JACINTO BENAVENTE

PLAYS, SECOND SERIES. *By Jacinto Benavente. Translated from the Spanish with an introduction by John Garrett Underhill. Illustrated. 12mo. 309 pages. Charles Scribner's Sons. New York.*

IT is a truly Shavian paradox that among contemporary Spanish dramatists should be found the author whose plays are most like the plays of Bernard Shaw. The Spanish playwrights have been influenced only superficially by the intellectual and technical forces that have been shaping the course of the modern drama, and, save for a few emphasizing exceptions, the very plays that are held up as examples of modern Spanish dramatic realism are plays of the classical Spanish plots of blood-and-honour, coated thinly with a very brittle veneer of naturalistic speech and setting. Spain is the last place where one might reasonably expect to discover another Shaw, for Shaw has been the arch-enemy of those same romantic illusions that are the stock-in-trade of Spanish playwrights and the chief protagonist of mental or moral conflict against the physical conflict in which Spanish audiences so delight. And yet Spain's foremost living dramatist is more closely akin to Shaw, both as a thinker and a dramatic craftsman, than any other playwright.

It would, however, be grossly unfair even to infer that Jacinto Benavente is an imitator of Shaw. He is not even a disciple. But there are very obvious similarities in the dialogue and technique of their plays, and the differences in their artistic motives and moral ideals are chiefly due to their different environments and national traditions. It is most convenient, therefore, to compare these two great individualists, although to compare an unknown—and Benavente is all but unknown in America—with a known like Shaw, about whom such debatable opinions are so stoutly maintained, is a critical device fraught with dangers of injustice. It demands at the outset fullest appreciation of Benavente's robust originality, and it makes necessary the clearest possible definition of each basis of comparison.

Spaniards recognize Jacinto Benavente as their greatest modern dramatist. Discerning Spanish critics do not hesitate to rank him

above Echegaray, but the most astute among them have been baffled in making any complete analysis of his philosophy. This is due partly to his attitude towards his work and partly to his astonishing versatility. Like Shaw he is himself a brilliant critic and he delights in his essays and prefaces to astonish and confuse the other critics with startling phrase and paradox. At the close of his Introduction to the Second Series of Benavente's plays, which has just been published, Mr. Underhill appends some of the Spaniard's critical maxims, the Shavian flavour of which is very keen. "Prince Hamlet, although the prototype of doubt, like all sceptics had faith in what was most preposterous: the probability that a theatrical performance would disclose anything." "One-fourth of the morality, rectitude, and sense of justice which an audience brings into the theatre would, if left outside, make the world over into paradise." Another often quoted saying of his is: "I do not make my plays for the public; I make a public for my plays." Again, he once said to a friend, speaking of one of his delightful fairy fantasies, "There is no inner meaning to the play, except the very obvious outer meaning which nobody understands." Such statements are just as disconcerting to serious-minded critics in Spain as in England or America.

Nevertheless, in the very midst of his most perverse epigrams he consistently reveals an honest disgust with all shams and poses and a very firm belief in democracy. As an author, his prodigious industry is the very antithesis of the dilettante airs and graces that some of his contemporaries assume, and he mocks to scorn the self-styled genius and his talks of moods and inspirations. As a literary critic, his *bête noire* is the parlour drama whose failure on the stage is explained away by saying that it is too intellectual or too artistic for the populace. As an interpreter of life, in his own plays he holds fast to this same hatred of all forms of hypocrisy and this same faith in the ultimate good judgement of the people. In The Evil Doers of Good, his clever satire of organized charity, his mouthpiece, Don Heliodoro, exclaims passionately:

"You are not handing out alms for nothing. All that you demand in return is a profession of faith, an oath of absolute allegiance, social, religious, political, sentimental—yes, even sentimental. You are shocked when you find someone who is not willing to sell his soul, his most cherished beliefs, for whatever you are willing to give

him as charity, and let me tell you this—there are fewer poor men than gentlemen of the upper classes who will do it. You think that you are encouraging virtue, but what you are really doing is promoting hypocrisy. You think that you are educating the masses: you are holding out a piece of candy in one hand and hiding a ruler in the other hand behind your back."

There is no need to call attention to the Shavian qualities of the speech or of the thought behind it, but it is significant that almost without exception Benavente's satirical comedies, and these are the most popular and the most important of his plays, are based upon some sham of contemporary Spanish society. It is a society very different from ours, different in form and based upon a different social order, but many of the shams he exposes are universal. La Gata de Angora holds up to view the idle, pampered, useless woman of great wealth, the Angora cat as the title calls her, as pretty, as selfish, and as cruel. Lo Cursi reveals the ugliness of the modern marriage of convenience. La Comida de las Fieras strips bare the empty pretensions of the wicked, decayed nobility. And so on, through a whole series of over forty brilliant plays, Benavente has satirized the false and the undemocratic in the upper and middle classes of Spanish society. He is the first specialist of the land in this particular field, and though he has several imitators, as yet no worthy rival has appeared.

