THE PLAYS OF ARNOLD BENNETT

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the plays of Arnold Bennett. In the years immediately preceding World War I, Bennett was an extremely popular and successful playwright. With the advent of the War, however, Bennett's success as a playwright came to an end. Although Bennett had nine plays produced between 1919 and his death in 1931, only one, Mr. Prohack, received moderate critical and popular acceptance. At the time, this seemed to suggest either that Bennett burned himself out during the War or that he could not adjust to the changes in the theatre -- that his achievement was both opportune and ephemeral. Yet several important factors may have influenced contemporary judgment of Bennett's contribution as a playwright.

Bennett's playwriting technique was similar to his novel-writing technique. He wrote a great deal that was either never published or immediately dismissed as mediocre. He served a long apprenticeship as a playwright from 1894 until 1908, working alone and in collaboration. Yet none of this work appeared on stage. Later, after his initial recognition as a playwright in 1908, he continued to write plays that were never produced. The critical judgment of Bennett's playwriting, then, depends upon the plays chosen to represent his achievement as a playwright.

Perhaps more than other literary works, the play is very susceptible to "external" influences. The choice of director, producer,actors, theatre, and so on, can all have a decisive influence on the acceptance of a play. The changes brought about by the War, for

example, had a profound effect on the public's attitude to the theatre and, apparently, to Bennett's plays. But practical problems can also influence critical perception of a play. For instance, Bennett's Mr. Prohack had a very successful opening with Charles Laughton in the lead. Unfortunately, the lease on the theatre ran out, Laughton accepted new commitments, and what had promised to be a long run ended abruptly.

In addition, Bennett offended theatre critics by declaring that he wrote plays to make money, and that plays were far easier to write than novels. And since he had achieved his first fame as a novelist, Bennett might have been seen as an interloper in the theatre. Probably he did not help his acceptance when, according to Kinley Roby, he described theatregoers as "untrained, child-like intelligences, just arousing themselves to the significance of things".

Now, over fifty years after his death, criticism of Bennett's plays can be more objective. It is "literary criticism" rather than "drama criticism", however, because his plays are seldom produced now. But the critic who carefully reads Bennett's plays can arrive at a fair evaluation of his work.

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CHAPTER ONE

ARNOLD BENNETT

I: The Man

Arnold Bennett was born on May 27, 1867, in Hanley, one of the six towns of the Potteries which became the Five Towns of Bennett's fiction. Arnold was the eldest of six children. His father, Enoch Bennett, had made his way up from the lower middle class through unstinting hard work, and at the age of thirty-four, in 1876, he became a solicitor. He had had to work night and day to pass his Law Society examinations, and the family felt that this contributed to his poor health later on. Enoch Bennett was proud of his material success and his intellectual interests. Eventually he provided a large home for his family with an extensive library.

A number of significant influences on Arnold Bennett's upbringing are reflected in his writing. The very forceful and demanding father is one of these. Bennett's father expected his children to work hard and succeed; but he also demanded intellectual and cultural awareness. The children were given books for presents, and they were expected to read rather than play outside. This autocrat had a serious nervous breakdown in 1899, however, and Arnold Bennett took care of a hopelessly incapacitated father until his death in 1902.

Another strong influence on Bennett was the Methodism which stressed hard work, piety, obedience, thrift, and material success. It had a great deal of emotional appeal with its revival meetings and hymns. Despite the enthusiasm and emotion shown in the church services, however, the Methodists tended to be restrained and unemotional in personal affairs. They did offer help to the poor, nevertheless, and provided educational facilities. Bennett rejected this religion early in his life because he felt it was joyless, but he certainly understood the hold it had on people.

The social and economic lives of the Potteries were also one of Bennett's concerns. Like small towns everywhere, the Potteries had a very structured hierarchy: classes were well defined and roles rigidly enforced. The Potteries also had a harsh economic reality. Children went to work at a very early age and their health was often ruined by dangerous jobs. Conditions had improved by Bennett's time, but he was aware of the suffering that still existed, and remained sympathetic to the working classes throughout his life. The Potteries, of course, were also blighted by the dust and smoke of the local industries. The towns were begrimed with soot and ash. There were huge slag heaps, and narrow, crowded streets. When Bennett became a world traveller, he was overwhelmed by the beauty of other areas, and only later did he learn to appreciate the beauty that could be found in the Six Towns.

