The Latest Study of Molière in English.*

In a prefatory note, the author of the latest of the encouraging number of recent Molière studies in English,† sets forth his plan and his point of view. He purposes to present, first, "the facts of Molière's life, stripped of all the legends which compass it about; second, to trace his development as a dramatist, making it plain how cautiously he advanced in his art and how slowly he reached the full expansion of his power; and third, to show his intimate relation to the time in which he lived, the glittering beginning of the reign of Louis XIV." Professor Matthews calls his book a biography, and has "endeavored always to centre attention on Molière himself."

Of the three avenues by which Professor Matthews has approached his subject, he has evidently been attracted most by the middle one, *i.e.*, Molière's development as a dramatist. In discussing this development he has wisely kept the plays in their chronological order, thereby avoiding confusion and impressing the reader with the continuity and the homogeneity of the great Frenchman's growth as a dramatic power. Indeed, this part of the plan has been so well conceived and so cleverly executed, especially as regards the lighter plays and the bearing of the unusually intelligent theatre-going Parisian public upon the length and breadth of Molière's career as a playwright, that one may reasonably be inclined to regret that the author has not confined himself to the discussion of this development. But the book is intended as a biography. It is not a history of Molière's dramatic career, but a biography of Molière himself which the author has "sought to establish solidly on the admitted facts," using no "legends" and refraining from borrowing hints or drawing inferences from such pamphlets as "Elomire Hypocondre" and "La Fameuse Comédienne." The intention clearly has been dictated by scholarly integrity.

It is not, however, a critic's province to discuss an author's intentions; rather is it his function to discover how thoroughly they have been carried out, and to state his findings as impartially as may be. It seems to me, in the first place, that Professor Matthews has scarcely distinguished between biography and history. Montesquieu's distinction is still valid. He said that biography studies the peculiarities of individual character, and history the general aspects of the society in which these peculiarities appeared. The general aspects of French society contemporaneous with the great humorist are placed before us with fine integrity; the author's characterization of Louis XIV. as monarch and as man is done in masterly manner, although the courtly background of the lighter plays is scarcely more than sketched in; but what of Molière the man? Do we not miss that coloring, that vivifying power which is so essential in the process of presenting the subject of a biography as a living human being?

The modern view of history is hostile to the anecdote, but biography cannot well get along without it. What if it be not true that the king invited the actor to sit at meat with him?—what if it be not proved that Bellocq the poet offered to help him make the king's bed? These "legends" are truer than many a fact may be, because they are generic and stand for a long series of facts which it would be futile to establish, and of which the significance is that Molière, being an actor, was a social outcast with whom courtiers would not associate. This fact being either established or corroborated by these legends, it follows that Molière must often have been deeply offended, and, being human, must sometimes have reacted, especially when opportunity offered during the building of a comedy. But it is exactly this biographical point of view that Professor Matthews eschews. He separates the man from the playwright, on the ground that the construction of plays is the most objective of the arts. He neglects the man, he does not make him live before us in his characteristics; the man merely establishes the Illustre Théâtre, fails, goes to the country, comes back to Paris, and dies on schedule time. But the playwright we see at work very clearly; and if the scope of the book had been limited to that of a history of Molière's dramatic career, it would have found an empty niche waiting for it.

Molière created the era of modern comedy. Was a new era ever created objectively, in cold blood? Is not Molière's deep melancholy alternating with rollicking fun proof enough of his abiding subjectivity? Your objective man or

* Molière. His Life and his Works. By Brander Matthews, Professor of Dramatic Literature in Columbia University. Illustrated. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

† Beginning with Henry M. Trollope's "Life of Molière," London, 1905, we have had: Karl Mantzius's "Molière and his Times" (translated from the Danish), London and New York, 1905; Marzials's Molière in the Miniature Series of Great Writers, 1905: H. C. Chatfield-Taylor's "Molière, a Biography," New York, 1906; A. R. Waller's "The Plays of Molière," 6 vols., London, 1902-08; and Curtis Hidden Page's Molière, in the French Classics for English Readers Series, two volumes, New York, 1908.

