Jan Baetens

**Maeterlinck, Maurice (1862—1949)**

Maurice Maeterlinck was a Flemish francophone writer, who spent most of his life in France and whose prolific oeuvre entails poetry, plays, and essays. In 1911 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature, mainly for his merits in the field of symbolist playwriting and his reputation as a man of great wisdom. However, his contemporary reputation relies as much on the musical compositions inspired around 1900 by some of his dramas. Take the musical compositions inspired by his *Pelléas and Mélisande* (1892, first performance in 1893): an orchestral suite by Gabriel Fauré, an opera by Claude Debussy, a symphonic poem by Arnold Schoenberg, and a suite by Jean Sibelius.

Disgusted by his Catholic upbringing and preferring a literary career to that of a lawyer, the very sensitive and emotional young man travelled from Belgium to Paris where he met Villiers de l'Isle-Adam and other representatives of the Symbolist movement. In line with this avant-garde, he broke away from all kinds of realism and tried to express the real with the help of symbols and metaphors. He used an extremely musical free verse in his first collection of poetry, *Les Serres chaudes* (*The Greenhouses,* or *Hothouses*, 1889, the greenhouse being a metaphor for the human heart). It is however his Symbolist drama that established his exceptional and long-lasting reputation as the inventor of a new form of playwriting, the so-called 'static drama', in which dialogue replaces action and suggestion dominates over explicit reference.

The basic theme of most Maeterlinck plays is fate and the impossibility of the play's characters to fight against the higher forces that constrain them. In his drama, the role of human emotions is less important than that of the external forces that drive them. Next to *Pélléas and Mélisande*, his most successful play was *L'oiseau bleu* (*The Blue Bird*, created by Stanislavski in Moscow in 1908), a fairy tale of two children, a brother and a sister, seeking the happiness represented by the symbol of the blue bird, which has given birth to an almost endless series of adaptations in all kind of media. If Maeterlinck's drama proved to be hugely influential on writers (Rilke for instance was one of his great admirers), the larger audience was very fond of the vulgarizing essays on ethically oriented natural science subjects, such as *La Vie des abeilles* (*The* *Life of the Bee*, 1901), and similar subjects, in which he expressed both his mystical tendencies, which gave him the status of a philosopher, and his sympathies for the Socialist movement, which demonstrate his interest in political issues. Maeterlinck published one such essay almost every year, partly in order to overcome his writer's block (his most important works have been written before 1910), partly to fund his opulent personal life. One of these essays, the 1927 *Vie des termites* (*The Life of Termites*), is considered a typical case of plagiarism: the book borrows heavily from a publication in Afrikaner, a language that Maeterlinck, raised in a Flemish city and having a good knowledge of Dutch, could easily read.

References and further reading

Maeterlinck, M. (2003) *Hothouses*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, original date of appearance: 1889.

Maeterlinck, M. (2006) *The* *Life of the Bee*, New York: Dover, original date of appearance: 1901.

Maeterlinck, M. (2007) *Pélléas and Mélisande*, Charleston, SC: BiblioBazaar, original date of appearance1892.

Maeterlinck, M. (2012)*The Blue Bird*, Charleston, SC: Forgotten Books, original date of appearance 1908.

McGuinness, P. (2000) *Maeterlinck and the making of Modern Theatre*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Paratextual material

Kicking\_k: "some productions of Maeterlinck" <http://subjectiviste.wordpress.com/2010/06/07/some-productions-maurice-maeterlinck/> (public domain)

*Pelléas and Mélisante*, act III, scene 1: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gbWydovn8oo> (with English subtitles), production by La Monnaie (Brussels)

*The Blue Bird*: 20th Century Fox film (1940), directed by Walter Lang, featuring Shirley Temple:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6lxIDQUDYWk