Bennett did not seem to be profoundly affected by his formal schooling: the only aspect of school, in fact, that did seem to influence

him was his introduction to French. In 1882 he passed the Cambridge Junior Local Examination. He could have gone to the Newcastle High School and then to university, but decided to leave school at the end of 1883 at the age of sixteen. He immediately joined his father's firm as a clerk while he studied for his matriculation in the evenings. Surprisingly, Bennett failed his Law Examination; but during the same period he learned that new skill, Pitman's shorthand. In 1889 he left for London, and became a shorthand clerk with a firm of solicitors. He was twenty-one.

Bennett stayed in the same law office in London for almost five years. During that time he became fairly comfortable financially, but there were times of great loneliness. He was able to go to the theatre, buy books, and enjoy cultural and athletic pursuits. Eventually Bennett made friends and began to travel in intellectual circles. In 1891 he wrote a parody of a sensational serial for the periodical Tit-Bits, and won twenty guineas. With this encouragement, Bennett began to feel that he could write, unaware that he had before him years of disappointment and frustration. In 1893 he decided to commit himself fully to literature and he obtained the assistant editorship of a women's magazine, Woman. He started work on New Year's Day, 1894. Bennett wrote all kinds of articles for the magazine — gossip columns, household hints, theatrical reviews, cycling information. His reviews of plays and books kept him well informed of current trends. In 1896 he became the editor of Woman. All this time Bennett was becoming more and more familiar with the literary

and theatrical scene, and making friends with similar interests. In 1897, for example, Bennett reviewed a book by H.G. Wells and began a long friendship. By 1897 Bennett himself had written his first novel, A Man From the North, and was beginning his next, Anna of the Five Towns. That year he also made his first visit to France.

In 1900 Bennett gave up his editorship of Woman to become a full-time writer. He made money initially by writing serials for periodicals — The Ghost and The Grand Babylon Hotel being the first. Bennett was an extremely prolific writer. He produced more than eighty published volumes. His personal Journals constitute more than a million words. He wrote novels, plays, pocket philosophies, essays, criticism, reviews, serial stories, short stories, collaborations. Yet Bennett's large income was derived mainly from his enormous journalistic industry.

In 1903 Bennett left for Paris. He had long been an admirer of the French realists, and he thought of Paris as his intellectual wellspring. Bennett eventually made friends in Paris as he had in London, and although, apparently, he never spoke French well, he became the close friend of many French literati. After an unhappy broken engagement, Bennett married Marguerite Soulie, a woman who had come to him seeking a secretarial job. It was 1907, and Bennett had just turned forty. In April, 1912, Bennett returned to live in England for good. With the publication of The Old Wives' Tale in 1908, his reputation as a novelist was assured, and he was becoming quite wealthy.

Each year that passed made Bennett wealthier and better known. As a writer and playwright he suffered the inevitable poor reviews and personal attacks, yet within a decade he had become an extremely important literary personality. His book reviews brought many young writers recognition, and his support and advice were widely sought. Bennett knew practically all the prominent writers of the time — Wells, Shaw, Gide, Virginia Woolf, D.H. Lawrence, Maugham, Noel Coward, James Barrie. By the 1920's, Bennett was a celebrity, the best paid and best known writer in England. Unfortunately, his personal life was not very happy. He suffered from poor health and was something of a hypochondriac. His marriage failed, but he could not get a divorce. He fell in love again late in life, and had a daughter when he was fifty-nine.

In March, 1931, Bennett died after an illness of several months. Newspapers mourned his death on the front pages. He had a large number of close friends and was sadly missed by many people. Most people who knew Bennett genuinely liked him, even though they often made fun of his provincial manners or gaudy dress. Unfortunately, many people seemed to resent the fact that Bennett made so much money from his writing. As a result, an objective measurement of Bennett's literary talent has taken a great deal of time. There is, however, still a great deal of interest in Bennett, and a fair evaluation of his work seems to be gradually emerging.