Much of the success of his satires is due to the skill with which, in the same play, he will balance frailties and vices with strengths and virtues. His characters are always an intimate mixture of goodness and badness, and while he never leaves a doubt as to their exact place in his satire, still they are easily recognizable as people from the workaday world. He finds no delight in running the sharp blade of his wit through a poor dummy stuffed with disagreeable traits, but he rejoices to make a red-blooded knave or a pious shrew ridiculous. His specialist's point of view is narrow, but the result he achieves in his plays has something of the breadth of that greatest of Spanish satires, Don Quixote. The best Spanish literature has always been national, and it seems to become universal only when its national spirit, as in Cervantes' novel, is most intensified. This holds good of Benavente's satirical comedies. He attacks an undemocratic, uncommercialized society, and an American winces at

his thrusts. His sincerity and keen insight into Spanish character enable him to reveal human beings that we recognize readily under their unfamiliar national costumes.

Like Shaw, Benavente is no respecter of his audiences' feelings. He apparently enjoys shattering fond illusions, nor does he spare individuals, even the most powerful. In so closely knit a country as Spain it is remarkable that the work of a vigorous, active free-thinker who has taken his place in the world of affairs has not degenerated into mere personal lampoon. It is not that Benavente has lacked the courage, for in Catholic Spain it is just as dangerous to attack the cherished conventions of caste and religion as it is in Puritan England to show that democracy can be tyrannical or marriage unhappy, and Benavente has not hesitated to satirize with particular gusto outworn ideas of personal and family honor, conventional moral hypocrisy, and devout wickedness.

It is said of this Spanish playwright, as it has been said of Bernard Shaw, that he has no higher aim than to be the super-clever popular playwright of his day; that he is utterly frivolous; that he lacks that stability which belief in any carefully thought out and firmly held philosophy would give him. It is true that we read his satirical comedies in vain if we look for the kindly admonitions of a great moral teacher; neither do we find in them the clarion calls to action of the social revolutionist. There are none of the continental dramatists' bitter criticisms of contemporary life in his plays —nor, it must be added, any of the comforting encouragement of popular modern philosophers. He does not exhort; he does not preach; he does not advise. He is content to show us some particular phase of life as he himself sees it, and then he leaves us to draw our own conclusions. He does this deliberately, not as a refuge for mediocrity, but because he is convinced that the true function of the drama is to picture life on the stage, and he accomplishes his purpose so well that he wins at once extravagant blame and praise. He is blamed unjustly for lack of a serious purpose, and so lifelike are his portraits that he has been over-praised as a student of character.

These confused estimates of his work have been fostered by Benavente himself. A dramatist to the core, he appreciates keenly the theatric effect, and he uses his powers spectacularly to arrest the attention of his fellow countrymen. He is too sensible and too honest to don a cloak of sobriety which would be unbecoming and un-

comfortable. He chooses deliberately the bespangled tights of the professional acrobat, and so garbed he turns his handsprings with a nimble dexterity that hides his skill and strength. Benavente does not underestimate his own powers. Rather the reverse—he sometimes confuses his remarkably keen observation with interpretation. Benavente does not, however, misuse his powers, for, if he does not recognize limits to his native abilities, he appreciates finely how to apply them most effectively.

Much of the great effectiveness of Benavente's plays, both in the printed page and upon the stage, depends upon his dialogue, and the selection of the pieces in the new Second Series has been very happy in showing this characteristic of his at its best. Indeed, the little one-act sketch, No Smoking, is a perfect example of dialogue, for dialogue is all that there is. Few dramatists are able to make dialogue accomplish so many things at one time as he, and it is not unusual to find single speeches that are at once clever *bons mots*, a keen revelation of character, and useful exposition of the plot. Such a speech is Theodoro's in The Governor's Wife: "In such matters I make it a rule to follow the catechism: the sacraments all in their proper order. Marriage comes seventh, after extreme unction." This uncanny skill in dialogue quickens his plays with the very breath of life. There are apparently no explanations—certainly no dreary, talky explanations or obvious exchanges of confidences for the enlightenment of the audience—and no quips or witticisms are tied to the characters like balls and tinsel on a Christmas tree. The best of Benavente's claims as a depicter of character rest upon his capabilities as a revealer of motives through speeches. Literally his people are convicted out of their own mouths, and this is surely one of the rare gifts of the dramatic genius.

In contradistinction to Shaw, Benavente is without any social conscience. It is impossible to imagine him as a member of any Spanish Fabian Society, and while he might well have written a Spanish Widowers' Houses, still it would not have been from any sociological motive. The point of his attack is the individual, and his plays have a social significance only because he does not waste time attacking unique specimens of tyranny, fraud, or deception. He certainly has to forego the prestige that attaches itself to every social reformer, but the effect of his work, especially in Spain, is increased by the mere fact that it is without avowed social purpose.

That he avoids the cramped exaggeration which his intense interest in the individual and comparative indifference to mass problems make so easy for him is the best evidence of the real quality of his genius as a dramatist. His splendid, almost Anglo-Saxon, sense of fair play has been both a source of inspiration and a balance to prevent his satires swinging into lampoons.

Changes in the thought of a people are subtle and difficult to appraise, and, while we cannot measure the effect now, the plays of this most popular dramatist are undoubtedly sociological forces at work in Spain to-day. Their effect upon contemporary Spanish drama, however, is very apparent, and at least two of the best known writers of these plays are men of serious social purpose. Although the classical drama of theatrical romanticism, which has held the stage of Spain in various forms since the Golden Age of Lope de Vega and Calderon, was killed in the revolt of 1890, still its spirit lives, and Benavente is the first Spanish dramatist to write plays conceived in the modern spirit and executed in modern technique. Especially is their effect felt upon the young playwrights who are following the path to serious social drama blazed by Galdós and Joaquin Dicenta.

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