of us grew up as his contemporaries and managed to take Edna in our stride. Being no longer adolescent, our appraisal of her work is more measured.

Instead of identifying her with her worst poems, which any spirited adolescent would and probably should like, we would be inclined at this date to measure her best poems against the accepted best in modern poetry.

LOUISE LITTLE STURGIS.

New York, N. Y.

SIR: Edna St. Vincent Millay was no ivory-tower resident. She was a tremendous booster of American show business. She thought "radio has the opportunity and, if skilfully employed, the power of giving to its listeners through the medium of poetry, as great a happiness and as deep an enrichment of their lives as it has given through the medium of music." She listened to the radio on an old table model. She switched the dials to symphonic music, news round-ups, and sports programs. She followed the fistful battles of Joe Louis. Once when her radio broke down she traveled twenty miles in order to hear the blow-by-blow account of a Louis fight. She was miserable when Charlie McCarthy went off the air. On one occasion she wrote a poem in praise of the dummy's brilliant behavior and sent it to Edgar Bergen via Western Union. The poem read:

Last night I heard upon the air  
A little man who wasn't there,  
He wasn't there again today,  
I hope he'll never go away.

She brought considerable fragrance to the air waves with her magnificent poetry readings from the former NBC studios at 711 Fifth Avenue. In the beginning (circa Cockaday Circuit) the NBC program nabobs thought there would be a limited, somewhat "precious" audience for the Millay readings. They discovered otherwise when the fan mail rolled in. West Point cadets, Scranton coal miners, Tacoma lumberjacks, Arizona cow-punchers, Texas oil drillers—these and many more demanded a repeat performance by the glorious writer.

Years later the world was privileged to hear her memorable dramatic poem "The Murder of Lidice," her first document written expressly for radio. One of the greatest works ever to be written for the air, it cried out against the horrors of dictatorship. In burning single-syllabled words she called upon all freedom-seeking people to fight the barbaric invaders. It was an eloquently moving performance with Paul Muni, Clifton Fadiman, and the late Alexander Woollcott against a background of special music by the NBC Symphony Orchestra. Radio came of age that day.

JO RANSON.

New York, N. Y.

### Possible Osmosis

SIR: You haven't printed any parallel columns for a long time. Here is a possible case of literary osmosis:—

"Gabriel Rossetti, a true poet, if not a great one, very firmly declared himself not at all sure that the earth really revolved round the sun. He even aggravated this scandalous position by asking, what, after all, did it matter?"

—From an address by John Morley at the Mansion House, London, February 26, 1887. (Reprinted in Lord Morley's "Politics and History.")

"I found incidentally that he [Holmes] was ignorant of the Copernican Theory and of the composition of the Solar System. That any civilized human being in this nineteenth century should not be aware that the earth traveled round the sun appeared to me such an extraordinary fact. . . . 'What the deuce is it to me?' he interrupted."

—From Dr. Watson's analysis of Sherlock Holmes in "A Study in Scarlet," published in *Beeton's Christmas Annual* for 1887.

CHRISTOPHER MORLEY.

Roslyn Heights, N. Y.

**Humor.** One of the nicest ways we know to bid a friend a Merry Christmas in the grim year of 1950 is to give a book that will provide him with a few laughs. The publishers obligingly offer books tailored to fit every sense of humor. If your friend prefers to get his laughs from pictures, he will be grateful for Helen Hokinson's posthumous "*The Ladies, God Bless 'Em*," Cobean's "*The Naked Eye*," "Charles Addams' Monster Rally," and SRL's own "*Through History with J. Wesley Smith*," by Burr Shafer. If he enjoyed Horace Sutton's Parlogram pieces in SRL some months back, he'll go for F. S. Pearson's "*Fractured French*." If he likes his ribs tickled by words as well as pictures, you have even greater choice: Cornelia Otis Skinner's "*Nuts in May*," John Kobler's "*Afternoon in the Attic*" and H. Allen Smith's "*People Named Smith*."

