

ENGLISH DRAMA BETWEEN TWO WARS

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ONE can see a fog, but scarcely draw a map of it; and any treatment that I can give this topic must leave it only a topic, not a fully articulated subject. Future historians of drama will decline to acknowledge that these years form any real epoch, regarding it (despite two or three splendid works) as a time of confusion and feebleness lying between the British Ibsenist era, which closed about 1914, and whatever renaissance may emerge in England when the new conditions which we now not even faintly desery have at length attained some clearness of outline and some promise of permanence. English drama is going bankrupt, bankrupt of ideas about the life which it portrays, bankrupt of ideas about its own methods. One might have expected that British dramatists would be affected by two vastly important energies elsewhere displayed: that the cinema would suggest techniques which, good or bad, were at least new; and that the combined novelty and splendour of Mr. O'Neill's work would produce a revolution analogous to that engendered by the impact of Ibsen in 1889. No such results are to be discerned.

One natural outcome of this weakness, as ever when unoriginal people get art on the brain, is bastard art: to rococo architecture, jazz music, futurist painting, cubist sculpture, *vers libre*, we have added dull historical drama, the most bogus of all, the most favoured by third-rate executants, and (except jazz music) the most productive of popular esteem. Mr. John Drinkwater, having secured loud acclaim for his *Abraham Lincoln*, followed it with *Oliver Cromwell* and *Robert E. Lee*. Mr. Halcott Glover wrote *Wat Tyler* and sundry other such works. Mr. Masfield and Miss Clemence Dane (who should—in fact, who do—know better) have given us respectively *The Trial of Jesus* and *Naboth's Vineyard*. D. H. Lawrence published a *David*, and Mr. Laurence Housman the numerous sketches later tied together under the name *Victoria Regina*. "Gordon Daviot's" *Richard of Bordeaux* had great success in 1933, but seems now forgotten: its sole merit lies in skilful avoidance of competition with Shakespeare. All these are

worthless, except for certain scraps—Herod's cynical wit in *The Trial of Jesus*, the third act of *Naboth's Vineyard* and the development of Prince Albert in *Victoria Regina*.

Worthless, when some of them make attractive reading, not seldom impressive spectacle? We should distinguish three kinds of historical drama: two of them good; one, that which here concerns us, incapable of anything but badness.

The first good type is history enlivened by the individual writer's own imagination; a type of which our twenty-one years provide three examples. In *The Song of Drums* Mr. Ashley Dukes has written a lively play about the Dutch revolt against Spanish domination. The waved flagons, simple-hearted peasants and "ye olde" in general are not to everyone's taste, but the piece has genuine emotion and vigorous melodrama—galloping without, mysterious friars and the like. Mr. Shaw's *The Six of Calais* is a one-act *bravura* play that shows the old realism and crispness. His *St. Joan* not only transcends all the other historical plays: it far outshines every other British drama of this period, save one. The charm and wit, the rich and convincing historical background, the racy humour, the excitement, urgency and suspense in a situation borrowed indeed from history but presented with tingling reality—all these would have made the play a success even without the chief excellence: namely, characterization, in which Shaw equals any of his earlier achievements. The archbishop, the Dauphin, the chaplain, the Earl of Warwick and each subordinate person in his degree, are vivid creations: above all, Joan herself is beautifully understood and depicted with magnificent power—a real saint, a real heroine, a real girl.

The other good kind of historical drama handles exciting contemporary fact, and might therefore be refused the name "historical" altogether. Of these we have a few. Mr. Noel Coward's *Cavalcade*, to be sure, is but a string of actualities joined by the most tenuous of personal concerns, and falls irretrievably within the *Abraham Lincoln* class. But the Irish troubles have called forth two admirable works. In *The Big House* Mr. Lennox Robinson portrays with forceful originality the events before and during the Black-and-Tan activities. Mr. Sean O'Casey in *The Plough and the Stars* has written of Irish politics, but has blent therewith a vigorous presentation of Dublin slum-life, which might in strictness be held to set the whole, together with his more celebrated *Juno and the Paycock*, apart from contemporary history. *Juno* has

importance, but mostly sociological, though it shows authentically dramatic excellence in the "Paycock" himself. Finally, we come to the famous *Journey's End*, by Mr. R. C. Sherriff—a realistic and moving picture of experiences in a front-line trench during the last war. Masterly, beautifully knit, terrifically alive, it is nevertheless not a great play: for no one can watch it without pain; and consummate art makes even the worst anguish not only bearable for the spectator but, by some wizardry, even a source of pleasure.

