

Introduction to the Dramas of Balzac

Epiphanius Wilson and J. Walker McSpadden

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BY

EPIPHANIUS WILSON
AND
J. WALKER MCSPADDEN

CONTENTS

Balzac as a Dramatist
By Epiphanius Wilson

Introduction
By J. Walker McSpadden

BALZAC AS A DRAMATIST

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BY

EIPHANIUS WILSON

Honore de Balzac is known to the world in general as a novel-writer, a producer of romances, in which begin the reign of realism in French fiction. His *Comedie Humaine* is a description of French society, as it existed from the time of the Revolution to that of the Restoration. In this series of stories we find the author engaged in analyzing the manners, motives and external life of the French man and woman in all grades of society. When we open these volumes, we enter a gallery of striking and varied pictures, which glow with all the color, chiaroscuro and life-like detail of a Dutch panel. The power of Balzac is unique as a descriptive writer; his knowledge of the female heart is more profound, and covers a far wider range than anything exhibited by a provincial author, such as Richardson. But he has also the marvelous faculty of suggesting spiritual facts in the life and consciousness of his characters, by the picturesque touches with which he brings before us their external surroundings--the towns, streets and houses in which they dwell; the furniture, ornaments and arrangement of their rooms, and the clothes they wear. He depends upon these details for throwing into relief such a portrait as that of Pons or Madame Hulot. He himself was individualized by his knobbed cane abroad, and his Benedictine habit and statuette of Napoleon at home; but every single one of his creations seems to have in some shape or other a cane, a robe or a decorative attribute, which distinguishes each individual, as if by a badge, from every other member of the company in the Comedy of Life.

The art of characterization exhibited by the author fascinates us; we gaze and examine as if we were face to face with real personages, whose passions are laid bare, whose life is traced, whose countenance is portrayed with miraculousness, distinctness and verisimilitude. All the phenomena of life in the camp, the court, the boudoir, the low faubourg, or the country chateau are ranged in order, and catalogued. This is done with relentless audacity, often with a touch of grotesque exaggeration, but always with almost wearying minuteness. Sometimes this great writer finds that a description of actuality fails to give the true spiritual key to a situation, and he overflows into allegory, or Swendenborgian mysticism, just as Bastien-Lepage resorts to a coating of actual gilt, in depicting that radiant light in his *Jeanne d'Arc* which flat pigment could not adequately represent.

But this very effort of Balzac to attain realistic characterization has resulted in producing what the ordinary reader will look upon as a defect in his stories. When we compared above the stories of this writer to a painting, we had been as near the truth, if we had likened them to a reflection or photograph of a scene. For in a painting, the artist at his own will arranges the light and shade and groups, and combines according to his own fancy the figures and objects which he finds in nature. He represents not what is, but what might be, an actual scene. He aims at a specific effect. To this effect everything is sacrificed, for his work is a synthesis, not a mere analysis. Balzac does not aim at an effect, above and independent of his analysis. His sole effort is to emphasize the facts which his analysis brings to light, and when he has succeeded in this, the sole end he aims at is attained. Thus action is less important in his estimation than impression. His stories are therefore often quite unsymmetrical,

even anecdotic, in construction; some of them are mere episodes, in which the action is irrelevant, and sometimes he boldly ends an elaborate romance without any dramatic denouement at all. We believe that Honore de Balzac was the first of European writers to inaugurate the novel without denouement, and to give the world examples of the literary torso whose beauty and charm consist not in its completeness, but in the vigor and life-like animation of the lines, features, and contours of a detached trunk.

It is not surprising, therefore, that when we come to study the dramas of Balzac we find that the very qualities that give effectiveness to a stage representation are wanting in them. For the qualities which make a realistic tale impressive render a play intolerable. Thus Balzac's stage pieces are interesting, exciting and vivid in many passages, but they cannot stand the searching glare of the footlights. Balzac, in the first place, looked upon the drama as a department of literature inferior to that of romance, and somewhat cavalierly condescended to the stage without reckoning on either its possibilities or its limitations. He did not take to play-writing because he had exhausted his vein of fiction, but because he was in need of money. This was during the last years of his life. In this period he wrote the five plays which are included in the authorized edition of his works.

Balzac's first play was *Vautrin*, and Vautrin appears as the name of the most astonishing and most original character which Balzac has created and introduced in the five or six greatest novels of the Comedy. So transcendent, super-human and satanic is Vautrin, Herrera, or Jacques Collin, as he is indifferently called, that a French critic has interpreted this personage as a mere allegorical embodiment of the seductions of Parisian life, as they exist side by side with the potency and resourcefulness of crime in the French metropolis.

