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JANE AUSTEN AND A FORGOTTEN DRAMATIST

READERS of *Mansfield Park* will not need to be reminded of the stir caused in the Bertram household by the preparations for the private theatricals. They will recollect how, after much argument, it was decided to act *Lovers' Vows*. They will remember how many heart-burnings were caused when the difficult task of assigning the parts was accomplished ; how Julia was consumed with jealousy because Maria was preferred for the *rôle* of Agatha ; how poor, retiring Fanny Price was worried to take the part of Cottager's Wife, and how she endured the agony of knowing that Edmund as Anhalt and Miss Crawford as Amelia were to act a love-scene together. It will be recalled, too, that *Lovers' Vows* was regarded by all the more sober-minded people as quite unfit for private performance. Fanny Price, who seized the first opportunity of reading the play, was astonished that it had been selected, and Edmund so strongly disapproved of it that he would have nothing to do with the scheme until there was a prospect that a comparatively strange young man would be imported to play Anhalt, and then he reluctantly took the part himself lest worse disaster should befall. But, while these details are familiar to lovers of Jane Austen, the play which caused all the pother has been so completely forgotten that only professed students of a very arid period of our drama know as much as the name of the author, and the text itself was never likely to have been seen by modern readers until Mr. R. W. Chapman printed it as an appendix to his recent edition of *Mansfield Park.*

August von Kotzebue, the prolific German dramatist who wrote *Das Kind der Liebe,* which Mrs. Inchbald adapted for the English stage as *Lovers' Vows,* is in the limbo of authors who were for their age but not for all time. His fame in his own day is indicated by his appointment in 1798 as dramatist to the court at Vienna : his many plays of varied types were known throughout Europe. In England he was the most popular of the German writers who were being translated at the end of the eighteenth century : not only did many of his plays obtain a vogue as

'closet-dramas,' but three became stage-successes. *Lovers' Vows* succeeded in both capacities. When it was produced at Covent Garden in 1798 it was given over forty performances (a long 'run' in those days), and the printed play, which was only one of four translations published between 1798 and 1800, went into eleven editions in a year. But, though it appealed to the average audience, *Lovers' Vows* aroused a good deal of opposition of the kind exhibited in *Mansfield Park.* The reader of to-day who looks at this drama will ask why it seemed so objectionable to the society in which Jane Austen mixed. The attempt to answer the question throws an interesting light on the thought and feeling of the early nineteenth century, and also gives an explanation of the failure of Georgian drama to emerge from the state of decay into which it had fallen. Moreover, an examination of the popular English adaptations of Kotzebue shows that they hardly deserve the complete oblivion that has overtaken them, for they brought a vital spark to our stage that might have been kindled into a flame, had not the moral and political atmosphere of the time effectually smothered it.

The significance of *Lovers' Vows* and of the German influence generally, however, cannot be appreciated without a brief survey of the state of the theatre in Jane Austen's time. The period which saw the renaissance of poetry inaugurated by the *Lyrical Ballads* was the one in which English drama showed fewest signs of life. The majority of the new productions were merely things of the stage, and almost the only pieces of true dramatic quality witnessed by playgoers were the masterpieces of the past. Remembering how any given age tends to develop its characteristic literary form, we should not find this strange were it not that, so far from avoiding the drama, all the poets of genius turned their hands to plays, but, with the exception of *The Cenci,* produced nothing of dramatic value. This failure was due to deeper causes than the restriction of dramatic output entailed by the patent system, and the mechanical difficulties brought about by the enormous increase in size of the two 'legitimate' theatres. Critics constantly lamented the decay of the national drama, but they did not see that the body of critical opinion which they were creating was fatal to any new developments. They denounced the rage for music and spectacle, they ridiculed the horrors of the 'Gothic drama of terror,' they generally disliked the plays translated from the German; but they were singularly backward in suggesting lines along which a dramatic revival might proceed. It was frequently said that the genius of the age was fundamentally undramatic, and critics seemed to accept the position with resignation. Even such authorities on the stage as Lamb, Coleridge, Hazlitt, and Leigh Hunt had little or nothing to

say that would help the young dramatist to write plays of vita quality. All they did was to point to the Elizabethan masters and recommend study and imitation of their methods. Dramatic criticism was, in fact, almost entirely retrospective: it was inspired by the renewed academic interest in the Elizabethan age which had led to a re-examination of the critical canons in the light of the dramatic practice of the old masters.