In strong contrast with all this stands the third sort of historical drama, the *Abraham Lincoln* and *Victoria Regina* class, which passes the facts through no alembic of the writer's own thought or emotion, and is in consequence blatantly cheap. Pages torn from the history-book are flung shamelessly across the footlights. Scene: The Field of Waterloo. The Guards massed in square. Enter Wellington, right, mounted. Wellington (at the top of his voice): "Up, Guards, and at 'em!" The Guards charge, cheering. Curtain. This anyone can do, providing he can find a backer who will pay for a brigade of guardsmen, with convincing beards. (In the midst of writing this I come upon vivacious confirmation in Mr. Nathan's *Encyclopaedia of the Theater*: "Eugene O'Neill some years ago remarked to me that anyone who would write an American historical panorama in terms of having a character pop in every once in a while shouting 'Andrew Jackson has been elected President!' or 'The Maine has been sunk!' was both a lazy and unimaginative loafer and a catchpenny playwright.") *Abraham Lincoln's* popularity set many pens to work. One aspirant wrote a *Robert Burns*, with songs—all wonderful, being coolly borrowed from Burns himself: no less than thirty-eight lyrics, *Ae Fond Kiss* and the rest. The dismal reason for the high repute won by such work is that upon most of us, as we enter a theatre, there descends a warm rosy mist of complacent stupidity: if the drama concerns some great historical figure, we naively transfer to the play whatever interest dwells in the real queen or president, and attribute marvels of virtuosity to a play-carpenter whose only merit is that he has correctly assessed our gullibility. These products resemble early Italian paintings on which the artist has stuck real gems to decorate the fingers of St. Teresa or St. Catherine.

Turning now to another aspect of our theme, let us note what has happened to those playwrights who were well established when this period opened. Sutro, whose *Man in the Stalls*

ranks among the best one-act plays ever written, has given us only *A Man with a Heart*, a negligible marital-tangle affair, published in 1925 but never (so far as I know) produced. He died in 1933. Mr. Granville-Barker, thirty years ago, was perhaps the most distinguished man of the theatre in Great Britain: as playwright, as actor, as producer, he did vivid original work. It therefore caused no surprise when Mr. John Palmer's *Future of the Theatre*, which appeared in 1913, included much prophesying about Mr. Granville-Barker's development by the time the year 1950 should arrive. He was completely wrong: instead of developing, Mr. Granville-Barker practically vanished from the stage. His sole play has been *The Secret Life*, which contains almost no action, only talk, and mere pretentious chit-chat to boot; there are at least two characters who look, in the first act, as if they were going to be important but are never heard of again; the whole piece sounds hollow, a languid picture of public affairs conducted like a tea-party—"May I offer you another seat in the Cabinet?" etc. etc. It reads like Mr. Granville-Barker's own play *Waste* (1907) with all the drive and vivacity gone. Mr. St. John Ervine has given us in *Anthony and Anna* a thoroughly attractive light comedy which atones for his earlier gritty pseudo-tragedies. Mr. Masefield has again performed the feat which he achieved long ago in *The Tragedy of Nan*—namely, to compose something unlike every other English play of its period. *Melloney Holtspur* offers a poignantly tragic picture of a family hag-ridden by ghosts: the realism, pungency and pathos of this terrible yet beautiful play suggest comparison with a later work, the greatest drama of our age, *Mourning Becomes Electra*.

Mr. Somerset Maugham wrote plays steadily for thirty years, developing notably and curiously throughout. His first English work, *A Man of Honour* (1903), was perhaps inferior to anything even in Pinero's early repertoire; his latest, *Sheppey* (1933), is thoroughly good, with genuine people and interests that merit the attention of civilized minds. The barber who, on winning a prize in the Irish Sweepstake, suddenly decides "to live like Jesus" and gives the money away, who takes into his home a prostitute and a thief, whereupon he is accused of insanity and saved from medical certification only by death, offers a fine example of the sardonic power and realism that distinguish Mr. Maugham's non-dramatic writing. But the other works, even of this latest phase, are less excellent, because he has always fought—consciously or not—against the adult

