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HENRY ARTHUR JONES AND THE NEW SOCIAL DRAMA

In an address delivered some years ago at Harvard, Viscount Bryce made the statement that "nothing is more important than that each generation and each land should have its own writers". This opinion, coming from so reliable an authority, suggests that we should place a revaluation upon our contemporary literature. In our zeal for the old classics, in which we were trained and which it is our first duty to know, do we not neglect the cultural and educational inspiration to be derived from many present-day writers?

The future historian of the literature of this century will chronicle two outstanding movements: one a remarkable poetic revival, the other the creation of our modern social drama. The beginnings of both can be traced in the decade of the '90s, the twilight of the Victorian Age; both were fully launched by the year 1900. Not since the high tide of the Elizabethan drama has there been such a swarm of poets and playwrights, and so much selling and buying and reading of books of poems and plays. Many reasons will occur to the thoughtful reader why he should turn his serious attention to the contemporary drama.

The novel, which has held an almost unchallenged literary primacy for two centuries, is deteriorating into a lean and slippered dotage. Like the heroic couplet of the eighteenth century, it has attained a smug, mechanical perfection, in which it is difficult to distinguish between the work of novice and of master. It is the age of 'best sellers', an abomination to the Muses. Since 1890 the supremacy of the novel has steadily waned before the rising drama. The play has grown increasingly significant and important, and many believe that the best thought of our age is finding its highest artistic expression in the work of such playwrights as Mr. Henry Arthur Jones, Sir Arthur Pinero, Mr. George Bernard Shaw, and Sir James Barrie.

In the master hands of these men and others the popular acting play, as in the time of Shakespeare, has once more risen to the dignity of literature. It has again made good its claim to

recognition as the most human and social of the arts. As the Tudor drama was the social history and the national epic of England in its day, so the new drama lends itself with more perfect adjustment than any other literary form to the development of the communal spirit of the twentieth century. It has, through the organization of local stage societies and little town theatres, proved useful in unifying the interests and activities of many communities. In such centres it is keeping alive the play instinct among our people, old and young; is awakening discussion of vital social questions; and is creating a wholesome and constructive civic spirit.

Tolstoi struck the keynote of the new drama when he defined the art of the modern playwright as—

“not primarily a pleasure, a solace, or an amusement, but rather a great instrument whereby man is enabled to sympathize more largely with man, quickening his consciousness of human brotherhood.”

The drama at its best is democratic, sociological, and humanitarian. I refer, of course, not to the cheap, commercialized plays sent out on mercenary missions around fixed circuits by the New York syndicates, but to the literary drama—poem-plays, thesis-plays, and sermon-plays by moralists and artists of recognized ability. Thinking men everywhere rejoice at the sign of *rapprochement* between the church and the stage. Mr. Jones's *Saints and Sinners* brought Matthew Arnold back to the stage after years of absence for conscience's sake. After seeing the play, he exclaimed: “The theatre is irresistible; organize the theatre!” Puritan England sadly forgot that the English drama was the daughter of the church, that the chancel was the cradle of the mediæval play, that the first actors were priests, and that the first plays were Bible stories retold. Many church folk, including not a few of the clergy, have realized that public morality and religion have no stronger ally than the thesis-play of to-day.

The drama of the nineteenth century was characterized by a dormant inactivity, broken now and then by sporadic outbursts of melodrama or highly romantic closet-plays. The drama of the

twentieth century, judging by its accomplishment during the first two decades, is entering upon an era of artistic promise and moral strength unapproached since the death of Shakespeare. The best social aspirations, the noblest ethical ideas are being interpreted by our leading playwrights. The greatest ferment and upheaving force of this century is apparently socialistic. Social betterment is the slogan of the age. The drama, the most composite of the arts, has seriously assumed the share of the burden of reform which literature can best bear. It is taking stock of the assets and the liabilities of our troubled and restless social order—its brutalizing poverty, its economic injustices, its misdirection of energy, its awful waste of life,—and is trying to create a saner public opinion and to suggest wise solutions. The play of to-day is attacking the ugliness of modern life, the mad pursuit of money, our vulgar material standards. It is trying to bring back into life the joyous artistic instincts from which so much of the happiness of the people springs. In many quarters platform and pulpit are welcoming the play as a powerful ally.

One of the ablest exponents of the aims of the new drama is Mr. Henry Arthur Jones, the distinguished English playwright, essayist, and lecturer, recently a visitor to this country. For over two decades he has been recognized as a leader in the dramatic revival, one of the four greatest living playmakers in literary style, power of thought, and story-telling skill. He is a self-made dramatist, having learned his art by obscure hackwork and humble apprenticeship to the craft of the contemporary stage. He was born in Buckinghamshire, England, on December 20th, 1851, of good yeoman stock, and received the strict puritan training usual with provincial farmers. He obtained the rudiments of an education at Winslow School, but was taken from school and put to work at the age of thirteen. A memorable visit to the Haymarket Theatre in London in 1870 started him on his career as playwright. His early literary efforts were rejected by various newspapers and magazines. He at last secured a hearing, however, by writing a series of clever and popular farce-comedies and romantic melodramas. Examples of these early efforts, slight but pleasant, are *Breaking a Butterfly*, a free adaptation of Ibsen's *A Doll's House*; *Saints and Sinners*,

a play portraying the inconsistency between a man's religious profession and his conduct; *Silver King*, the story of a victim of blacklegs and gamblers; *The Manœuvres of Jane*, a farcical study of the struggle between filial disobedience and love; and *The Lackey's Carnival*, an effort to penetrate the character of servants. Included in this period are a number of one-act plays, seldom rising above the commonplace, such as *A Bed of Roses*, an irascible father's reconciliation to his disowned son; *A Clerical Error*, in which a minister, due to a misunderstanding, proposes to his ward; and *Sweet Will*, a quiet pastoral play in which the course of true love finally runs smooth. Situation and mechanical ingenuity hold an important place in all these sketches of middle-class society.