II: The Playwright

Bennett was best known as a journalist and novelist, and the research he did to write articles for periodicals kept him informed on innumerable topics, including cooking, clothing, fashions, travel, architecture, art, psychology, mysticism, spiritualism, self-improvement. He was well-informed about current affairs and current concerns, and in his journalism responded to the concerns of his readers. He was always very aware of the type of audience that read his work. He was prepared to write for different types of audiences, and tailor his work to suit their tastes. This attitude is also very apparent in Bennett's plays. He wrote to fill the theatre, and he was prepared to re-write to satisfy changing audience taste.

Bennett's training as a novelist is reflected in his concern for accuracy of detail in his plays. The novelists whom Bennett admired — Balzac, the Goncourts, Zola, de Maupassant, Turgenev, and Tolstoy — set out to represent accurately different aspects of life. As the theatre moved away from melodrama, it too became concerned with accuracy and verisimilitude. When novelists like Henry James, John Galsworthy, Somerset Maugham and Bennett began to write for the theatre, their concern for realistic themes and realistic presentation must have been influential. The themes that Bennett dealt with in most of his plays were current and realistic — married life, newspapers, aging, changing values, political intrigue, and so on. Bennett had gained critical acclaim with his realistic novel The Old Wives' Tale before he wrote his first play that

was produced, What the Public Wants, in 1909. Later, he adapted his novels Sacred and Profane Love, Anna of the Five Towns, Buried Alive, and Mr. Prohack for the theatre.

Concern for accurate detail and visual descriptions was characteristic of his novels. Realism would also have to be present in his plays: costumes, stage settings, stage properties, all would have to contribute to a play's verisimilitude. In plays like Milestones, Body and Soul, and A London Life, the places and times represented by the stage background and stage furniture become central to the meaning.

Early in his career as a writer Bennett also wrote reviews of West End plays. When he became assistant editor of Woman in 1894, he wrote a column reviewing current plays and books. By this time, modern realism had begun its triumph over the melodrama, but of course there was an inevitable tension between entertainment and didacticism. Bennett continued to write reviews of plays even as he wrote his own. In 1909, for example, Bennett was apprehensive about meeting John Galsworthy because he had written a cool review of Galsworthy's play Strife in New Age. In the 1908 preface to Cupid and Commonsense, Bennett recounted:

> For five years I was dramatic critic for several London papers in turn, and in this capacity I attended nearly every first night from 1895 to 1900. I count several West End theatrical managers and leading actors among my friends, and I have talked at great length with them.[1]

In any case, the role of a theatre critic must have forced Bennett to develop a very clear set of criteria by which to judge plays.

Arnold Bennett was not only a playwright and drama critic, he was also a man of the theatre. He joined the board of directors of the Lyric Theatre in Hammersmith in 1918, and also acted as business manager for seven years. The founder of the theatre was Nigel Playfair, and the Lyric made significant contributions to the development of drama in England. The Lyric opened in 1918 with A.A. Milne's first play, Make Believe, which featured the young actors Herbert Marshall, Hermione Baddeley, and Leslie Banks. Real triumph for the theatre came in 1920, however, with Gay's The Beggar's Opera, adapted by Bennett. The play revealed the talent of the stage designer, Lovat Fraser, who "inaugurated a new era in English scene design. The result was a change from 'historical reconstruction' to 'simplified realism'."[2]

Bennett was very familiar, then, with all aspects of the theatre — play selection, theatrical contracts, theatre finances, set design, casting -- all the minutiae of play production. He knew about innovations in the theatre and had seen theatrical theory turned into stagecraft. After 1922, Bennett's involvement in the theatre was maintained through Dorothy Cheston, an actress who became his mistress.