ideas of human nature and behaviour that have besieged with ever greater success the entrenched theatricality whereby the English stage had for generations been shielded from the impact of life. Sometimes it was Pinero who influenced him, sometimes Wilde, perhaps more often the best of the pre-Ibsenists, Henry Arthur Jones. For he has never taken his art seriously enough to achieve what his fine talent could have accomplished, had he freed himself from traditional affectations and unreality. Read the preface to the second volume of his collected plays, and believe if you can that it was written well on in the twentieth century. "The day before yesterday's newspaper is not more dead than the play of twenty years ago. I suppose no form of art has a more vivid appeal than the drama, but it is just this vividness that makes it so impermanent." (He goes on to talk of cocktails, motor-cars and telephones.) "I submit to my brother dramatists that the unfaithfulness of a wife is no longer a subject for drama, but only for comedy." The whole frank and facile preface implies that drama should deal with the surface of things, an elegant confection served on dainty silver.

As regards, then, his basic conception of the playwright's art, Mr. Maugham stands where Etherege stood in the pink dawn of Restoration comedy. In ideas and technique he has been ruled, less and less (it is true) as time went on, by the late Victorian stage. The man who gave us *The Moon and Sixpence*, *Ashenden*, *Cakes and Ale*, no sooner catches sight of limelight and practicable doors than he falls into a nostalgia for Haddon Chambers's golden days, when dramatists no harm meant, before Ibsen blundered in, that giant from the North, upset the ormolu tables and broke the french windows, putting to flight butlers and comic duchesses, the days whence Mr. Maugham drew inspiration for pieces like *Jack Straw* and *Lady Frederick*, now sharing the lumber-room with marble clocks and swollen photograph-albums. A man of first-rate brain, he understood people and affairs; as a playwright, he accepted solemn faded frivolities which made him fumble woefully when he undertook to dramatize those people and those affairs. It was as if Inigo Jones had sought to erect a guild-hall made of embossed wall-paper.

But as time passed, he yielded slowly to the changes at work on the Continent and indeed in England . . . To *The Sacred Flame* (1928) he actually gave a denouement borrowed from Ibsen's *Ghosts*. At length, in *Sheppey*, he created a work completely good, entirely free from claptrap, then realized in a

flash what had happened and with a splendid gesture surrendered his well-notched sword: the preface announces that *Sheppey* is to be his last dramatic work. We may watch his final struggle in the plays immediately preceding this, above all in *The Unknown*. A young soldier, on leave from the Great War, is surrounded by a group of passionately religious people—his *fiancée*, his parents, the vicar, the vicar's wife—and finds himself compelled to disclose that he has utterly lost his faith; this causes them terrible distress, and Sylvia breaks off the engagement. So far all is sound work, with discussions of religion which, though not noticeably trenchant, are sincere and engrossing. Then Pinero's ghost intervenes. Sylvia, nursing grotesque hope of "a miracle" whereby he may be re-converted against his will and beliefs, tricks him into taking Holy Communion. The stupid—in fact, downright incredible—attempt fails: he is horrified and at once loses all love for her. Mr. Maugham himself calls this third act "meaningless". Not so: it throws a rather ghastly light on the author's development.

Barrie and Galsworthy being for sundry reasons postponed, we arrive finally at Mr. Bernard Shaw, as usual. When our inter-bellum period opened, he was sixty-two years old, with a record of dazzling and invaluable achievement; but his decline at once set in. With *Heartbreak House* (1919) he began to lose control of his material. Why does the title-page describe it as "a Fantasia in the Russian Manner on English Themes"? What in the world had this man, hitherto the most incisive and well-poised writer of our age, to do with the Russian Manner? He must have composed the play first and noticed afterwards that his method was growing ramshackle. Then came *Back to Methuselah*, a series of brief plays enforcing three propositions: first, that man's life is too short for him to grow out of his vices and follies; second, that the world is therefore governed with disastrous incompetence; third, that since all animals (including man) have shown themselves ever competent to evolve qualities and organs needed for survival, the human race will achieve longer and longer life, after three hundred centuries growing utterly intellectual and yearning to free itself altogether from the flesh. The decline that began with *Heartbreak House* is here manifestly under way. The five items have small connexion, dramatic or quasi-historical, with one another: we miss a grand sweep of human development or even historical pageantry. The finest element, Lilith's famous valediction, is far outshone in splendour by Julius Caesar's address to the Sphinx, far less

