EURIPIDES AND SHAW, WITH OTHER ESSAYS

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Euripides and Shaw, with other essays by Gilbert Norwood

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NOTE

TWO of these essays were originally lectures. "Euripides and Shaw" was delivered in 1911, "The Present Renaissance of English Drama" in 1913. I have to thank the Literary and Debating Society of Newport (Mon.) and the Editor of the *Welsh Outlook* respectively for permission to reprint them. Both have been revised, and the second has been brought up to date.

For the Index I am indebted to the kindness of my friend, Mr. Cyril Brett.

GILBERT NORWOOD

PRESTON

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EURIPIDES AND SHAW

A COMPARISON

OUR subject can best be understood if viewed, in the first instance, historically. Both Euripides and Mr. Bernard Shaw have been voices of an age of reaction, of an age which stood in marked and recognized contrast to the era which had immediately preceded it. Let us begin then with the briefest historical survey and endeavour to compare these two reactions.

It is usually hard or impossible for any man to describe, perhaps even to understand, the history and spirit of his own generation. But the present epoch is exceptional; it can be understood even by those who live in it if they keep before their eyes a strong contrast, precisely the contrast which it is my present business to indicate. There is a real gulf between us and the middle of the nineteenth century. In Eng-

land, at any rate, the march of affairs broke into a kind of hand-gallop, ending with a leap over a chasm which can hardly be defined, into a morass from which we have not yet found our way. This jerk in our progress, this turning-point (to use a more decorous metaphor), is to be found in the Education Act of 1870, a piece of legislation which has already given results of gigantic importance, generating and letting loose energies, the history of which has hardly more than begun. But their activity has already shaken society. On many momentous subjects it is impossible for us to think or act as we thought and acted fifty years ago. The present age is severed from what is called the Victorian era with a completeness which is truly amazing when we consider the fewness of the years; but not more amazing than the extent to which analogous conditions enable us to enter into the spirit of an epoch so far sundered from us in time as the age of Euripides. We can understand Pericles better than we understand Palmerston.

It will be enough for our purpose if we confine ourselves to pointing out the difference in spirit between the present time and

the Victorian age. Consider the legislation of two generations ago, the tone and the implied assumptions of statesmen, of orators, of political and social theorists; the formulæ, sometimes not expressed but often definitely proclaimed, which ruled the different classes of society in their inward life and their outward contacts. Above all, consider the literature of those days—the writers who were not only great but also popular, and who therefore voiced the opinions and emotions of their less articulate fellows—Dickens, Macaulay, Wordsworth, Tennyson. Add to these that invaluable chronicle of manners and customs, the back numbers of *Punch*. Are we not already far enough removed from them to observe, in spite of their manifold differences, a unity of spirit, a definite tone? Above all we are conscious of a robust faith in everything English and of the nineteenth century, a certainty that all the men of the past have been but so many coral insects building up that perfect structure which has at last emerged above the waters of humiliation and experiment into the sunshine of the Great Exhibition. England is the heir of all the ages and the centre of space. From London

there is a slight fall to the provinces, and then again to Scotland and Wales, with a deep but isolated depression to mark Ireland. The level falls rapidly as we come to "foreigners," among whom the French have a bad pre-eminence. Farther down the slope are Germans, Americans, and then the rest of Europe. Thus at length we reach the dim collections of humanity known as "natives," whose territory provides the Englishman with a species of drill-hall in which to exercise his celebrated bull-dog virtues and enjoy to the full the luxury of patronizing people who can never annoy him by rivalry.

Even the greatest of the popular writers were not untainted by this childishness. The more free an author was from it, the harder was it for him to gain a high reputation in his own day; Carlyle is an example, and Shelley above all. In the work of those who really struck the imagination of their contemporaries, in writers like Macaulay and Tennyson, there is a tone of gentlemanly arrogance, of urbane self-satisfaction, which impels one to echo Sydney Smith's wistful remark: "I wish I were as sure of anything as Tom Macaulay is of everything."