In 1889 Mr. Jones abandoned spectacular melodrama and the well-made conventional comedy, and presented the public with a more modern type of realistic character-studies. Although his work shows the influence of Ibsen, the master-builder of the new drama, he did not go to the extreme of heart-breaking tragedy created by the great Norwegian. In his desire to make the drama a purifying social force, he turned aside from the task of catering to the amusement-seeking crowd to appeal to the small circle of the judicious. *The Middleman*, for example, was written to portray the desperate economic struggle between capital and labor, anticipating Mr. John Galsworthy's *Strife*. It was followed by *Judah*, which has as its theme the keen conflict which science wages with spiritualism, and *The Dancing Girl*, which presents the sharp contrast between the old puritanic view of life and the easy-going, cynical attitude of the upper classes. *The Case of Rebellious Susan*, a clever and convincing play, is the story of the revolt of a spirited wife against modern social conditions. Wifely indulgence is suggested as essential to a happy marriage. In cases of marital infidelity women dare not retaliate in kind. Theoretically, there should not be a double standard, but the laws of society, under which we have to live, are necessarily unequal in their application to woman. Socially, what is sauce for the gander is not sauce for the goose. Similarly, Elaine, a character in the sub-plot, asserts her rights industrially and politically, but is a failure as a wife. According

to the conservative author, "conventions rule the world, and individualism is impracticable". In this group may also be included *Mrs. Dane's Defence*, one of Mr. Jones's most interesting plots. It tells of the unsuccessful attempt of a reformed young woman to conceal her past in her effort to win a husband.

The three dramas last mentioned also involve social problems. In his development Mr. Jones has cultivated more and more the drama of discussion. His important characters are all confronted with some moral dilemma, from which they can escape only after fierce debate with their consciences. He is primarily an artist, but is a moralist too, and is not content unless his play also catches the conscience. He writes sermon-plays to drive home some powerful lesson of justice, righteousness, and ethical conduct. Present-day society is shown to be dull, selfish, scheming, snobbish. In various plays the author attacks hypocrisy, shams, worldliness, pharisaism, love of pleasure,—all forms of the life-lie.

One of his best comedies, *Mary Goes First*, is a keen, delightful satire on a group of social climbers in a middle-class rural community, involving a struggle for precedence between two ambitious women of contrasting types. In *The Hypocrites* a young curate enforces one law on the high-born and the low-born for a common sin. *The Liars* is the study of a wife sailing too close to the wind in a flirtation, a searching satire on the smart set. *The Lie* tells the story of a social scandal long concealed, with the consequences of a sister's deception and treachery due to a rivalry in love. In several of the plays mentioned Mr. Jones, following the example of Hall Caine, has translated biblical themes into modern examples. We observe, too, his fondness for "the priestly hero" caught on the horns of a moral dilemma, generally involving a question of conscience and religion. In his analysis of character he seems also to have specialized on "the wayward woman". Audrie Lesden, Drusilla Ives, Letty Fletcher, Susan Harabin, Felicia Hindemarsch, Lucy Shale, and Julia Wren, are but a few of the victims of passion, temptation, and sin, wonderful focal studies of the "eternal feminine".

Mr. Jones's dramatic method is seen at its best in *Michael and His Lost Angel*, one of the strongest of his plays. It may be

regarded as a sermon-play on the text: "For I acknowledge my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me". A minister of strict ascetic character succumbs to the charms of a vampire woman, and sins. The author's central theme is the influence, at first degrading and afterwards ennobling, of the woman's stronger personality upon the minister. Love, that conquers all, is his bad angel and his good angel in turn. His cry *de profundis*—"Why should n't we make our love a lever to raise our souls?"—is realized when the end comes, bringing a great peace out of pain. The play does not conform to the unities, and follows no fixed structural pattern. The dialogue is beautifully written, and the pictures of rural scenery are accurate and realistic.

Without Pintero's *finesse*, Shaw's brilliancy, or Barrie's intuition, the author relies successfully on force and effect in the mass. He was one of the first of the new dramatic school to insist that his plays, while intended primarily for the stage, should stand the test of being worth while in printed form as well. In fifty-five plays he has reproduced to a nicety the manners, tricks of speech, and idiosyncrasies of character of several hundred midland folk. He has played on these people his searchlight of burlesque humor and good-natured satire, and has enriched his pages generously with nuggets of worldly wisdom, the by-products of a genial philosophy of life. "Partly because he is a man of cultivated talent", says Professor Walter, "rather than of sheer genius, a study of his work is of great value to the student of dramatic technique."

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