pungent than much in the third act of *Man and Superman*. There is little character-drawing, and less plot—only talk, and talk which (though good) sadly lacks the earlier wit. We feel a chill of approaching winter. Yet *St. Joan*, the play which followed in 1923, shows, as we have remarked, magnificent artistry. How shall we explain this exception to a decline elsewhere unmistakable? By the inspiration radiating from St. Joan herself, a late but not (please God!) the last achievement of her overwhelming spiritual potency. Across five centuries that heroic soul has flung itself and fired anew a writer whose powers had begun to flag, a man wearied, beyond any expression but his own, of the sins and follies that had exasperated him even in his most vigorous and comedic days. But he has never been a cynic, never lost that generous alacrity which recognizes and salutes true greatness.

Concerning his later plays let us say only so much as may seem needful: why exhibit in detail the collapse of one who during some thirty years was the greatest dramatist, the finest wit, the wisest political theorist in Britain, perhaps even the greatest man? He is old, he has written himself out, and unluckily will not lay down his pen. In *The Apple-Cart* disintegration strikes the eye more plainly than in *Back to Methuselah*: a long, cumbersome and irrelevant introduction; the American affair bungled; the dialogue no longer sparkling, only glib. Lysistrata's speech about Breakages, Ltd. alone delights us with a gleam of the former Shaw. *The Six of Calais* presents only an attractive trifle, and *Too True to be Good* contains nothing notable save the episode where Lawrence of Arabia appears, scarcely disguised. *The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles*, for all its vapidity, offers nevertheless a morbid interest to the ghoulish type of student. Senility means for most people a loosening of mental grip: for Shaw it means that the flesh of his art has gone, the sinews have dropped away, nothing is left but the bones. Those lovely beings Maya, Vashti, Janga and Kanchin, later ticketed by their curator as Love, Pride, Heroism and Empire, are our old and valued friends Ann Whitefield, Professor Higgins, Sergius Saranoff and Tom Broadbent respectively, at last stripped of human quality and transformed to ineffectual wraiths.

Nevertheless, this period has seen a thing unprecedented in Shaw's career. The Austrian *littérateur* Siegfried Trebitsch had done him vast service by translating his plays into German and securing for them a vogue in Central Europe before they

were taken seriously by England. In 1920 Trebitsch produced a play of his own, *Frau Gitta's Sühne*, which Shaw "translated" (that is his own word) as *Jitta's Atonement*. To much of the play he has given a new tone, even new action, adducing for this plastic surgery a queer set of reasons, which include Baudelaire, Sobieski and *Il Trovatore*. But his real excuse lies in Trebitsch's intolerable flatness, beside which even Hebbel seems rollicking. You can hear him breathing hard as he fits his wooden machinery together with earnest thumbs, everywhere by a miracle of vigilance avoiding the dimmest sparkle, strangling every smile at birth. Having thought out a psychological situation, with sections and subsections, he thereupon set up dummies (which he took for characters because he called them Alfred Lenkheim, Edith, etc.) and by a dismal ventriloquism made these dummies squeak out the subsections, which are supposed to become dramatic dialogue by the cunning insertion of "mein Kind", "Gott sei Dank!" and similar enrichments.

Shaw turned this mound of verbiage into something like a good play. First, he french-polished the dialogue, of which diverting process one example may suffice. When Edith Haldenstadt breaks off her engagement, in Trebitsch she concludes a solid address with the words: "Herr Doktor, I cannot become your wife." He answers: "Edith, you cannot mean that. Those words arise from the desperate mood in which you find yourself. I do not accept this decision. Not yet. Please allow me to wait." The passage appears thus in Shaw. *Edith*: "Doctor Fessler: I am sorry: but I cannot be your wife." *Fessler*: "I don't mind that so much for the present if only you won't call me Doctor Fessler. It's ridiculous. You don't expect me to call you Miss Haldenstadt, do you?" *Edith*: "Yes, I do." *Fessler*: "Then I won't. You see, I don't know how long this mood of yours will last." Moreover, the scene receives actual additions, odd bits about Goethe, cucumbers and partridges which, though feeble for Shaw, flash like diamonds in the murk of poor Trebitsch's frowzy dialogue. Secondly, the people too begin to reveal human quality and cease to be recognizable as the puppets of Trebitsch. The German play ends with Jitta beginning her atonement as the anguished repentant wife of a stuffed moralist. In Shaw, Lenkheim becomes intellectually as well as morally master of the situation, puncturing Jitta's pose much as Bluntsehli punctures that of Raina in *Arms and the Man*.