woman is wont to have a cheerful or grave, but an equable temper, and creates no new eras. I venture to doubt whether an equable temper was ever humoristic also: the millennium is not yet. If Professor Matthews had stooped to the legend of the Duc de la Feuillade who rubbed Molière's nose against the buttons of his coat till it bled, or to the legend of his quarrels with Armande Béjart, the reader would not have received an altogether incorrect impression of the dynamics of Molière's sensitiveness. Brunetière points out how the ascendency of women in the seventeenth century, which is at the root of its contrast with the sixteenth, hampered Molière's growth and accounts for his not being greater than he is. Considering his penetrating genius and the excellent education he had had, he must have known that this ascendency was a fact. Besides, he was a naturalist,—*i.e.*, he insisted on seeing things as they are. But society in his day insisted on warping nature into artificiality and convention, with their corollaries of "humbug and pretense." As Professor Matthews points out, Molière hated these. Would mere academic dislike, or the requirements of the ticket-office, or a laudable desire to write a good play, nerve a human being to such attacks upon women as we find "Les Précieuses Ridicules" and the "Femmes Savantes" to be? or to such an attack upon woman-dominated society as is "Le Misanthrope"? No; indignation, hate, underlie these. Is hate not a very subjective passion, and is it not always caused by personal incidents and conditions which the hater finds unbearable? The "legends" tell what these incidents were or might be. Molière reacted, fought back; it is not possible that a man of his high seriousness had that lukewarm pleasant thing, "a message," which the author twice asserts he had. It had not yet been invented. Again, Molière lived at a time when the clergy were an all-pervading power, which—as far as he and those he loved were concerned—was exerted to keep him and them in a position of ignominious contempt, and who, unless he abjured his great life, would even make his death an occasion for insult. And yet is there only objective criticism in "Tartuffe"? Molière had a grumpy, grasping father, and he himself delighted in generous expenditure for his wife and his friends. And yet is it mere coincidence that his comedy fathers are all grumpy and grasping towards their children? Molière lost his mother in boyhood,—there are practically no mothers in his comedies; and what a caricature Madame Pernelle is!—yet was this owing to the fact that there was no "old woman" in his company? Indeed, I make bold to surmise that in suppressing the "legends" and in basing his biography only on "the admitted facts," Professor Matthews has merely invented a new method of expressing *his* opinion.

The sort of reader to whom this biography is addressed cannot fail to discover that Professor Matthews has not always succeeded in keeping his foothold firmly on the admitted facts. A quotation will illustrate the author's procedure in this matter. He says, page 49: "These were the . . . performers Molière in his boyhood had seen in the open street, at the fair of Saint-Germain, and perhaps also in the playhouse itself (if it was a fact that he was taken to the theatre by his grandfather)." On page 27 we are told that "it is likely that she—Madeleine Béjart—had hoped to become a countess," and on page 179 that "it is possible that this withdrawal of 'Don Juan' was made a condition for the ultimate approval of 'Tartuffe.'" These and many other similar facts are not yet admitted, as the author duly indicates; but that they have been used shows how difficult it is to carry out the programme he lays down in the preface. More serious is a slip like that on page 22, where the author states that the Illustre Théâtre was housed in a tennis court "owned by a man named Métayer." But this court was the Mestayers' (joint—or share-renters') court. There was, of course, no man named Métayer. The business was transacted by Noel Gallois, the tennis master,* who signed the lease, the rent being 1900 livres a year. On page 83 the author makes Louis Béjart die just after the first performance of the Étourdi, which on page 33 he puts at 1653, although Grimarest's date has been discarded by Lefranc (1906) and others for that of La Grange, who mentions 1655. But in the immense labor of building a book of this kind one is fortunate in escaping with the very few errors of this sort that the book contains.

I hope that a word or two concerning the English of the work may not be considered improper. When anyone takes pleasure in a thing, he is made to "joy in" it. When he has cause for an angry protest, that protest becomes "exacerbated." And Molière "bodies forth" his interpretation of life. At the same time, to expose becomes "to show up," to address "to hold forth," to resign "to drop out," to exhibit

*See "Le Molièriste," 1885-86, p. 123; or Aug. Vitu, "Le Jeu de Paume des Métayers," Lemerre, 1883.

"to show off." On page 97, poor Molière is made to "work against time," and to be "ready to the minute." It is a question whether or no Madame de Rambouillet was herself only "half an Italian," or whether "the immediate appeal of the playwright is to the eyes of the spectators and to the ears of the auditors in the playhouse itself." It is agreed that Molière was a realist; but why he should as such not brood over the darker aspects of humanity, which the conjunction "however much" (page 91) would seem to deny him the right to do, the author does not explain. At the end of the book no one except a college student would have a legitimate excuse for not knowing that Molière had been nourished on Rabelais and Montaigne, that he had a hearty detestation for humbug of all sorts, that he was a humorist, that he had had thorough instruction in philosophy, or that in the Italian plays the acting occurred in the neutral ground between the houses. These repetitions, and a little padding here and there, might easily have been avoided.

When all is said and done, there remains the very praisworthy effort of which this book is a token. That professors of modern literatures should begin more and more to join urbanity with scholarship, and even to address the general reader now and then, is a hopeful sign,—hopeful also for American scholarship itself. Professor Matthews is a modern pioneer in this respect, and on that ground alone deserves the most cordial recognition, the more so because he has had the courage to do this at a time when philological erudition of an almost physical type has been the surest road to a reputation for soundness.

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