Unfortunately, Bennett often lost money in theatrical ventures. For example, a company formed to produce plays at the Court Theatre, Sloan Square, failed after a few months with Bennett losing several hundred pounds. When Dorothy Cheston tried to contribute to the family finances by producing a revival of Milestones, it lost money. In fact, it would seem that near the end of his life the theatre was not a joy for

Bennett. He noted in his journal of March 16, 1930: "We dined at the Savoy. Dorothy carried theatrical talk to excess, so that I had to protest very firmly. I protested throughout dinner. Theatrical talk is a tremendous strain on my nerves."[3]

It is difficult to say how much Bennett was influenced by his contemporaries in the theatre. He was part of the modern movement in the theatre dominated by such playwrights as Strindberg, Ibsen, Chekov, and Shaw. That movement is so broad, of course, that there are many sub-headings, and exceptions, to general tendencies. In England, the "new theatre" was pioneered by the Incorporated Stage Society founded in 1899 by Shaw and other playwrights. The Stage Society produced new and experimental British and foreign plays which were otherwise unlikely to receive public performances. It produced ten of Shaw's plays, as well as plays by Harley Granville Barker, St. John Hankin, Somerset Maugham, and Bennett. In 1909, it put on Bennett's Cupid and Commonsense and What the Public Wants. According to Margaret Drabble, however, Bennett was a little uncomfortable with the Society.

> Bennett was inclined to regard them [The Stage Society] as an arty lot, and made fun of their more avant-garde and poetic productions in the Regent. He was not much interested in the revolutionary staging techniques of Granville Barker: he would have been more at home with a commercial organization. Still, it was something, and he became very excited by and involved in rehearsals.[4]

The Stage Society also presented the foreign dramatists Tolstoy, Gorky, Chekhov, Turgenev, Brieux, Curel, Hauptmann, and Ibsen. At the

same time, the English theatre was influenced by the success of writers like Sir James Barrie, Noel Coward, and Edward Knoblock. Bennett was familiar with all these contemporary playwrights, and his plays utilize the social realism of Ibsen, the irreverent satire of Shaw, the drawing-room wit of Coward. Bennett was not a great innovator like Ibsen or Shaw, but worked within the movement of the time and introduced his own concerns and viewpoint.

The British theatre in Bennett's time was certainly undergoing change. Allardyce Nicoll agrees with St. John Ervine's statement that "the revolutionary change in the character of the theatre" occurred after 1901.[5] Nicoll argues that there were playwrights of the nineteenth century (Wilde, Pinero, Jones) and the new playwrights of the twentieth century (Shaw, Barrie, Maugham, Galsworthy, Coward). Although Nicoll recognizes transitional playwrights and styles, he believes that a new start was made in the British theatre after 1901. Clement Scott, the editor of The Theatre, opposed the Ibsen model and prevented its popular acceptance in Britain during the final years of the Victorian age. After 1900, however, playwrights began to use the term "modern drama" to explain their own theatre and to bludgeon the "out of date". Generally speaking, the term "modern theatre" meant a self-consciousness about the theatre, a serious examination of theatrical theories, a belief in the theatre of ideas as opposed to the theatre of entertainment, a rejection of customary conventions, and a concern with the future. Along with this went the belief that artistic success and financial success were inimical.

In fact, the extreme position was that commercial failure was proof of artistic success.

The modern playwrights inherited a theatre which was very popular and vigorous. At the beginning of the century, the London West End was crowded with theatre-goers in the evening. There was a rapid increase in new theatre construction during this period (The Apollo, 1901; the new Gaiety, 1903; the New, 1903; the Aldwych, 1905; the Scala, 1905; the Strand, 1905; the Hicks, 1906), and extensive remodelling of old theatres. The theatres were dominated by three or four distinct groups. The first group was the actor-managers (Herbert Beerbohm Tree, George Alexander, Charles Wyndham, etc.). The second group was the "impresarios" who controlled their own theatres. Then there were the groups specializing in melodrama, and the companies devoted to musicals and variety.

As the century progressed, however, the actor-managers declined in importance and the legitimate theatre itself faced stiff competition. The theatre became increasingly commercial, and the music-hall became popular. In 1911, for example, sixteen variety houses were built, and in that year the King attended a variety show rather than the legitimate theatre for a gala performance. And yet a rival was waiting for the music hall: cinematography was making rapid advances, London theatres were being used for film displays, and soon the music-halls had to introduce films into their programmes. The legitimate theatre welcomed the Cinema because film studios in England were established near London and offered

actors jobs, and because the Cinema did not affect the playhouses though it shattered the variety empire. Soon, however, actors and actresses would play the legitimate theatre, the variety halls, and participate in films, depending on the opportunities.