During this period, then, we observe that the old names, the old ideas, the old techniques, strong at first, have lost ground and have been succeeded by no new force, whether of ideas or of discoveries in stagecraft. Wilde has produced Mr. Coward and Mr. Lonsdale, and has contributed to produce Mr. Maugham. How poorly they show beside his plot work, his lightness of touch, his astonishing skill in epigram! From this point of view, Mr. Lonsdale's *The Last of Mrs. Cheyney* makes an almost fascinating example of mildew in art. The machinery—the exchange of bedrooms—set up to produce the *scène à faire* is miserably uncouth. And the piteously bogus epigrams! "It will put us in the happy position of only doing the things, and those, we want to." Pinero is in part responsible for Mr. Harwood and for Mr. Maugham; Barrie for Mr. A. A. Milne. In short, the tale is almost entirely a tale of degeneration. The one great central fact about English drama has been a decline of Ibsen's influence. The London performance of *A Doll's House* in 1889 started a revolution: Shaw began to write for the stage; the already established playwrights, often against their judgment, sometimes even without their knowledge, were forced by the impact of Ibsen to jettison much of the pretentious ideas and silly conventions which had defaced English drama since Sheridan, and admit some measure of truth and vigour to the theatre. That gigantic impulse has now exhausted itself, after doing all that could thus be done to change the drama of a nation whose temperament is utterly un-Ibsenish. English drama, improved out of all knowledge and for at least one generation showing qualities plainly alien, is resuming an English voice with no Scandinavian undertones. We can now see that for England the total result of Ibsen has been only one enduring benefit, but a benefit enormously valuable: theatricality has vanished. But, alas, the ideas, the brains, have begun to disappear also, and first-rate stagecraft, excellence in dialogue, are vanishing more rapidly still. Galsworthy's plays (I confess) have always filled me not only with admiration for sound ethics and clear sight, but with a sense of stodginess also—a blend suggesting cocoa. On these lines, I must compare Wilde with sweet champagne, the earlier Shaw with a fine Scotch whisky-and-soda, most of the new men with that depressing potion, soda without the whisky.

As no new thoughts or methods in art can be discerned, so perhaps no fresh ideas about life stir the contemporary theatre. Perhaps: because many plays voice disillusionment—a negative

spiritual result, if we may call that a fresh idea. The war of 1914 produced no rejuvenescence, only a rejection of old beliefs and prejudices, only the conviction that theories, doctrines, principles are humbug. This disgust has taken three forms.

First is the disillusionment about politics seen in all our recent political or semi-political plays . . . except the bad historical, the writers of which imagine that economic causes did not exist before Ricardo and that all political villainy except the spectacular was invented by Walpole. I do not mean the conviction which has been forced upon us all, that international relations can be poisoned by the vilest passions: a conviction powerfully vocal in Mr. Munro's *Progress* and *The Mountain*. No: I allude to the contempt which it has become the fashion to throw upon public life in itself: the attitude so often taken by cynics in conversation, in free-lance journalism and latterly in novels has become almost as frequent on the stage. That we should find it in Mr. Shaw's *Apple-Cart* and *On the Rocks* need surprise no one, especially after *John Bull's Other Island*. But we see it again in Mr. Harwood's *Grain of Mustard Seed*. Even Mr. Milne, the whimsical and debonair, expounds the same idea in his delightful play *Success*. The title is satiric: Mannoek throws away love for a post as Cabinet Minister. Contrast that with Mr. Granville-Barker's *Waste*, twenty-two years before our period: then the waste was that a man who lost by a love-entanglement his chance of a political career.

