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Notes On Morals

Attacks Upon The Stage

An alleged clergyman, quoted in the current theatrical papers, warns the country that the theatre is no place for a respectable citizen. "The stage," he says, "is as rotten as the devil, from top to bottom. It is conceived in sin, shaped in iniquity and acted in disgrace. I regard the theatre business, here and elsewhere, as a moral cesspool."

The pronouncement of this critic would be of no significance whatever if it were merely an isolated cadenza, but, unluckily enough, it is part of a chorus, and at times that chorus rises to a deafening roar. The stage, indeed, is almost constantly under attack. Day in and day out it is denounced as a nursery of crime, an incubator of immorality. The people who write for it or strut upon it are consigned to perdition: the folk who patronize it are warned to beware of the wrath to come.

In all of this frenzy, of course, there is very little intelligible criticism. The clergyman who alleges, in his pulpit, that all stage women are drabs is merely a peculiarly offensive ignoramus, and so is his brother who charges that the moral effect of all stage plays, without regard to content, is degrading. As a matter of fact, the standard of chastity among actresses in the first-class theatres is probably just about as high as the standard of chastity in any other group of working women. The women who give the stage its evil name are not actresses. Their actual business is of another sort and their appearance on the stage is nothing more than a device of advertisement. Most of them do not even call themselves actresses. Their chosen designation is show girls, and the plain meaning of that term is girls on show.

Three Classes Of Critics

The problem as to the moral effect upon the spectator of the stage play itself is a rather more difficult one. Those serpents of wisdom who discuss it may be divided, roughly, into three classes—first, those who maintain that all plays, without regard to content, are demoralizing; second, those who maintain that some plays are elevating and some are the reverse; and third, those who argue that no play in itself is either the one thing or the other. The majority of serious students of the drama, I fancy, belong to the third and last school. They are pretty well convinced that the stage play, to gain consideration as an art form, must stand, as it were, upon its own bottom. If it is to be thought of merely as a handmaiden to homiletics, then it is not worth thinking of at all.

It is very difficult, however, for some persons to think of anything save in terms of morality. Such folk are busily engaged at all times in reading moral meanings into things and events that are no more moral or immoral, in themselves, than so many cobblestones. They seem

to be constitutionally unable to disentangle an aesthetic or a gastronomic or a political or a pugilistic idea from the dense network of moral wires which impedes their processes of ratiocination. Such ethical prima donnas are known to zoologists as Puritans. A Puritan is a man who sees a right or a wrong in every phenomenon, whether it be the fall of a sparrow, the death of Romeo Montague, the squeal of the fiddles in the second act of "Tristan and Isolde," the triumph of prohibition or the burning of a beefsteak.

The Frenzy of The Puritan

I say a right or a wrong, but in any specific case it is usually safe to say a wrong alone. It is, indeed, the hallmark of a Puritan that he is constantly inventing new immoralities. Those forbidden by the Ten Commandments are ridiculously insufficient for his hortatory needs. He has so developed and improved upon each of the commandments by assiduous rabbinism that the seven deadly sins have been increased to 7,000,000. The use of strong languages, for example, has a high place upon his catalogue of crimes, despite the fact that it is a natural and normal act to almost all healthy human adults of the male sex, and is nowhere prohibited in the Scriptures. Again, he has laid it down, as a moral axiom, that the consumption of alcohol, in no matter how small a quantity, is grossly immoral, despite the fact that under easily conceivable circumstances it may have no more influence upon the consumer's morals than snoring or sneezing. Finally, he has invented the rule that the theatre is a moral cesspool, in the face of the plain fact that the stage play—at least the English stage play—was originally one of the chief instruments of moral teaching and is today, in certain degenerate forms, frequently turned to that same use.

But vain is the task of confuting the Puritan. He speaks a language of his own. When we howl at him he cannot understand us, and when he, on his part, howls at us we stare at him blankly. It is impossible for him to imagine an act which is neither right nor wrong. He is pickled in what the Germans call moralic acid. He is obsessed by the idea of sin. It is inconceivable to him that sentient creatures should ever engage in any enterprise without taking thought of its effect upon their souls.

The Wicked World

And yet, as a matter of fact, all of us do that very thing every hour of the day. We loose *sotto voce* darns at lost collar-buttons without the slightest consciousness of sin; we eat, drink and make merry without once thinking of the immorality of it, and we go to the theatre to be amused, instructed, puzzled, insulted, entertained, soothed, stimulated, aroused, flabbergasted, delighted, dazzled, disgusted, kept awake or put to sleep, as the case may be, without giving a single thought to the possible moral consequences of the experience.

In other words, we make a sharp differentiation between a sermon and a stage play. The former has an obviously moral aim, just as a Fourth of July speech, a Sunday school novel or a hanging has an obviously moral aim. The latter, on the contrary, has nothing whatever to do with morals, save incidentally, and, as it were, by accident. It is no more moral and no less, in itself, than a clarinet solo, a photograph of Abdul Hamid or the struggle for existence.

"Hamlet" Has No Moral

It would not be difficult to maintain, indeed, that a stage play into which a moral thesis has been introduced loses to that extent its validity as a work of art. The greatest of all dramas is "Hamlet"—and yet it would take a whole seminary of moralists, working day and night for six months, in eight-hour shifts, to find a moral in it. "Hamlet," in truth, is no more moral and no more immoral than the table of logarithms. It teaches no lesson. The man who sees it played by good actors—a purely theoretical situation, by the way, for Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern, at least, are always played atrociously—is held in its firm grip for three hours, but not once does it set him to meditating upon his sins. When he leaves the theatre he is no better and no worse than when he entered. Intellectually and artistically "Hamlet" is colossal. Morally, it is a blank.

And so it is with most other great stage plays. Shakespeare, living in the shadow of the old moralities, was sometimes tempted to preach—as in "Othello," for example, and "The Merchant of Venice." But more often his fine artistic sense, his feeling for the eternal fitness of things, his general superiority to his age, saved him from that blunder. "Romeo and Juliet," like "Hamlet," is a moral vacuum. The comedies show nothing but an acute joy in life—that spirit which rejoices in the mere privilege of living and puts aside for another and less happy day the search for the meaning of existence.

The Stage and The Pulpit

The theatre, in a word, has nothing to do with preaching—and Shakespeare, the incomparable dramatic artist, was well aware of it. It may set forth the facts and it may even indicate the problem, but it may not without losing something indefinite but very real read the lessons. When it falls into the ways of the pulpit it becomes tedious and bombastic and maudlin just as the pulpit, when it falls into the ways of the theatre, becomes a hideous joke and an intolerable bore.

(Source: Iowa State University, Parks Media Center, Microfilm Collection)