Vautrin is described in the *Comedie Humaine* as the tempter and benefactor of Lucien de Rubempre, whom he loves with an intense devotion, and would exploit as a power and influence in the social, literary and political world. The deep-dyed criminal seems to live a life of pleasure, fashion and social rank in the person of this protege. The abnormal, and in some degree quixotic, nature of this attachment is a purely Balzacian conception, and the contradictions involved in this character, with all the intellectual and physical endowments which pertain to it, are sometimes such as to bring the sublime in perilous proximity to the ridiculous. How such a fantastic creation can be so treated as to do less violence to the laws of artistic harmony and reserve may be seen in Hugo's *Valjean*, which was undoubtedly suggested by Balzac's *Vautrin*. In the play of *Vautrin*, the main character, instead of appearing sublime, becomes absurd, and the action is utterly destitute of that plausibility and coherence which should make the most improbable incidents of a play hang together with logical sequence.

Balzac in the *Resources of Quinola* merely reproduces David Sechard, though he places him in the reign of Philip the Second of Spain. He went far out of his way to make Fontanares the first inventor of the steamboat; the improbability of such a supposition quite forfeits the interest of the spectators and, in attempting to effect a love denouement, he disgusts us by uniting the noble discoverer with the vile Faustine. Even the element of humor is wanting in his portrayal of Quinola--who is a combination of the slave in a Latin comedy and the fool, or Touchstone of Shakespeare. This play is, however,

ingenious, powerful and interesting in many passages.

Pamela Giraud is fantastic and painful in its plot. Balzac's ideal woman, the Pauline of the Peau de Chagrin, is here placed in a situation revolting even to a Parisian audience; but the selfish worldliness of the rich and noble is contrasted with the pure disinterestedness of a poor working girl in all of Balzac's strongest, most searching style. The denouement is well brought about and satisfactory, but scarcely atones for the outrageous nature of the principal situation.

Balzac was especially a novelist of his own period, and the life of his romances is the life he saw going on around him. The principal character in The Stepmother is a Napoleonist general typical of many who must have lived in the first half of the nineteenth century. The ruling passion of General de Grandchamp is hatred for those who deserted the cause or forsook the standard of the First Consul. This antipathy is exaggerated by Balzac into murderous hatred, and is the indirect cause of death to the General's daughter, Pauline, and her lover, the son of a soldier of the First Empire, who, by deserting Napoleon, had fallen under the Comte de Grandchamp's ban. The situation is, however, complicated by the guilty passion which Gertrude, the stepmother of Pauline and wife of the General's old age, feels for the lover of Pauline. The main interest of the drama lies in the struggle between these two women, every detail of which is elaborated with true Balzacian gusto and insight. We expect to see virtue triumphant, and Pauline united to the excellent Ferdinand. When they both die of poison, and Gertrude becomes repentant, we feel that the denouement is not satisfactory. The jealousy of the woman and the hatred of the man have not blended properly.

But there can be no doubt at all that if Balzac had lived, he might have turned out a successful playwright. When he began his career as a dramatic writer he was like a musician taking up an unfamiliar instrument, an organist who was trying the violin, or a painter working in an unknown medium. His last written play was his best. Fortunately, the plot did not deal with any of those desperate love passions which Balzac in his novels has analyzed and described with such relentless and even brutal frankness. It is filled throughout with a genial humanity, as bright and as expressive as that which fills the atmosphere of She Stoops to Conquer or A School for Scandal. The characters are neither demons, like Cousin Betty, nor reckless debauchees, like Gertrude in The Stepmother. The whole motif is comic. Moliere himself might have lent a touch of his refined and fragrant wit to the composition; and the situation is one which the author could realize from experience, but had only learned to regard from a humorous standpoint in the ripeness of his premature old age. Balzac makes money rule in his stories, as the most potent factor of social life. He describes poverty as the supreme evil, and wealth as the object of universal aspiration. In line with this attitude comes Mercadet with his trials and schemes. Scenes of ridiculous surprises succeed each other till by the return of the absconder with a large fortune, the greedy, usurious creditors are at last paid in full, and poetic justice is satisfied by the marriage of Julie to the poor man of her choice.

EPIPHANIUS WILSON.

INTRODUCTION

BY

J. WALKER MCSPADDEN

The greatest fame of Balzac will rest in the future, as in the past, upon his novels and short stories. These comprise the bulk of his work and his most noteworthy effort--an effort so pronounced as to hide all side-excursions. For this reason his chief side-excursion--into the realms of drama--has been almost entirely overlooked. Indeed, many of his readers are unaware that he ever wrote plays, while others have passed them by with the idea that they were slight, devoid of interest, and to be classified with the *Works of Youth*. Complete editions--so-called--of Balzac's works have fostered this belief by omitting the dramas; and it has remained for the present edition to include, for the first time, this valuable material, not alone for its own sake, but also in order to show the many-sided author as he was, in all his efficiencies and occasional deficiencies.