The second form of disillusionment, possibly even more momentous, is that leading dramatists are beginning to satirize what used to be called "the upper classes". Leading dramatists—that is important. Plenty of people in England have long seen through the close cliques and clans that cling to the privileges of aristocracy while ignoring its responsibilities. The tide of criticism has in the last twenty-five years risen ever higher; the sudden storm of jeers at the old school-tie was a portentous comet in the heavens. That puissant organ of aristocracy and privilege, *The Morning Post*, went out of circulation in 1937. Most significant of all, leading dramatists (I say) are now beginning to see these idols as human beings. When a West End theatre—not some arty suburban place with horrible "drapes", but a fashionable commercial theatre—puts on a play showing the rottenness of men and women who inhabit a mellow old "place in the country" with french windows, sunken rose-gardens and the second footman bringing in tea to people who still talk about Canada and Australia as "the Colonies"—when

such dread omens meet the gaze, expectation of genuine change begins to stir. They are the queer English equivalents of the tumbrils of 1793.

In 1920 Barrie produced *The Admirable Crichton*. An English family, overwhelmingly upper-class, jewelled at every hole, is shipwrecked on a desert island together with its butler, who during the years of life there becomes their lord, protecting and aiding them, reforming them out of recognition amid their whole-hearted, even servile, devotion. Alas! As Barrie himself said, some of his plays peter out, others pan out. This peters out. Though on their return to London it remains clear that Crichton outshines them all, the family go back to their old ways and their old conventions. Despite excellent first and second acts, the piece as a whole is a damp squib.

Long before this, another dramatist had approached the hitherto sacrosanct territory from another side. As early as 1906, Galsworthy's *Silver Box* had made a far more effective attack, but not directly on the county people, only upon what used to be called "the upper-middle classes", commercial or professional families of position and means, the head of which might (with luck) be a Conservative Member of Parliament, but would almost certainly not shoot, and beyond question would not ride to hounds: perhaps the more elegant sons and nephews might be allowed to beagle. In the summer they would all resort to Scarborough or Interlaken, not Biarritz. Thus, what Galsworthy gained over Barrie in force and drive he lost by belabouring not the decadent patricians but their solicitors and bankers. Now, here is the point! In our period (1920) he wrote *The Skin Game*, which reveals the unsoundness of a county family, all complete with gamekeepers and linen-fold panelling. Hillerist's hitherto secure, comfortable and dignified position as landowner and magnate is threatened by the encroachments of a gross parvenu. His struggles are vain, his prestige is near ruin, when suddenly his wife rescues him. Discovering a squalid secret about the parvenu's daughter-in-law, she exploits this without shame or pity and succeeds in routing the enemy, who at last shows himself, for all his coarseness, at least a more decent person than the desperate exponents of gentility. Mr. Milne, too, in *The Dover Road*, has no illusions about the spinelessness of his victims, though he puts them into padded stocks and his thumbscrews are made of satin. In *The Last of Mrs. Cheyne* Mr. Lonsdale shows up the English leisure class just as clearly, though with hardly more conviction or sincerity than

Wilde himself. Mr. Maugham has written two plays far more drastic, in fact remorselessly damning; but *Our Betters* (1917) falls outside this period. In *The Circle* (1921) a young wife thinks of leaving her husband for a lover; and the action shows her the result of such conduct in the life of her husband's mother. But the lesson avails nothing—she goes on her way nevertheless.

Into the third kind of disillusionment—that which results in derision of marriage and condonation of marital irregularity—we need not enter fully, because it is not in the least peculiar to our period. But amid all the irresponsible raffish writing of this type a constructive idea has been rising, the one new idea (such as it is) that the recent English stage has produced. Its frankest expression is Lawrence's novel *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. In the theatre, it animates Mr. Noel Coward's *Design for Living*, which in virtue of its thesis may conceivably be regarded some day as the most important drama of all this period—important in the history of British morals, not as art, for in construction, characterization and dialogue it is no more than passable. Gilda has two friends, Leo and Otto, lives with one and deserts him for the other, then leaves the other for the first. In the background hovers a husband who intermittently demands explanations and tumbles over travelling-bags: any more essential function which he may be intended to perform escapes my scrutiny. So far, we are on the level of a Palais Royal farce; but observe! After divers bouts of jealousy between Gilda and Otto, Gilda and Leo, the three realize that what they need is a triple union—not mere promiscuity, but a permanent state of serene polygamy: three are company, two are none. They thus attain a new equilibrium, in place of that febrile precariousness which curses so many liaisons, as depicted by the French school of Capus and Donnay. It is a *design for living*, not a gilt-edged menu of carnality. Whatever the value we assign to these doctrines, we must concede that Mr. Coward has squarely faced real facts. Nor is his idea so old as it looks. True, Rabelais long before him had written *Fay ce que voudras* over the Abbaie de Thélème, and long before Rabelais Aristophanes had anticipated our contemporaries who exclaim "Refuse no form of experience" by assigning to his Unjust Argument the line "Indulge your nature, prance and laugh, think nothing is disgraceful." The difference lies here, that Mr. Coward says in effect: "Indulge your nature under no guide save your own intelligence: all other paths lead to shams and so to waste and misery."