Now during the eighteenth century the persistence of the Elizabethan tradition on the stage, with its parallel influence on critical opinion, had been all to the good, since it provided the necessary resistance to the tyranny of the French school. But it cannot be said that the outburst of enthusiasm for the Elizabethans which occurred at the end of the century was productive of beneficial results on new work. It was good to discover and emphasise the fact that Shakespeare, besides being a wild and irregular genius, was a wonderful dramatic artist, but it was not very helpful to the aspirant to dramatic honours to tell him to imitate Shakespeare. Enthusiasm for our older playwrights had hardened into a conservatism which blighted original effort. A fact that is apparent to a later generation was not then realised, namely, that the old dramatic types had been exhausted, and that if the theatre was to be reinvigorated, some fresh line of progress must be found.

The first steps along a new path had been taken by the writers of prose domestic plays. In the domestic tragedies of Lillo and Moore and in many of the sentimental comedies there was drama made out of the stuff of ordinary everyday life. There were surely possibilities here. But the writers of domestic plays failed to see what might be done with the type. These pieces were devitalised through the conventionalising of the characters, the gross sentimentalism, and the fondness for stage trick. What was lacking, in a word, was sincerity in dealing with the social problems touched upon.

But a frank facing of the facts of contemporary life was scarcely possible at this time because of the rigid system of moral conventions which were generally observed, or at least publicly subscribed to, by the upper and middle classes, who still formed the great bulk of the audiences at the regular theatres. The moral reaction which drove Beaumont and Fletcher and most of the Restoration dramatists off the stage in the middle of the eighteenth century ended by establishing conventions which precluded dramatic treatment of any themes or situations except those that were already threadbare. The growth of Methodism and of Low Church Evangelicism gave momentum to the movement of reform already started, so that before the end of the century many serious people came to regard the theatre as a

forbidden pleasure. Hannah More, who in her youth had written a successful (acted) tragedy, in later life adopted the view that only the reading of plays was permissible to a sincere Christian; and Wilberforce and Zachary Macaulay are among the well-known public men who completely eschewed the theatre. The more numerous class to which Jane Austen belonged were moderate in their views. Visits to the play formed part of the regular round of amusements when they came periodically to town: the novelist herself was delighted with the acting of Kean, who had just begun his conquest of London, and on a previous occasion she was so much disappointed at missing Mrs. Siddons (she had performed one evening although the boxkeeper had announced that she would not) that she felt she 'could swear at her with little effort.' But the Austens and the majority of the middle-class families of the time, while enjoying good acting in the favourite stock-plays, would have looked with severe disapproval on anything like a frank stage treatment of social problems. What we now call 'Victorian prudery'—the attitude that forbade the public recognition of matters which were perfectly familiar in private life—was already well established. People judged characters in a book or a play, not by considering whether they exhibited natural human feelings, but by applying certain arbitrary ethical rules; they did not ask whether a given character would really behave in a particular way in actual life, but whether a person belonging to a society having certain religious, social, and political beliefs ought to behave, or, at least, ought to be shown on the stage as behaving, in such a way. This is the view implicit in the dramatic criticism contained in *Mansfield Park*.

To complete the explanation of the antipathy of late Georgian society towards anything like a drama of ideas it must be said that political prejudices acted as powerful supports of the conventional moral system. The advanced thought of the time originated with the revolutionaries in France, and in this country the war-time nervousness was so great that any literature which challenged accepted beliefs or established authority was stigmatised as 'Jacobinism,' and it received as short shrift as in our own time was given to any production which could be labelled 'German "*kultur*"' (with ironical adjective and inverted commas).