Just as the interaction with the variety hall and cinema was new for the theatre at the beginning of the century, so internationalism in the theatre was also new. Plays from Sweden, Russia, and Belgium were introduced in Britain and many of them were described as "modern". These plays could be performed by the repertory theatres and play-producing societies that were growing in Britain. In addition, improvements in travel meant that successes in New York could be on the London stage in a matter of weeks, and foreign companies travelled to London's West End in increasing numbers and presented plays in various languages.

There were, then, many forces influencing the "modern" dramatist as the twentieth century advanced. There were the music-hall variety shows, the cinema, the one-act plays, the repertory companies, the pageants, the foreign experiments, the regional theatres, and so on. Arnold Bennett participated in much of this diverse activity. He wrote one-act plays and film scripts; he championed continental drama; he had his plays performed at regional theatres; he managed a repertory company. His plays reflect the ideas of a man very much a part of the general theatrical movements of the time.

Notes for Chapter One

[1]James Hepburn (ed.), Arnold Bennett: The Critical Heritage (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), p. 119.

[2]Oscar Brockett and Robert R. Findlay, Century of Innovation: A History of European and American Theatre and Drama Since 1870 (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1973), p. 446.

[3]Reginald Pound, Arnold Bennett (New York: Kennikat Press, 1952), p. 342.

[4]Margaret Drabble, Arnold Bennett (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974), p. 166.

[5]Allardyce Nicoll, English Drama 1900-1930 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), p. 1.

CHAPTER TWO

POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CRITICISM

A major characteristic of modern drama was the adoption of the idea that the theatre must be didactic. It was no longer acceptable to write a play merely to entertain. Moreover, modern drama dealt primarily with contemporary and secular problems. This meant that the whole framework of political and social custom came under careful scrutiny and criticism. Old habits and traditions were seen as built upon a foundation of hypocrisy. It was the duty of the playwright to expose these hypocrisies by showing how unfair or illogical the practices had become. The modern playwright believed the nineteenth-century political and social structure was based upon a deliberate moral blindness. Whether the writer came from Russia, Germany, Scandinavia, France or Britain, the point of view seemed almost identical. Society had become cruel and unfair because the individual was trapped by social customs and values which were evil.

Frank Chandler points out that the democratic trend of art in the nineteenth century was expressed first in poetry, then in prose fiction, and lastly in the drama.[1] In the first half of the nineteenth century, plays on the whole were romantic and artificial — attempts to escape from reality. In France, the romantics were followed by "L'école du bon sens", and Augier and Dumas fils wrote plays that displayed social conditions

that demanded reform. Chandler believes, however, that it was Ibsen more than any other who made the drama of social criticism a living fact. Since Ibsen, all social and political issues have been considered legitimate subject matter for the drama. A number of writers developed Ibsen's drama of social criticism — Bjornson, Brieux, Tolstoy, Galsworthy, Wedekind, Shaw, Moore.[2] By the time Bennett began writing for the theatre, then, this tradition was well established. Bennett's plays of political or social criticism are not innovative, therefore. By the time Bennett wrote these plays it was not good enough merely to have a political or social message. The message must be embodied in an effective dramatic form.

I

In What the Public Wants Bennett examined the issue of the popular press and the popular theatre. The economic and social changes in Britain in the nineteenth century gave rise to a population that was interested in and could afford newspapers and the theatre. With universal male suffrage and the campaigns of the suffragettes, there was a genuine fear among the upper classes that the "mob" would eventually take over the political system. Many social philosophers had hoped that with universal education the great mass of people would strive to better themselves by reading elevated literature and attending serious theatre. When large numbers of people turned to the sensational press and to music-hall entertainment, there was both disillusionment and anxiety. If

the common person were going to vote, it was important that he vote the right way. If his opinion were going to be formed by the penny press, those who controlled the presses must inculcate the right ideas. Yet the new press barons tended to be social upstarts whose only purpose in running periodicals was to make money. By saying that they catered to public tastes, they argued that they ran a truly democratic press that acted in the best interest of its readers. Of course, the argument continues today, except that we talk instead about the "mass media", particularly television, rather than popular newspapers.