For those readers who now make the acquaintance of the dramas, we would say briefly that the Balzac *Theatre* comprises five plays -- *Vautrin*, *Les Ressources de Quinola*, *Pamela Giraud*, *La Maratre*, and *Mercadet*. These plays are in prose. They do not belong to the apprenticeship period of the *Works of Youth*, but were produced in the heyday of his powers, revealing the mature man and the subtle analyst of character, not at his best, but at a point far above his worst. True, their production aroused condemnation on the part of many contemporary dramatic critics, and were the source of much annoyance and little financial gain to their creator. But this is certainly no criterion for their workmanship. Balzac defied many tenets. He even had the hardihood to dispense with the *claqueurs* at the first night of *Les Ressources de Quinola*. Naturally the play proceeded coldly without the presence of professional applauders. But Balzac declared himself satisfied with the warm praise of such men as Hugo and Lamartine, who recognized the strength of the lines.

The five plays were presented at various times, at the best theatres of Paris, and by the most capable companies. One of them, *Mercadet*, is still revived perennially; and we are of opinion that this play would prove attractive to-day upon an American stage. The action and plots of all these dramas are quite apart from the structure of the *Comedie Humaine*. *Vautrin* and his "pals" are the only characters borrowed from that series, but his part in the titular play is new beyond the initial situation.

The *Premiere Edition* of the *Theatre Complet* was published in a single duodecimo volume from the press of Giraud & Dagneau in 1853. It contained: *Vautrin*, *Les Ressources de Quinola*, *Pamela Giraud*, and *La Maratre*. All prefaces were omitted. *Mercadet* was not given with them in this printing, but appeared in a separate duodecimo, under the title of *Le Faiseur*, from the press of Cadot, in 1853. The next edition of the *Theatre Complet*, in 1855, reinstated the prefaces. It was not until 1865 that *Mercadet* joined the other four in a single volume published by Mme. Houssiaux.

Vautrin, a drama in five acts, was presented for the first time in the Porte-Saint-Martin theatre, March 14, 1840. The preface, dated

May 1, 1840, was not ready in time for the printing of the first edition, which was a small octavo volume published by Delloye & Tresse. It appeared in the second edition, two months later. The dedication was to Laurent-Jan. [See "Jan" in Repertory.] The play was a distinct failure, but its construction and temper combine to explain this. At the same time it makes interesting reading; and it will prove especially entertaining to readers of the *Comedie Humaine* who have dreaded and half-admired the redoubtable law-breaker, who makes his initial entrance in *Le Pere Goriot* and plays so important a part in *Illusions Perdues*, and *Splendeurs et Miseres des Courtisanes*. Here we find Vautrin in a favorite situation. He becomes the powerful protector of an unknown young man--much as he picked up Lucien de Rubempre in *Illusions Perdues*, and attempted to aid Rastignac in *Le Pere Goriot*--and devotes all his sinister craft to his protege's material interests. The playwright is careful to preserve some degree of the young man's self-respect. Chance favors the two by providing the unknown hero with worthy parents; and Vautrin's schemes unexpectedly work out for good. As in the story of *Pere Goriot* again, Vautrin, after furthering matrimonial deals and other quasi-benevolent projects, ends in the clutches of the law. Of Raoul little need be said. He is the foil for his dread protector and he is saved from dishonor by a narrow margin. The scene is laid at Paris, just after the second accession of the House of Bourbon, in 1816. Titles and families are in some confusion on account of the change of dynasties. It is therefore an opportune time for Vautrin to manufacture scutcheons as occasion may demand. Since this story of Vautrin is not included in the *Comedie*, it will not be found among the biographical facts recorded in the *Repertory*.

Les Ressources de Quinola, a comedy in a prologue and five acts, was presented at the Theatre de l'Odeon, Paris, March 19, 1842. Souverain published it in an octavo volume. Balzac was disposed to complain bitterly of the treatment this play received (note his preface), but of it may be said, as in the case of its predecessor, that it makes better reading than it must have made acting, for the scenes are loosely constructed and often illogical. Our playwright yet betrays the amateur touch. It is regrettable, too, for he chose an excellent theme and setting. The time is near the close of the sixteenth century, under the rule of Philip II. of Spain and the much-dreaded Inquisition. An inventor, a pupil of Galileo, barely escapes the Holy Office because of having discovered the secret of the steamboat. Referring to the preface again, we find Balzac maintaining, in apparent candor, that he had historic authority for the statement that a boat propelled by steam-machinery had been in existence for a short time in those days. Be that as it may, one can accept the statement for dramatic purposes; and the story of the early inventor's struggles and his servant's "resources" is promising enough to leave but one regret--that the master-romancer did not make a novel instead of a play out of the material. Though this is called a comedy, it contains more than one element of tragedy in it, and the tone is moody and satirical. The climax, with its abortive love episode, is anything but satisfactory.