The interest of *Lovers' Vows* and one or two other adaptations from the German lies in the fact that they did to some extent point the way of escape from stereotyped characterisation to something fresh. In this respect they have scarcely received the recognition that is their due. The craze for translations and adaptations of German plays which culminated in the publica-

tion of Benjamin Thompson's *The German Theatre* in 1800 has generally been regarded by historians of the drama as a phenomenon of no great significance, although Professor Allardyce Nicoll has recently treated the matter with more judgment. Kotzebue, whose plays were particularly favoured, has been dismissed as a clever stage-craftsman who mingled mawkish sentimentality of the worst kind with a superficial treatment of revolutionary ideas about morality and religion. This is, of course, largely true. But the most popular of the plays taken from Kotzebue have, in spite of their crudity, certain characteristic qualities which were new to the English theatre, and which, had they been developed by writers of power, might have given us interesting and original plays. Notwithstanding his false sentiment, Kotzebue did in some measure face the facts of life. The charge of 'Jacobinism' brought against him has, of course, long lost any significance: the revolutionary ideas of yesterday are the commonplaces of to-day. The more serious charge that his ideas were superficial must no doubt stand; but the fact that he had any ideas at all was of importance at a time when they were a commodity in which English dramatists had few dealings.

To come now to *Lovers' Vows*. The plot is briefly as follows: After five years' absence, Frederick, a soldier, returns to find his mother, Agatha Friburg, in a destitute state outside an inn. He has come to obtain for military purposes a certificate of his birth. His mother is forced to confess that there is no certificate: he is the natural son of Baron Wildenhaim. Frederick has no money, and to obtain the means of relieving his mother's distress he goes out to beg. He meets the Baron, without, of course, knowing him, and attempts to obtain money from him by force. He is overcome and taken prisoner to the castle, where he learns who his captor is. Partly through the appeal of Frederick, and partly through the remonstrations of Anhalt, the young clergyman who acts as tutor to the Baron's daughter Amelia, the Baron is persuaded to own his son, and to send for Agatha to make her his wife. The subsidiary plot concerns Amelia, who, at first destined for the foolish fop, Count Cassel, is happily united to her tutor.

Mrs. Inchbald's play has a theatrical plot, and most of the characters—especially the Baron and Agatha—are conventionalised; yet there is some approach to sincerity of treatment, and the requirements of poetic justice are not allowed altogether to falsify characterisation, nor is the candid expression of opinion on social questions entirely excluded. Contemporary criticism fastened on the fact that Agatha, the Baron's abandoned mistress, is shown in an amiable light. The confession that she has to make seemed very shocking to Edmund Bertram. 'Read only the first act aloud to your mother or your aunt,' he said to his sister,

'and see how you can approve it.' And yet the confession is made with every mark of shame and contrition, and for many years Agatha has been leading an exemplary life. Then there is the love-scene between Anhalt and Amelia—the scene which even the self-possessed Miss Crawford could not face without getting used to it in a preliminary rehearsal with Fanny as Anhalt. ('Look at *that* speech, and *that*, and *that*. How am I ever going to look him in the face and say such things?') And all that it amounts to is that a young and innocent girl makes avowal of her love for her tutor instead of waiting for his proposal, as any well-conducted young lady of the time should have done. Mrs. Inchbald found it necessary to modify the dialogue slightly, for 'the forward and unequivocal manner in which Amelia announces her affection to her lover in the original would have been revolting to an English audience'; but the original picture so far remains that her Amelia is much more like a human being than was the usual stage miss of the time. Hazlitt confessed that the character of Amelia was the principal charm of the play.

> The open, undisguised simplicity of this character is, however, so enthusiastically extravagant, as to excite some little surprise and incredulity on the English stage. The portrait is too naked, but still it is the nakedness of innocence. She lets us see into the bottom of her heart, but there is nothing there which she need wish to disguise.