If we turn now to consider works directly issuing from the war—that is, definitely treating of its results or openly describing it—we shall find an astonishingly small number. (I allude, as always, only to plays that can in any sense be called art.) So far as my knowledge goes, there are but six. *Cavalcade* and *Journey's End*, already discussed, are direct pieturization. Mr. O'Casey's *Silver Tassie* falls theoretically into the same, or nearly the same, class as these, but far outdoes them in poignancy and beauty: for instance, the lyrics recited by soldiers in the front line are an audacious and entirely successful device whereby experiences sordid or terrible are viewed *sub specie aeternitatis*. Fully elaborated discussion of the war's results is almost incredibly rare. Mr. Priestley's *Time and the Conways* depicts, indeed, the changes wrought by twenty years, including the terrible four, upon the members of one family; but its great merit lies elsewhere—in the simple device of interchanging the second and third acts, so that, while we hear and watch these delightful people, we know, with the certainty of gods, exactly what is to befall their characters, hopes and plans. In Mr. Maugham's *The Unknown*, John Wharton's loss of faith and Mrs. Littlewood's cosy cynicism are both due to the shock of realizing that God can permit so many fine youths to be destroyed in battle. Full comment, however, occurs only in Mr. Maugham's *For Services Rendered*, which plainly asks "What is to become of the young in this post-war world?" Unfortunately, as we have already set forth, he had not freed himself from a bad tradition, and the play strikes us as a somewhat repellent blend of urgent present-day problems and shabby theatrical ideas inherited from Tom Robertson. He shows us an elderly couple with four children. Sidney has lost his sight in the war, becoming the family cynic; Eva is the frustrated drudge. So far, well enough, or bad enough. But the other two? Ethel has married beneath her. Her husband, not to mince matters, is nothing more or less than a farmer. That is pure eighteen-eighty, but Maugham (some whisper of the *Zeitgeist* entering his ear) jerks things straight by making him also a drunkard. Lois, the youngest, remains—thank Heaven: for we nearly forgot adultery, and without that we should have no play at all. Accordingly she is wooed by that Victorian bogey, a married man, to whose obsolete advances (he talks feverishly about jewels and the Riviera) she succumbs, alleging that she does so in order to escape the dull fate of Eva. In real life, of course, she would solve the Eva-problem by getting a job of work; but in the Pinerarium

no woman can live except in one of three ways: marriage, gaudy vice, or the legacy of her father, the dear General.

It is high time that we cheered the gloomy scene, not only by reminding ourselves of *St. Joan* and one or two other fine plays already noted, but also by adding what we can to that meagre stock. Miss Clemence Dane's *A Bill of Divorcement* offers the best contemporary British specimen of drama that builds not only striking episodes, but a superb solution too, upon character subtly conceived and nobly projected. One problem, when solved, settles the others: Sidney's trouble—that she cannot marry because she fears hereditary madness—answers the two questions, what to do about the tendance of her father, what to do about her mother's remarriage. The same year (1921) saw Miss Dane's *Will Shakespeare*, the most beautiful and moving play, if not the most splendid in characterization and incident, that the English stage has known in the last three hundred years. Mary Fitton's speech beginning "Oh, I faced the peacock of the world", and Elizabeth's "Why, not a keel grates on the Cornish pebbles", would by themselves add lustre to any epoch of our literature. The portrayal of Shakespeare's career, of his agonized love and friendships, of his service to the Queen and her glorious conception of England's grandeur, is wrought throughout with a blend of skill, wisdom and sympathy, a flawless and unfaltering mastery, that leave one breathless with admiration. Yet this marvellous play wins little or no recognition from our professional critics because (Heaven help them!) they "know" that blank verse is obsolete.