Pamela Giraud, a drama in five acts, was first presented in the Gaité Theatre, Paris, September 26, 1843. It was published by Marchand in a single octavo volume, in the same year. The action takes place at Paris in 1815-24, during the Napoleonic conspiracies, under Louis XVIII. The Restoration has brought its strong undertow of subdued loyalty for the Corsican--an undertow of plots, among the old soldiers

particularly, which for several years were of concern to more than one throne outside of France. The hero of this play becomes involved in one of the conspiracies, and it is only by the public sacrifice of the young girl Pamela's honor, that he is rescued. Then ensues a clash between policy and duty--a theme so congenial to Balzac, and here handled with characteristic deftness. We notice, also, a distinct improvement in workmanship. Scenes move more easily; dramatic values become coherent; characters stand out from the "chorus" on the stage. Pamela is a flesh-and-blood girl; Jules is real; Joseph is comically individual; Dupre is almost a strong creation, and nearly every one of the other principals is individual.

La Maratre (The Stepmother) is characterized as an "intimate" drama in five acts and eight tableaux. It was first presented at the Theatre-Historique, Paris, May 25, 1848. Its publication, by Michel Levy in the same year, was in brochure form. The time is just a little later than that of Pamela Giraud, and one similar motif is found in the Napoleonic influence still at work for years after Waterloo. Though this influence is apparently far beneath the surface, and does not here manifest itself in open plottings, it is nevertheless vital enough to destroy the happiness of a home--when mixed in the mortar of a woman's jealousy. The action is confined to a single chateau in Normandy. A considerable psychological element is introduced. The play is a genuine tragedy, built upon tense, striking lines. It is strong and modern enough to be suitable, with some changes, for our present day stage. The day of the playwright's immaturity (noticed in the three preceding plays) is past. With this, as with all of Balzac's work, he improved by slow, laborious plodding, gaining experience from repeated efforts until success was attained.

In his dramas he was not to succeed at the first trial, nor the second, nor the third. But here at the fourth he has nearly grasped the secret of a successful play. While at the fifth--Mercadet--we are quite ready to cry "Bravo!" Who knows, if he had lived longer (these plays were written in the last years of their author's life), to what dramatic heights Balzac might have attained!

To Mercadet then we turn for the most striking example of the playwright's powers. This first appeared as Le Faiseur (The Speculator), being originally written in 1838-40. Justice compels us to state, however, that another hand is present in the perfected play. In the original it was a comedy in five acts; but this was revamped and reduced to three acts by M. d'Ennery, before its presentation at the Gymnase Theatre, August 24, 1851. It was then re-christened Mercadet, and took its place as a 12mo brochure in the "Theatrical Library" in the same year. The original five-act version was first published as Mercadet, in Le Pays, August 28, 1851 (probably called forth by the presentation of the play four days earlier), and then appeared in book form, as Le Faiseur, from the press of Cadot, in 1853. It is of interest to note that the play was not presented till over a year subsequent to Balzac's death. The presented version in three acts has generally been regarded as the more acceptable, M. de Lovenjoul, the Balzacian commentator, recognizing its superior claims. It is the form now included in current French editions, and the one followed in the present edition.

Although Mercadet, like the others, excited the ridicule of supercilious critics, it has proven superior to them and to time. As early as the year 1869, the Comedie Francaise--the standard French

stage--added _Mercadet_ to its repertory; and more than one company in other theatres have scored success in its representation. The play contains situations full of bubbling humor and biting satire. Its motif is not sentiment. Instead, it inveighs against that spirit of greed and lust for gain which places a money value even upon affection. But during all the arraignment, Balzac, the born speculator, cannot conceal a sympathy for the wily Mercadet while the promoter's manoeuvres to escape his creditors must have been a recollection in part of some of Balzac's own pathetic struggles. For, like Dumas pere, Balzac was never able to square the debit side of his books--be his income never so great. The author of _Cesar Birotteau_ and _Le Maison Nucingen_ here allows one more view of the seamy side of business.

Structurally, too, the play is successful. With so great an element of chance in the schemes of the speculator, it would have been easy to transcend the limits of the probable. But the author is careful to maintain his balances. Situation succeeds plot, and catastrophe situation, until the final moment when the absconding partner actually arrives, to the astonishment of Mercadet more than all the rest. And with Mercadet's joyful exclamation, "I am a creditor!" the play has reached its logical final curtain.

J. WALKER MCSPADDEN.

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