The originality displayed in the treatment of Amelia is seen again in the last act, where a fairly frank attempt is made to deal with the problem of the cast-off mistress, and again in the portrayal of Count Cassel. In the latter particular Mrs. Inchbald added to the material furnished by Kotzebue, and allowed her character to give his liberal views about a young man's gallantries, and he does this so convincingly that for a moment the stage fop comes alive. Besides retaining most of Kotzebue's realism in characterisation, Mrs. Inchbald reproduced his humanitarian sentiment, though she cut out the revolutionary remarks about rank.

Such was the play which was so repugnant to the feelings of Jane Austen's world. It is not a good play; but it evidently had sufficient novelty and power to please a large public of both theatre-goers and readers. For the historian of the drama it acquires more importance than its intrinsic merit warrants, because the opposition that it provoked would have been equally strong against any piece, however well written, that followed the same lines.

The view of *Lovers' Vows* here put forward is reinforced by a consideration of two other versions of Kotzebue's plays which

attained great popularity. The first is *The Stranger* (translated by Benjamin Thompson from *Menschenhass und Reue*), which had been produced at Drury Lane in 1798, and the second is *Pizarro*, Sheridan's adaptation of *Die Spanier in Peru*, staged at the same theatre in the following season. Both were immense successes and long remained stock-plays: years later the young heart of Arthur Pendennis was to be enslaved by Miss Fotheringay as the heroine in *The Stranger*, and it was by her performance in *Pizarro* that that distinguished actress obtained for herself a London engagement.

The plot of *The Stranger* concerns a Mrs. Haller, who as an inexperienced girl of sixteen had been married to a man who soon seemed to grow cold towards her. A friend of her husband lied to her about him; she was deceived and ran away with him. Soon repenting of the step she had taken, she sought shelter with the Countess Wintersen, with whom, at the beginning of the play, she is shown to be leading a virtuous, useful, and benevolent life. Throughout the action the sympathy of the audience is enlisted on behalf of this amiable woman, and in the end she is reconciled to her husband. At one point in the play an attempt is made to extenuate the heroine's fault. The Baron suggests to the Stranger (Mrs. Haller's husband) that perhaps, after all, some of the blame was his:

STRANGER. Mine!

BARON. Yours! Who told you to marry a thoughtless, inexperienced girl? One scarce expects established principles at five and twenty in a man, yet you require them in a girl of sixteen! But of this no more. She has erred; she has repented; and, during three years, her conduct has been so far above reproach, that even the piercing eye of Calumny has not discover'd a speck upon this radiant orb. . . .

Such an argument in this twentieth century would seem to embody plain common-sense, but at the time the play was produced it was regarded as undermining the whole foundations of connubial morality. The dramatist was condemned for making such a woman as Mrs. Haller a sympathetic character instead of subscribing to the convention which would make her an abandoned creature, overcome by shame and remorse, incapable of returning to the path of virtue, and so never to be reconciled to her husband. Kotzebue had handled a new situation with truth to life, but the English moralists would have none of it. It was even felt that Mrs. Siddons in some sort sullied her own virtue by playing Mrs. Haller. Boaden, her biographer, says:

I never could, without strong reluctance, submit to see the character of Mrs. Haller represented by [Mrs. Siddons]. Her countenance, her

noble figure, her chaste and dignified manners, were so utterly at variance with the wretched disclosure she had to make, that no knowledge that it was pure, or rather impure, fiction, could reconcile me to this *forcible feeble*. . . .

In another translation (by A. Schinck, published in 1798) of Kotzebue's *Menschenhass und Reue* some significant changes were made in the plot. According to the 'Address to the Public':

The Translator has also ventured to deviate from the original plot in one delicate particular.—He has not made the wife actually commit that crime which is a stain to the female character, tho' she was on the brink of ruin, by eloping from her husband.—This last liberty he trusts will be excused; partly because he feels that, according to the dictates of nature, reconciliation would in such circumstances be more easily obtained: but chiefly, because he considered it as more consistent with the moral sentiment, and more congenial to the heart of an English audience, than the forgiveness of a wife who had actually been guilty.

No doubt the translator accurately gauged the attitude of the critics, but he misjudged how much an English audience would stand, for his own work was rejected by Drury Lane, and the translation which won such success was unexpurgated in the particular over which he was so careful.