In Bennett's play, the great press baron is Sir Charles Worgan. He runs a whole string of newspapers and magazines. Each periodical is run with "snap", and each makes a profit. The empire includes magazines for young boys, women, and different interest groups. Worgan's religious papers present a particularly vexing problem. He believes that there is a great deal of money in religion, but his papers have not been selling well. He publishes the Sabbath Chimes, The Sunday Comrade, The Pleasant Sunday Afternoon Record, Sunday Tales, The Sunday School Teacher's Friend, and Golden Words. All of these papers have the same editor who, unfortunately, doesn't understand the concept of "snap". Worgan orders that he be taken out to lunch and given the proper guidance. The flagship of the publishing empire, however, is the Daily Mercury. It has a circulation of almost a million, and Worgan will use any method necessary to increase sales. Worgan is even prepared to fan the fires of war to sell newspapers. Worgan's brother, Francis, had heard nothing about war

in The Times and the Manchester Guardian, but when he read the Mercury he discovered that England and Germany were at each other's throats. Worgan defends himself by saying:

> I'm told I'm unscrupulous because I 'fan the war fever', as it's called, so as to send up my circulation. I'm told I want a war. Damned nonsense! Nothing but damned nonsense! All I want is for the public to have what it wants. It's the public that would like a war, not me. The public enjoys the mere thought of a war. Proof: my circulations.[3]

Of course, five years from the publication of this play, England and Germany would go to war. But Bennett was not prescient. The general feeling at the time was that American intervention in Cuba in 1898 had been brought about by the "yellow press" of William Randolph Hearst.

Blowing up international incidents and appealing to jingoism was only part of Worgan's formula for selling newspapers, however. The other part of the formula was to appeal to the prurient taste of readers. Francis Worgan discovered the type of headings that appeared in Worgan's Courier: "Colonel as co-respondent", "Child-cruelty in vicarage", "Strange scene in a West-End flat", etc. When Francis is critical of this type of journalism, Sir Charles replies, "Of course, superior people may laugh - but that's what the public wants. I've proved it." (What the Public Wants, p. 36.) And Sir Charles adds that the front-page ad for uric acid costs three hundred pounds for one insertion, noting "I'm a business man, and that's what I call business. Put that in your pipe and smoke it." (What the Public Wants, p. 36.)

Having proved himself a successful businessman in the newspaper business, Sir Charles applies the same theories to the theatre when he decides to become involved. Sir Charles buys a theatre when he falls in love with an actress. Earlier Francis had decided he would like to be a drama critic on the Mercury and stated: "I've got an idea that the English theatre must be a great joke." To this, Sir Charles replies: "I never go myself. But they say it's a most frantic bore." (What the Public Wants, p. 46.) Having acquired a theatre, Sir Charles must contend with Holt St. John, the theatre manager. St. John is the epitome of the intellectual theatre man. He is not interested in making money: he wants great theatre. As a result, his theatre has always underpaid its actors and staff. St. John states to Sir Charles: "It's no part of my scheme to produce certainties. . . . .My scheme is to produce masterpieces." When Sir Charles replies: "And if the public won't come to see them?", St. John rejoins defiantly: "So much the worse for the public! The loss is theirs!" (What the Public Wants, p. 56.) The result of this argument is that St. John resigns from the theatre and Sir Charles goes on to make it a financial success by choosing tried plays and advertising widely.

