

INTRODUCTION

La Marâtre (The Stepmother) is characterized as an "intimate" drama in five acts and eight tableaux. It was first presented at the Théâtre-Historique, Paris, May 25, 1848. Its publication, by Michel Lévy in the same year, was in brochure form. The time is just a little later than that of *Pamela Giraud*, and one similar motif is found in the Napoleonic influence still at work for years after Waterloo. Though this influence is apparently far beneath the surface, and does not here manifest itself in open plottings, it is nevertheless vital enough to destroy the happiness of a home—when mixed in the mortar of a woman's jealousy. The action is confined to a single château in Normandy. A considerable psychological element is introduced. The play is a genuine tragedy, built upon tense, striking lines. It is strong and modern enough to be suitable, with some changes, for our present day stage. The day of the playwright's immaturity (noticed in the three preceding plays) is past. With this, as with all of Balzac's work, he improved by slow, laborious plodding, gaining experience from repeated efforts until success was attained.

In his dramas he was not to succeed at the first trial, nor the second, nor the third. But here at the fourth he has nearly grasped the secret of a successful play. While at the fifth—*Mercadet*—we are quite ready to cry "Bravo!" Who knows, if he had lived longer (these plays were written in the last years of their author's life), to what dramatic heights Balzac might have attained!