Pizarro also gave rise to adverse criticism on the ground of its revolutionary morality, although this did not deter huge crowds from flocking to Drury Lane to see Kemble as Rolla and Mrs. Siddons as Elvira. Sheridan's adaptation is a romantic play coming near to melodrama in type, and thus aims at different effects from those secured by *The Stranger*; but there is a noteworthy realism in the treatment of the character of Elvira, Pizarro's mistress, who is gradually alienated from him by his cruelty and his base attempt to secure vengeance on his enemy, Alonso, and who eventually brings about his death. The moralists could not admit the propriety of putting lofty sentiment in the mouth of such a creature, and of giving her a passion for humanity leading to acts of heroism. 'It is not unlikely,' writes Boaden, 'that from any *other hand* . . . Mrs. Siddons might have scrupled to accept a character so profligate and desperate; but Mr. Sheridan was not a man to be refused.'

The crudities and exaggerations of the German plays were sufficiently obvious to make them an easy prey to the wits of the time, especially those with a political axe to grind. In two numbers of the *Anti-Jacobin* in June 1798 there appeared the clever burlesque called *The Rovers*, written chiefly by Canning, and parodying pieces by Kotzebue, Schiller, and Goethe. The German dramatists were attacked as revolutionaries aiming at the total subversion of civilised society. Conservative views were given the sharpest point of satire. But there were not

wanting those who saw more in the new drama than a pernicious expression of revolutionary sentiment. Hazlitt, the soundest dramatic critic of that age, bears witness to the effective vigour of the German plays, and contrasts them with the feeble products of the English stage.

> The action [he says of the German dramas] is not grave, but extravagant: the fable is not probable, but improbable: the favourite characters are not only low, but vicious: the sentiments are such as do not become the person into whose mouth they are put, nor that of any other person: the language is a mixture of metaphysical jargon and flaring prose: the moral is immorality. In spite of all this, a German tragedy is a good thing. It is a fine hallucination: it is a noble madness. . . . The world have thought so: they go to see *The Stranger*, they go to see *Lovers' Vows* and *Pizarro*, they have their eyes wide open all the time, and almost cry them out before they come away, and therefore they go again. There is something in the style that hits the temper of men's minds. . . . It embodies . . . the extreme opinions which are floating in our time; . . . we are all partisans of a political system, and devotees to some theory of moral sentiments.

Miss Mitford, too, looking back after many years on the adaptations from the German, had a good word to say for them: 'With much that was false and absurd, and the bald gibberish of the translator, for which the author is not answerable, the situations were not only effective, but true.' Finally, perhaps it is not unfitting to quote the somewhat extravagant encomium inserted by William Taylor, of Norwich, in his *Historic Survey of German Poetry* (1828–30): 'According to my judgment Kotzebue is the greatest dramatic genius that Europe has evolved since Shakespeare.'

In another age plays like *Lovers' Vows* and *The Stranger* might have been the forerunners of a new form of drama embodying current ideas and opinions, and dealing with social questions with clear-eyed truth to life. But in this period the 'psychological climate' was too unfavourable for such a development to take place. The taboos that existed at Mansfield Park formed such an integral part of the beliefs and manners of the time that the free discussion of ideas would never have been tolerated on the stage. The literary giants who might have been equal to the task of creating a drama of ideas did nothing but make more or less futile attempts to resuscitate the moribund traditional form of tragedy. Wordsworth, Coleridge, Scott, and Shelley all came under the spell of the young German drama, but it was not the plays of common life that attracted them. They turned rather to the romantic plays like Goethe's *Götz von Berlichingen* and Schiller's *Die Räuber*—plays which, while giving expression to revolutionary ideas, carried on the Shakespearean tradition.

Our romantic poets were wedded to the idea of poetical tragedy conceived according to the outworn formulas. Original artists in other directions, they could not free themselves from the trammels of tradition when they attempted plays. Thus it was that the stimulus administered by Germany passed without any lasting effect. And the English theatre had to wait for Ibsen.

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