Sir Charles' downfall is before him, however. In a typical Bennett touch, Sir Charles must return home to Bursley to introduce his fiancée to his mother. Back in Bursley, Sir Charles is a celebrity with no power. His elder brother and his mother are not impressed with his wealth and fame. Instead, they are scandalized by the crime articles that Sir Charles runs in his Sunday papers. In an unhappy coincidence, Sir Charles'

paper is about to run an article on the family of a close friend of Mrs. Worgan. Both Sir Charles' mother and brother demand that he stop the article. Sir Charles refuses. But his fiancée, Emily Vernon, "caresses" a change of mind out of him. The incident shows everyone there, nevertheless, that Sir Charles has a different set of moral standards from his family. As a result, Emily breaks the engagement. She says boldly to Sir Charles, "We differ as to the precise point where shame ought to begin." Sir Charles doesn't understand her point of view and decides to go blindly ahead with his newspaper crusades. He decides that the newest crusade for the Mercury will be women's suffrage. As the play ends, Sir Charles is determined to carry on as he has in the past, and he is certain he will end in the House of Lords. Francis warns him, however, to prepare for the rainy day "when the public wants something better than you can give it."

Bennett's portrait of the ruthless and successful newspaper tycoon points out a number of social injustices. The obvious first point is that money buys respectability, power, and social position. Sir Charles has been pursued for a number of years by a Lady Calder. He could easily marry into the upper class and forget his Five Towns background. And after he contributes one hundred thousand pounds to Oxford he is immediately granted a Doctorate. Undoubtedly, his knighthood would eventually lead to a seat in the House of Lords. Sir Charles is a success in part because he exploits a field which the upper classes disdain. In this sense, Sir Charles triumphs because he comes from the middle classes of

the provinces. But, at the same time, he has left behind the middle-class morality of Bursley. Bennett suggests that there is a moral system in the provinces that is intrinsically superior to the amoral desire for success that is so apparent in London. The interesting thing about Sir Charles is that he sees nothing wrong in his actions. The persuasions of his mother, his brothers, and his fiancée all fall on deaf ears. Sir Charles has become one of those people who believe they are doing the right thing if they receive popular approval — there is no guideline for their actions beyond that.

The central idea of the play, however, is the proper role of newspapers and the theatre. Each medium or activity is shown to have a choice. It can attempt to educate and elevate its audience, or it can cater to the audience's baser instincts. The particular audience in this case is the newly educated class. Bennett points out that there will always be a small but significant audience for good newspapers and good theatre. Obviously the "public" enjoys and will patronize sensational newspapers and frivolous theatre, but Bennett's play condemns those who provide this fare. Bennett does not believe the "democratic" idea that the public should always be given what it wants, whether it be war, gutter newspapers, or music-hall theatre. He does believe that those who control newspapers and the theatres can either raise the level of public sensitivity or lower it. The warning that Francis gives Sir Charles at the end of the play (that one day the public will want something better than Sir Charles can provide) is Bennett's hope.

The ideas presented in this play were not new, however. In fact, by the time of Bennett's play, the concern over the popular press and the success of the music-halls had become a cliché. The play depends for its originality and force on the character of Sir Charles Worgan. The play revolves around this larger-than-life character. In many respects, he is similar to Shaw's Andrew Undershaft in Major Barbara (1905). Undershaft believed that the greatest sin was to be poor. Worgan believes that the greatest sin is not to take advantage of a gullible public. There was a time when there was a general fascination with the energetic, amoral, ruthless, charming self-made millionaire. But even by 1909 this person may have become a stereotype. Sir Charles is shown in the play as a time-conscious organization man, a stricken lover, a dutiful son, a bull in the china shop of culture, a clever popularizer, and so forth. In all these scenes, Sir Charles dominates the action without arousing any empathy or prompting any insight. In this case, Bennett has taken a character through a series of incidents that should have caused some emotional response and perhaps even a change in character. Yet Sir Charles seems unaffected by the people around him. Even the highest emotional conflicts leave him untouched. He remains a "flat" character. Because of that, the audience cannot respond emotionally to the play and it remains an uninspiring social tract.