## The Buoyant Mrs. Blodget

**NUTS IN MAY.** By Cornelia Otis Skinner. New York: Dodd, Mead & Co. 188 pp. \$2.75.

By ROSEMARY C. BENÉT

EVERY now and then I meet someone who says in what is obviously a self-satisfied voice, "Oh, I never read light fiction." Now why ever not? Where is the virtue in that? Light fiction is quite as hard to do well as the grim, stark school. Do such people like only serious conversation, preferring endless Ancient-Mariner accounts of major operations, nervous breakdowns, stock-market curves, and the effect of the atom bomb? If so, they will not like "*Nuts in May*" for it is definitely light fiction, designed to amuse, and Miss Skinner's tone is that of an entertaining dinner companion, making a story diverting, embroidering an anecdote with humor, but not necessarily enlightening us. Like her friend and erstwhile collaborator, Emily Kimbrough, amusing things seem to happen to her and nothing is lost in the telling.

It is as though she said to the reader, "Did I ever tell you about the time I tried to send a wireless to a ship from Paris?" or, "Will you ever forget the trials of my opening night?" or even, "Do you remember the day Mother and Father Skinner had an audience with the Pope?" Her stories move easily and lightly and they are sufficiently varied, since her own background is varied. As Mrs. Blodget, her domestic life is here in some detail. She visits her son at prep school, she receives his guests, she and her husband buy a house. As Cornelia Otis Skinner, the actress, her professional life takes the fore and there is an account of the trials of benefit performances, the problems of

first nights, and the lady who insists she must have come from Butte, Montana. Then there are some general sketches, like the report on Dr. Kinsey or one called "Laugh Happy," where she says the nervous giggle is both prevalent and a nuisance. The only sketch I didn't care for, and here I seem to agree with *The New Yorker*, which published all but this, is "Seaweed Sewer," a takeoff on Steinbeck. Her son appears in a number of the sketches and he is quite clearly Cornelia's jewel. We see him at various ages and in varying moods. He is ten years old when he is collecting horse bones hoping they will turn out to be those of the ichthyosaurus; he is fifteen or so when he takes to entertaining diverse strong, silent, and anonymous guests and a shade older when he gets his



—From "*Nuts in May*."

first dinner coat. I suppose one's favorite piece is apt to be the one nearest one's own experience. I like "Ordeal for Sons," the maternal visit to the halls of learning, and "Parcel of Land," the account of trying to purchase a house, legal minds to the contrary, which is word for word from my own experience.

The thirteen sketches have gay pictures by Alajálov. "Nuts in May" will amuse you and so far as I am concerned that is enough. That is just what it sets out to do, and it succeeds.

## Oddities & Addams

**AFTERNOON IN THE ATTIC.** By John Kobler. Illustrations by Charles Addams. New York: Dodd, Mead & Co. 135 pp. \$3.75.

By HOWARD CUSHMAN

PERHAPS you thought your fellow man

And all his works were hunky-dory,

Constructed on a normal plan—

Well, brother, it's a different story!

This book with strange recitals rife is,

From which you learn how cock-eyed life is.

The antic, attic gamut runs

From barkeep schools (Advanced Martinis)

To circus gentry shot from guns

(You surely know the mad Zucchini's!)

And all the guys and all the madames

Are grimly limned therein by Addams.

(That extra fancy "d," my pet, Stands for "demoniac" in our set.)

The spiritualistic medium

Is here to ease your tedium,

With spooks and poltergeists aplenty

That levitate along Route 20.

(For cultist, mystic, nut, or crackpot, York Staters always hit the jackpot.)

The gentleman in Paris who'll

Be glad to help arrange a duel;

The doings at Le Grand Guignol—

And Madame Tussaud's, quite as droll;

Gibraltar's apes that breed and clown, Protected by the British crown;

And many another lad and wench

With quirks too numerous to mench.

A gay and leering tome, my lads,

And worthy of your salary,

To brighten up the home, my lads,

This wild and winsome gallery.

Besides, it's nice to know for sure

That someone's screwier than you're!