Let us remember, too, with lively gratitude a number of plays that offer us a delightful evening, although (having for the most part no ideas and no depth) they possess small permanent value except for amateur dramatic societies, under which modest heading we may place Mr. Munro's *At Mrs. Beam's*; three plays by Mr. Sutton Vane, the best known of which was *Outward Bound*; Mr. Armstrong's *Ten Minute Alibi*; sundry delicious pieces by Mr. Milne, as *To Have the Honour*, *Mr. Pim Passes By*, and *The Romantic Age*; Mr. Van Druten's work, even *Young Woodley*, perhaps, though it has real poignancy. Mr. Richard Hughes, author of the novel *High Wind in Jamaica*, has given us, in *A Comedy of Good and Evil*, a perfectly observed study of life in a Welsh village, where a she-devil is entertained by the minister and his wife. All is charmingly done—the neighbours who, as usual in rural Wales, half live in one another's houses; the husband; the wife; above all, the quaintly touching

blend of human nature, conventional ethics and baffling theology. Finally, to this class of charming but (when all is said) somewhat flimsy plays should be added most of the eighteen works which Mr. J. B. Priestley's fecund and genial soul has poured forth in the brief span of nine years (1931-9). The best, *Time and the Conways*, has been assessed earlier. Few others have special merit; but *Mystery at Greenfingers* is an excellent detective comedy; *Laburnum Grove* pleasantly depicts a suburbanite who fends off his bothersome family by asserting that he is a "crook" and then proves to be one after all; *The Roundabout* is witty country-house stuff; and *I Have Been Here Before*, which makes admirably dramatic use of Ouspensky's time-theory, contains a too brief passage of noble exhortation: "Peace is not somewhere just waiting for you . . . You have to create it . . . Life is not easy. It provides no short cuts, no effortless escapes. Peace and ecstasy are not laid on like hot and cold water."

Nevertheless, our summing-up on the whole must be melancholy: during these years English drama has shown grave weakness and—still more deplorable—no hint of development. On a broad view, this should excite no wonder. The English are not really interested in dramatic art. Let me become absurdly pedantic for a moment in the interests of brevity and clearness. Shakespeare has done much harm to the study of English literature by throwing our judgment out of focus. His merits are stupendous, and his works almost entirely dramatic: therefore, if you give marks to all English writers and add up the marks for each category of literature, you find that drama has the biggest total, a fact which is artlessly interpreted to mean that drama is the leading type. But the total is so high because Shakespeare by himself has gained the immense award of 10,000 marks, while Milton receives only 1,500, Burke 900, Dickens 725, Trollope 80, Byron 140, Marlowe 350, Campbell 2—and so forth. If we can forget Shakespeare for a moment, or tell ourselves that after all he is only one, we shall say that not drama but non-dramatic poetry is the brightest glory of English letters. In the one list the great names are Marlowe, Jonson, Congreve, Goldsmith, Sheridan and Shaw. Who would set them against such a list as Chaucer, Spenser, Milton, Wordsworth, Byron, Coleridge, Shelley, Keats, Browning, Arnold, Tennyson? In this sense, as in so many others, Shakespeare is unique: he took in hand, with sublime results, a genre not fully suited to his nation. We English do not love dramatic art: we love shows; and most of us would

rather see *The Belle of New York* than *King Lear*, which, by the bye, had to be popularized by Nahum Tate, the noted hymn-writer, with a happy ending that actually held the English stage until well into the nineteenth century.

Such surveys as this are usually rounded off by a more lordly and eloquent final paragraph entitled: "What of the Future?" But to-day is a bad time for prophets; and, even were the life of the world normal, I should find nothing to suggest except negatives. If we are to judge by those dearly loved abstractions, Influences and Tendencies, we must decide that there is no future at all for English drama. Not impossibly it will disappear as an art, dwindling to mere fourth-rate sketches, or mimes, as occurred in ancient Rome; for the English people lack that instinct for drama which has marked the ancient Greeks and the modern French, since drama by its very nature demands crispness and vivacity in thought, feeling, speech and the other external manifestations of the spirit. It will be observed that I have given much of my scanty praise to an Irishman. But let us take heart! Influences and tendencies are not all. Indeed, they are little more than the schemes erected by us students in order to quicken our appreciation, having as much, and as little, to do with art as the lines of longitude and latitude have to do with geography. What prevents the appearance of a mighty dramatic genius in England to-morrow morning? The finest playwright of them all was born not in Athens or Florence or Paris but in a little English town.