THE STUDY OF DRAMA

A SUMMER MEETING in the University of Cambridge devoted to Masterpieces of Drama and the Modern Theatre; that, surely, is something of a landmark in the history of the drama in England! Only very recently can such a thing have become possible. Masterpieces of Dramatic *Literature* we might have had. But drama as drama, considered in relation to the theatre—and to the *modern* theatre; lectures upon the repertory system, upon experiments in staging, even upon the ballet, and, as an integral part of the programme, performances of plays by members of the University (but not, unhappily, ballets!)—forty, thirty, ten years ago, could such a thing have been? In addition, there are classes for amateur producers of plays. And—is not this a happy symbol of the reconciling of University and Theatre?—the lady who directs them has, besides her own pre-eminent claim upon the occasion, another and

very glamorous one in the eyes of many of us: she is Ellen Terry's daughter.

This reconciliation has not been easily achieved. For two hundred years and more the drama, except as it belonged to book learning, was effectively banished from both Universities. In Oxford, not till late in the nineteenth century could professional companies act in term time, and not until 1884 were undergraduates allowed to act. In Cambridge, from about 1830 onwards, occasional semi-private performances by undergraduates, and after a while the existence of an amateur club, were tolerated by the authorities. The Cambridge undergraduate was possibly more unruly than his Oxford brother. Possibly the authorities held that, though his time might be better employed, it didn't follow (if they forbad him to act) that it *would* be. But till 1894 the Vice-Chancellor had absolute power to forbid all professional performances in Cambridge; and for long—in term time at least—he exercised it (A).

For some years before, however, a more liberal opinion had been developing; and among the leaders of it was a man of character. He not

only had liberal opinions, in this as in other matters, but he had the courage of them. And when, after many difficulties, the Vice-Chancellor was deprived of the more drastic of his powers and it was worth while to build a reasonably well-equipped theatre—the present New Theatre—J. W. Clark, Fellow of Trinity and Registrary of the University, joined the Board of its Directors, and till his death in 1910 did all he could to help it. (He was also, by the way, an authority upon the topography and architecture of the University, and it is his little guide that—if you are a stranger here—the programme recommends you to buy.) It must have been just about 1895, when the New Theatre was really new, that I paid my own first visit to Cambridge. I cannot remember in the least what brought me. But, oddly enough, I can vividly recall walking down the long concrete passage that leads one out of the theatre, and seeing in front of me a burly, bearded, springily stepping man. That, I was told, was J. W. Clark, on whom the whole fortune of the drama in Cambridge depended. And this, I think, was really true. He had been chiefly

responsible for the famous series of Greek plays given in the 1880's (Parry's and Stanford's music remains as testimony to the quality of the productions). He encouraged the A.D.C. He must have steered it, as he helped steer the New Theatre, through many difficulties. He must, in fact, have done more than anyone of his day to restore the credit of the living drama in the University. For he had an uncovenanted and uncalculating love of the theatre. I don't suppose that all its modern manifestations would have appealed to him. But his opposition was, it seems, almost as stimulating as his support. He had in himself, in fact, that greatest of dramatic virtues, a generous vitality. In blessing or damning he would certainly have been the liveliest of figures at this present meeting. And as I feel that, to some extent, I owe him my own good fortune in being here to-night, perhaps—even though I was a stranger to him and am not much better than a stranger to Cambridge—I may be allowed to begin by commemorating his name.

If we go back a little further—to the sixteenth century, which *is* but a little further in the

University's history—we find drama, of a kind, very much alive in Cambridge. Not only in those days were members of the University permitted to act, they were by various College statutes directly enjoined to, and fined if they did not. Trinity, for instance, by the statutes of 1560, had to produce five plays a year.[1] But this was *academic* drama, which had—or at least pretended to—a purely educational aim. No connection was admitted between it and the popular drama of the public theatre, which a few years later began to blossom so marvellously. To that, when it came a-visiting, the University would have nothing to say. In 1575 we find the Vice-Chancellor petitioning the Privy Council for powers to abate the nuisance of "...the making of shows and playing of Interludes and setting forth of other vain games and pastimes...". And the Privy Council sympathetically responds that "...being informed very credibly of some attempts of light and decayed persons, who for filthy lucre are minded and do seek nowadays to devise and

[1] My reference is to Dr Boas' book on University Drama, the authoritative work on the whole subject.

set up in open places shows of unlawful, hurtful, pernicious and unhonest games near to that University of Cambridge..." they consider that "...it cannot be but a great number of the youth and others of the same ['others of the same' must, I fear, mean the Dons] may be thereby enticed from their places of learning, to be beholders, learners and practisers of lewdness and unlawful acts...".

