

THE LITERATURE LECTURES.

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in Rome until the time of Pompey, the history of Roman literature opens with the rise of comedy about 250 B.C. The Italian of the early days was very light-hearted and lived a life full of merriment; the later development of life and literature was toward the sober and utilitarian, until we have come to regard the Roman as essentially serious. The beginnings of Latin comedy were of the merest farce, made up of improvisations and satirical mimicry; the play—if so it might be called—was quite formless, and was often used, as by Nævius, for political purposes. Foreigners or slaves were the only actors, and music filled up much of the performance.

But presently the need of better form was felt; for, though the laws of the drama have usually been based on tragedy, comedy also has its laws. The whole work of art must focus, and have unity. Unity was unknown to the Italian farce, and must be sought from the Greeks, the world's masters in form. The Greek plots, taken in by way of Southern Italy, were often greatly modified by the Roman playwrights, who even went so far as to combine two of them in a single play for the sake of greater confusion and more fun; but a strong element remained, and the Italian comedy is properly Graeco-Roman. Greece was already decadent, and her sons were fast degenerating into semi-oriental tricksters; Rome was still in vigorous youth, and these plays are a portrayal, for her amusement, of debased types of Greek character. These stage-types were largely fixed when Plautus received them; the central motive of the play is usually furnished by a sum of money, of which an old man is to be defrauded, in the interest of a younger one; this calls forth all the trickery of which the play is made up.

The realm of comedy is wit and humor; and here Plautus—a thoroughly practical playwright, who had very likely himself been an actor—was a master: his plays are always amusing. Much of the fun is of the nature of practical jokes; but, reprehend these as we may, a love for them seems to be inherent in human nature. It is the cleverness of the trick rather than the pain it gives, that causes us pleasure; and the old man's loss is seldom final.

Terence is a greater character-artist than Plautus; but amusement, not fine delineation of character, was the object sought. Plautus, the pure humorist, unlike the satirist or reformer, occupies an impartial standpoint, seeing all things equally in a comic light. The greatness of his art is shown in this, that, though it is far easier to grasp the serious side of others' lives than the light, and though humor is notoriously elusive, Plautus can make us laugh heartily at the Romans of those remote days. In his time, the Italian language was still homogeneous; it was not yet subdivided into the two grades—literary, and colloquial or vulgar—which were so sharply distinguished at a later date. His language is that which all the people used all the time; it is perfectly suited to dialogue, because it was formed in dialogue; it is a purely natural product, crisp, racy, often prolix, full of slang, but infinitely flexible; and in the hands of a master of language like Plautus it was the ideal vehicle of comic expression.

The speaker concluded by saying that all forms of art have their root in the unconscious, simple needs and conditions of life. Tragedy and comedy existed potentially in the love of mimicry, of song, and of the choral dance. The change to conscious art is a gradual and continuous one, but in all such progress there is one point at which impulse becomes art. This point, for Latin comedy, was marked by the rise of Plautus and Terence.

COMEDY IN ITS FRENCH FORM.

Professor Luquiens took up 'Comedy in its French Form—Molière.' He attributed the extravagant praise which the French lavish on Molière to the fact that he was the founder and master of a peculiarly national art; he is a national spokesman. His service was, to have raised comedy to respectability, in spite of the tremendous authority of the classic French tragedy, which, noble as it was, could never be natural or spontaneous.

The speaker proceeded to give an entertaining account of Molière's life, laying stress on his wonderful energy and fertility and on the wide range of his experience, which furnished the material for his plays. His comedies are all restricted to the lighter phases of life; there is no place for feeling, for this had been preëmpted by tragedy as its exclusive right. Before his time French comedy was comic, but not literary; it was a sort of hodge-podge of the Latin comedy, with its simple plot and typical characters, of the Spanish play of intrigue, and of the Italian pantomime. Molière rationalized comedy, which now became logical, organic, developing and ripening from a germ within. It became didactic, with a clear moral—and so national, for every Frenchman has his thesis.

Descartes had said, *Cogito, ergo sum*; Molière, following his thought, created the comedy of character—of thinking individuals. Movement, again, is a sign of life—and the lecturer compared Molière's lively scenes with the tragic stage and its 'squad of four men and a corporal, of whom only two speak.' Except for the Olympus of Versailles, and the criminal classes, the whole of seventeenth century French life appears in the plays of Molière; there was no class of society with which he was not familiar; none which he does not present to us in living colors.

Poetry was closed to him; the tragedians claimed that as their own, but he had another resource; if he might not attract men to the good, by showing the true beauty of goodness, he could at least try to laugh men out of their follies. His work is inconsistent, and not perhaps really moral or ethical; social philosophy, not ethics, underlies his plays. His thesis was: common sense, not coercion, should rule life. His plays are a subtle but persistent appeal against authority, convention, pedantry, and hypocrisy, in all stages of society; his blow seems light, but his blow and our minds go beyond the petty object at which he aims, to the great institution which peeps from behind it.

In summing up Molière's character, the speaker said that, though he has wonderful powers of observation, is a great artist in the portrayal of character, has seen and pictured French life with marvelous clearness and truth, and is most admirable for his long fight against shams, he must ever be acknowledged inferior to a Shakespeare, a Goethe, or a Corneille; the true poet, the singer of the ideal, belongs to a sphere far above even the keenest of observers.

PHILOSOPHICAL BASIS OF LITERATURE.

Professor Ladd, in opening his lecture on 'The Philosophical Basis of Literature,' said that all great poets are great philosophers; philosophy supplies the poet with ideas, and helps literature to understand itself. The philosophical basis of literature is 'man's power to express ideas of value, in language whose form commends itself to the cultivated esthetic mind as suited to such expression.' The three aspects of this definition were considered separately.

First, the power of language. This is man's supreme and distinctive means of expression. Language has no independent being, but comes into existence only as it flows from and into the souls of living men.

Second, the power of appreciating form, which again is a special endowment of man. We seek to enhance the value of a product by using great care in the selection of its form; and we are more pleased with a good thing if its form is good. Literature differs vitally from mere language in the attention bestowed upon its form. Balance, breadth, rhythm are essential to literary art. The laws of literary form are as eternal, unchangeable, and yet infinitely variable, as the laws of human life. Thought or feeling which have been experienced must be expressed in language fitted to them; the final law of literary form is one of adaptation.

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After Dinner Speaking.

This is rather the season for it in College, and the best banquets, at which it is heard, are more and more held at the New Haven House. There is a roominess and a good atmosphere about the hotel that commend it to undergraduates and to graduates.

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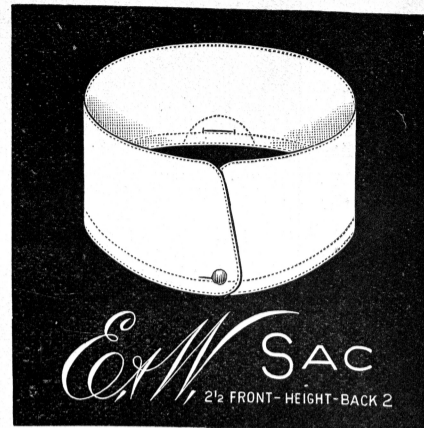
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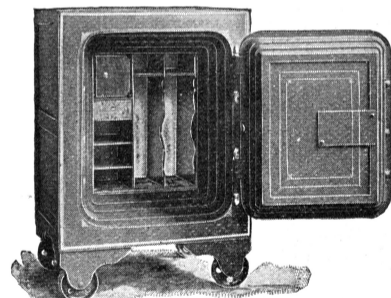
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