

SHAKESPEARE AND BELGIUM

IF the great artists of Belgium in past and present times could be called to greet the Master Craftsman of the Globe Theatre, they would all bow before him and do homage, but he in his turn would hail them as brethren in the delineation of single aspects of the humanity and fate that he alone has embraced as a whole. The creator of *Cymbeline* would recognize in Rubens's canvas the full and noble figure of Imogen and that heroic cave in the mountains from which Britain's royal sons stride forth to rouse the game; the mind that conceived Falstaff would smile at the lusty fleshiness of Jordaens and at the scenes of revelry imagined by Jan Steen.

But has not the Belgian soil brought forth any growth that will emulate Shakespeare's finer and sterner creations, such as the singing Ophelia, with her rosemary for remembrance, her pansies for thoughts, or such as the mourning Leontes, whose conscience is scarred by remorse? Our answer lies in the dramas of Maurice Maeterlinck and of Émile Verhaeren.

‘We are such stuff as dreams are made of,’

says the Master, and this lesson the two Belgian dramatists have learned alike, and have interpreted each in his own way. Maeterlinck gropes into the dark realm of the preternatural and from it he lets in voices, breaths, and sounds which the soul answers in mute thrills and shivers, as it answers the spirits and portents in *The Tempest* and in *Julius Caesar*. His slender heroines, Mélisande and the Princess Maleine, flutter in the grip of fate like

‘The bird that hath been limed in a bush.’

Guilt, Wisdom, Destiny, the forces from the contemplation of which his essays were born, are also the protagonists in his earlier plays. In thus refining individual lives into mere playthings for cosmic powers, the poet of the *Blue Bird* seems to have, under Shakespeare's aegis, made an attempt to redeem the genius of Belgium from the taunt of

grossness, and to banish the 'Flemish drunkard' Silenus far from the walled garden of his *béguinage*.

Not so Émile Verhaeren's tragic fervour, which still savours of the national soil as it rises towards the light of heaven. If he has taken example from the Master, it is to saturate his ideals with such full-blooded reality as makes itself felt in *Henry IV* and in *Othello*. The heart-burning repentance and the courage for truth which flash through the action of *The Cloister* may not be lineally traceable to any creation of Shakespeare's ; they belong to the same sphere as the mighty passions that sweep through the Tragedies and the Histories.

Among the many strings of the English poet's harp, Belgium, then, touches two extremes : Maeterlinck awakens the chords of extreme spirituality, his brother dramatist strikes a note that harmonizes more with the old vigour of Flemish art.

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