

From a Woman's Point of View

Women and the Modern Dramatist

(By Alice Brewer)

Mimi: "These flowers that I make,
Alas! they have no perfume."

—La Boheme.

POR Mimi's plaint is the cry from the heart of every woman of us, at some period, early or late. All that has given enjoyment and constant zest having vanished, what then?

Possessions and gratifications have singularly little to do with that which is the real joy of life; the hurt soul painfully realizing that happiness is not to be regarded as at all synonymous with pleasure.

Much spiritual enjoyment and uplift is to be found in Art, Music, Literature or the Drama, all these take us out of the intolerable prison of our narrow selves, and all deal faithfully, though quite differently, with the deeper aspirations, yearnings, doubts and stirrings of the human spirit.

Struggling against frightful odds, the modern dramatist has become the torch-bearer to those who weep in shackles. With the utmost good-humor and indifference he has borne the charge of encouraging an extremity of vice; of being immoral. He has been labelled "feministe," mountebank and other unpleasant names, but with unswerving truth to his self-imposed standard he has remained steadfast, fully conscious that through every day's experience runs the supernatural intervention which must be eventually recognized.

By the tender aid of such dramatists as Galworthy, Maeterlinck and Ibsen, women may gather the scalding tears of sorrow and change them into cool fountain of memory.

Knights armed cap-a-pie, each bearing weapons of his own choice, and all with their pens for lances, these men have entered the lists of the literary stage drama to fight for the freedom of the souls of women; the scoffers are the most cruel antagonists, and the Grundys, male and female, the most bitter. But observe Maeterlinck with his appealing tenderness; Bernard Shaw with his biting sarcasm and ridicule; Galworthy with his burning sincerity; Bennett with his confidence, fun and wit; and Ibsen with his ruthlessness; here is assembled a panoply of shining weapons equal to anything the opponents may offer, and wielded with the consummate mastery of certainty.

The battle is on, and as it is a progress from evil to good—it can have but one ending: the victory of Good. Heralded by his advance guard of Beauty, which is Truth, the modern dramatist is coming into his kingdom at last, though with no flourish of trumpets.

Here assembled for our delight and comfort are types of women that breathe and live. Galworthy, whose heroines all say, "Come with me to the Springs of Life, which arise in the sea of dreams"; listen to the naked sincerity in his "Ruth" in "Justice"—she whose glimpse of love inspires strength enough to drag her up from the depths.

Shorn of all conventional disguise is the tragedy of the dove-like "Clare" in "The Fugitive." Gentle and malleable as wax in all but the one thing, frenziedly casting away the unclean martial bond in its lovelessness, only to find the royal dower of her love to be as silken bands on the arms of the man from whom she can accept shelter. He writes powerless to earn bread in a Philistine place where money alone is king. She is driven in all her beauty to death, because there is nowhere in life for her to remain.

There is the spirit of brilliant wit and fun incarnate in the delightful "Flora" of Arnold Bennett's "Honeymoon." She is ready to relinquish bridegroom and assume the awkward-

ness of becoming unmarried again rather than have her queenship in love unacknowledged.

The high-hearted "Ariane" of Maeterlinck, whose love for her sisters is so remarkable, is shown to us, valiantly going to the rescue of the wives in the cellar, placing herself in imminent danger of the stern shadow of ancient dominion, firmly withstanding the insidious temptation of the jewelled atmosphere. She encourages and passionately loves the imprisoned ones, exerting a supreme effort to thaw the frozen spirit of inaction in them; symbolical of those who for ever weep and wring their hands, yet make no effort towards release. She reveals to their tear-be-dimmed eyes their own hidden treasure of beauty, swathed in conventional veils disguised with the commonplace cloaking of custom.

At the annunciation of conquest, with the last barrier split and cast aside, and widely opened portals of freedom before them, one glimpse of their injured lord and jailer calls forth suppressed sobs and the sad refusal to accept their hardly-won deliverance. It has come too early for the unripe spirit, and too late for the broken one.

"Melisande" with the mystery of her shadowed pools, over whose world spreads a mist of shifting light; and "Monna Vanna," whose story is pure spray from the sea of glass itself, changing to crystal that which was opaque. These are women who enter the inner courts, where the foundations are.

Ibsen's "Nora" in "A Doll's House" speaks for all the women of the earth with the completeness of finality. The bright-eyed throng of George Bernard Shaw's stage heroines form a brilliant gallery. "Candida," wisest of lovely women, with her sweetly maternal domesticity; "Lesbia," cool and fragrant, a chalice of lost rapture; "Ann" with her bewitching subtlety; "Mrs. Warren" standing on the city rostrum to proclaim her tidings; the wonderful "Mrs. George," sparkling with the delicate beauty of the purple and gold flowers of the bella-donna, her education being that of life itself, submerging you with her refreshing vitality. Of her, Shaw himself says that if she were placed in a historical museum, she would do much towards explaining Edward the Fourth's taste for shop-keepers' wives.

All these heroines are regal in lineage and issue their commands, yet are fully as erring in action, as impulsive in thought, as warm of heart, as perverse in attitude as sacrificing unselfish, yet self-willed, as the veriest human among us. We also are engaged in making roses and lilies for pastime, to find, with breaking heart, that fashioned flowers have no perfume.

Earlier in the century Pinero did pioneer work, making a brave fight with his Tanqueray and Ebbsmith studies. But he lacked the investiture of joyfulness and succeeded only in presenting "Paula Tanqueray" as a frightened woman, always in terror of a figure that ever stood by. No merry laugh comes from this figure of memory—only a dull insistent chime from the muffled bells which weighed down her gray draperies.

Mrs. Craigie (John Oliver Holmes), with fine brevity, characterizes "Mrs Ebbsmith" as "an intensely religious woman without a religion!"

By these sad-toned pictures Pinero succeeded in arresting the hasty and unsympathetic judgment. His work is a living portrayal of the woman's heart crying for other and more spiritual fare than the hard bread of reality; giving pause to the most implacably narrow-minded by her plea to all mankind—Remember that I, too, am mortal.

It is Ibsen that best shows the souls of women weary of bondage. Their pleasure, comfort or convenience, nay, even happiness, he shows, itself depends to a tragical degree upon the actions of other people.

The astounded attitude of the worldly-wise parent in "Fanny's First Play," is closely allied to that of the general ruck of humanity.