THE DRAMA; ITS LAW AND ITS TECHNIQUE

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BY

ELISABETH WOODBRIDGE, PH.D.

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PREFACE

FREYTAG'S *Technik des Dramas*, written thirty-five years ago, remains up to this time the best work of its kind. Yet its defects of manner and of arrangement are apparent even to the casual reader, and they become yet more evident when the book is subjected to the test of the college class-room. Such a test — one for which the book was never intended — obscures its merits, which are many, and emphasizes its defects, which might appear few and superficial, but which are peculiarly irritating to both teacher and student. Yet the need of such a book is indicated by the number of treatises on the drama which have appeared since Freytag wrote. All of these that I have seen, however, are either too exclusively philosophical, and in their theorizing about the art ignore the practical details of the craft, or they are not philosophical enough, and in their preoccupation with the craft lose sight of the fundamental principles, the absolute standards, of the art.

In this, as in all other essentials, Freytag was sound; his proportionate emphasis is right, and when I first began to realize the defects of the

book, I thought that by making some changes it could be rendered more practically available while no less suggestive. I soon discovered, however, that it was not possible to fit Freytag's discussion into the Procrustean framework of my own plan. His book lacks system, but it does possess the unity that must always characterize the utterances, however careless, of an honest and conscientious thinker. My book, I saw, might rectify some of the faults of the original, but would fall short of its merits. So I laid Freytag quite aside, and wrote the following chapters with as little regard as possible to the discussions in the *Technik*. "As little as possible," — for to make any claim to entire independence would be preposterous. No one can read the utterances of a thoughtful critic and veteran in stage-craft like Freytag without being influenced by them. Even if one has arrived independently at the theories and the judgments therein contained, the formulation and illustration of these theories and judgments by another mind must affect him, if not by altering his thought, at least by enriching its subject-matter. I wish, therefore, to make a comprehensive acknowledgment of my indebtedness to the *Technik*. Comprehensive and general it must be, for just because his book, despite its diffuseness and its desultoriness, is vital and fundamental, it is impossible to lay a finger on the exact places where I am in its debt.

One of the chief merits of Freytag's work is its mass of illustrative comments on ancient and

modern dramas. More especially was his use of the Greek dramatists valuable and suggestive, and I hesitated before determining to omit from this treatment any such detailed discussion. Without a sympathetic familiarity with Æschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides for tragedy, and with Aristophanes for comedy, no one can claim the right to "judge righteous judgment" in things dramaturgic. When Freytag wrote, such a familiarity was scarcely to be gained without years of toil; since his time, modern classical scholarship has experienced a wonderful growth, bearing fruit in a number of critical treatises whose profound learning is informed by philosophic insight and delicate taste, is directed by a sense for historic proportion, is dominated by just æsthetic standards. With such works at hand as the treatises of Jebb, of Butcher, of Haigh, any detailed treatment of the ancient drama would be presumptuous, not to say superfluous, and its place is more fittingly taken by the bibliography at the end of the volume, which points out to the student some of the guides to whom he will commit himself when he shall explore this part of the field.

Of Freytag's illustrations from modern drama, many are based on German plays, and are thus less illuminating to the average American reader — even the college student — than to the German audience for whom they were intended; hence they greatly increase the bulk of the book without adding proportionately to its effectiveness. I have confined my illustrations more strictly to English literature,

using the drama of other nations only where it is needed for comparison. Such a method is theoretically lawful as well as practically expedient, since English drama was in its formative period — that is, up to Dryden — scarcely at all influenced by any other drama save the Roman and, chiefly indirectly, the Greek. With our own contemporary drama it is different. It is not possible to set up a language-barrier when our English and American stages are occupied with the plays of Italian, French, German, and Scandinavian writers.

Of contemporary drama Freytag's book takes almost no account. Indeed, when he wrote, the renaissance, if we may venture to call it so, of drama had only just set in. Ibsen had been writing plays only a few years, and his greatest were yet to come; Sudermann was six years old; Hauptmann was an infant; Fulda was not yet born, nor was Maeterlinck, nor Rostand, the brilliant actor-dramatist who is now hailed by some of his countrymen as their young Shakespeare; in England a few critics were hopelessly hoping that the drama was not really so dead as it seemed. Small wonder that Freytag's mention of modern work had rather the character of an exhortation and a warning than of a critical judgment. But in the last thirty years many good plays, many brilliant ones, some great ones, have been written, and it is well not to ignore them. In the ordinary college courses it is, indeed, scarcely possible to lay much emphasis on these, yet it is unfortunate

to treat the drama as though it came to an end, for England in 1616, and for Germany in 1832. Such an attitude lends color of truth to the assertion that the drama is no longer a living art form. One of the signs of its life is that it is changing; and we must not be deceived by the frequent presentations of Shakespeare's plays into thinking that our stage is like the Elizabethan, or that our Shakespeare is the Shakespeare of Elizabeth and of James. In the study of drama Shakespeare must be our centre, but just as we cannot arrive at the truest judgment if we leave out the Greeks, so too we cannot if we ignore our own contemporaries.

Finally, there is one great section of the drama which Freytag left untouched, — comedy. Yet it is present as an element in every one of Shakespeare's plays, it is the predominant element in many of them, and a discussion of the drama which ignores this is, not *Hamlet* with Hamlet left out, but something more preposterous — *Henry IV* with Falstaff left out.

For an exhaustive, or even a fairly satisfactory, discussion of dramatic comedy an entire volume is needed; such a volume ought to be written. In the three chapters here devoted to the subject I have tried merely to make a survey of the field, to suggest points of view whence it may be studied, to point out lines along which it may be explored. So little has it been investigated that I cannot offer the student even the nucleus for a bibliography. My hope is that others may come to