It could not but be—and it was! For at least three of the undergraduates of that time, Christopher Marlowe, Robert Greene and Thomas Nashe, acquired a pronounced taste for the lewd practice of playwriting. And their pursuit of it when they went down had some consequence for the popular theatre, and, incidentally, made things no easier in this direction for the University. Since fifteen years later it is evident that the Privy Council has proved a broken reed (the Council, possibly, was disingenuous in these matters; it must, I think, have kept a Puritan clerk to write sympathetically to Vice-Chancellors and another to tell Alleyn and Burbage to go quietly ahead). By 1590, in any case, we find the University re-

duced to paying the Queen's Majesty's Players 20*s.* to "move on". It sounds terribly like blackmail. And that is not the worst. For in the same year we find travelling companies given 20*s.* and even 30*s.* to play before the Mayor and Corporation. We can only hope that no members of the University—graduate or undergraduate—slipped in disguised. However, as we know, the Puritans won in the end—and upon each front! They suppressed the academic theatre and the popular theatre too. And it has taken just about three hundred years for the drama to become a national art again.

I do not say that in the interval we have not had from time to time very first-rate drama of one sort or another. But it is worth noting that it has hardly ever been comprehensively first rate. Excellence in acting and excellence in playwriting have seldom coincided. It would be worth while also to ask why (B). Nor has the theatre, until once more to-day, ever, I think, shown the natural and unconscious strength, which can let us begin to call it a national art. At the Restoration its tragedy became artificial and its comedy a scandal to the average man

and woman. In the eighteenth century it was out of touch with life. In the nineteenth it was out of touch with literature too. That is the age of unactable closet dramas and unreadable plays. (The statement is, of course, too cursory. But it is not untrue.) But now we really seem to have something like a fresh upspringing of the art of the drama; very various in kind and quality, widespread certainly, and, I think, deep-rooted.

It has been of a most diverse growth. There was the development in the professional theatre, which you may date from the 1890's or a little earlier (C). This has produced the "modern English drama" of the textbooks. After the war comes the amateur dramatic movement; quite unlike the old pre-war "private theatricals"; not a parasite upon the professional theatre; and an essentially democratic movement. There has also been an astonishing rebirth of the religious drama. Finally—and this to me is the most gratifying thing of all—we have what one may call the new Humanism in education turning, as did the old Humanism, to the art of drama. But not this time as master to servant;

rather as if seeking alliance upon terms of mutual respect. Everywhere to-day in schools we have some use of the dramatic method (as it is called) in teaching, and the acting of plays encouraged. In the Universities we no longer have to add the respectable "literature" to make the dangerous "dramatic" tolerable. Drama may show itself for what it is. And here, as we see, is the great University of Cambridge reconciled not only to drama as drama but to its old enemy the popular theatre also.

That is, fundamentally, a far healthier state of things. Drama is drama, even as music is music; no matter the kind or the quality. Beethoven's great Mass is music; but so is the tune vamped on a penny whistle at the street corner. *King Lear* and the *Agamemnon* are drama; but so is the silliest farce or a charade in the nursery. By that, as a principle, one must abide. For it is in their wide range that the power of the two arts lies; in the fact that, either as musician and actor on the one hand or listener and spectator on the other, we may pass from the penny whistle and the charade to the Mass and *King Lear*, if we have the talent

or the taste to do so, nothing hindering us. And since beside this they are *social* arts, they are the two that it best becomes a democracy to cultivate. They have, of course, their divisions and branches, their nobler and meaner aspects. But these in themselves are, so to speak, natural divisions; therefore it is profitable to distinguish them. What is not profitable is to set up arbitrary and snobbish divisions; to have the "classic" musician despising the mere tune-maker—or *vice versa*; or, as was proved three centuries ago, an academic drama snubbing the popular. Nevertheless, from the academic point of view, if relations are to be intimate, and when it comes to admitting drama as drama into the curriculum of a school or a university, the most liberal of Humanists will have some practical questions to ask.

How precisely is the drama to be turned to educational use? Is it to be a thing of general or only of specialised study? And—as important a question, perhaps—how is its misuse to be prevented?

For (let us be frank about it) the drama, or rather the theatre, can be a very enthralling