II

In the autumn of 1907 Bennett began his great masterpiece The Old Wives' Tale — 200,000 words long. A visit to London was so distracting, however, that he put that novel aside and in January and February of 1908 he wrote Buried Alive. He said in his Journal about Buried Alive: ". . . it was published immediately, and was received with majestic indifference by the English public, an indifference that has persisted . . ."[4] In 1913, however, Bennett adapted Buried Alive for the stage and called it The Great Adventure. The play opened successfully at the Kingsway Theatre and ran for 673 London performances. In June, 1914, he celebrated the 500th performance by having dinner with the Granville Barkers after seeing the performance. They were joined unexpectedly by Asquith, the Prime Minister. With the beginning of the War, however, the receipts for the play began to drop. Nevertheless the monetary success of the play encouraged Bennett to continue to write for the theatre. By the early 1920's, for example, Bennett had received more money from Milestones and The Great Adventure than from all the novels and the other plays put together.[5]

The Great Adventure uses the familiar plot device of exchanged identities. In this case a very famous and wealthy painter, Ilam Carve, is mistaken for his dying valet, Albert Shawn. Carve has just returned to England to escape the clutches of a husband-hunting woman. Since he has spent his life as a recluse and on the Continent, he is not known personally in England, although his paintings are famous. When the doctor

comes to treat Albert Shawn, he concludes that Shawn is Carve because he is wearing Carve's dressing gown and lying in his bed. Carve decides to take advantage of the situation because he detests fame. When Shawn dies, the exchange of identities becomes final.

The "death" of Ilam Carve brings complications, however. With his death, Carve becomes a national treasure. The Church of England and the Catholic Church fight over who should have the right to bury him. Finally, national prestige demands that he be buried as an Anglican in Westminster Abbey, although Carve had no religious affiliations. The funeral becomes a national tribute to the arts, with thousands of people mourning Carve, even though none knew him as an individual. In addition, Carve leaves a fortune to encourage artists and to support a national gallery. Carve becomes a national hero in death, despite his obscurity while alive.

Luckily Ilam Carve is able to step into a new life immediately. Shawn had arranged to meet a woman through a marriage agency. When the woman, Janet Cannot, shows up, Carve finds her attractive and they marry. Janet has a small inheritance and they can live modestly but comfortably in Putney using the name Shawn. Carve finds the anonymity in Putney very pleasant, and he returns to his painting only as a hobby. Janet, unfortunately, is unable to appreciate his painting and is disappointed when he gives her a special painting for her birthday. She knows his paintings are of little value because she has already tried to

sell one. Carve has already sold a few of his paintings himself to a local art supplies dealer to pay for his paints, canvases, and brushes.

The life of Carve and Janet suddenly changes, however, because Janet's inherited income from brewery stocks is halved. Despite Janet's scepticism, Carve volunteers to increase their income by selling his paintings. Just at that moment, unfortunately, a picture dealer from London by the name of Ebag shows up. He has been buying the paintings Carve sold to the local art supplies dealer. In turn, he has sold them at a huge profit to an American collector named Texel. A crisis has just occurred because Texel thinks that Ebag has sold him phoney Carves since one of the paintings was obviously painted after Carve's "death". Texel is now preparing to take Ebag to court, and Ebag needs Carve as a witness. The plot is further complicated by the appearance of Mrs. Albert Shawn and her twin sons. She hasn't seen her husband for twenty-five years. Shawn apparently deserted her before the children were even born. But Mrs. Shawn is prepared to testify that Carve is Albert Shawn.

The whole crisis is finally resolved by Lord Leonard Alcar. He arranged the magnificent funeral of "Carve" in the Abbey. Now he would like to avoid the horrendous complications the truth would cause. Lord Alcar arranges to bring all the interested parties together: Cyrus Carve (Ilam Carve's cousin and closest relative), Ebag, Texel, Janet Cannot, and Ilam Carve. Finally Ilam Carve agrees to identify himself to everybody's satisfaction. The sale of his paintings is resolved, and Carve can remain dead and anonymous.

In this play Bennett examined humorously the role of money in peoples' lives and the attitude that various people have to art. In the first scene, for example, the doctor is very reverential to the patient he thinks is the wealthy and renowned Ilam Carve. He is curt and abrupt to the real Carve because he thinks he is a valet. Similarly, Carve is able to buy obsequious servants at the Grand Babylon Hotel, although they suspect his ability to pay.

In his ironic examination of art, Bennett presents the various attitudes to the paintings of Carve. Bennett presents the successful artist, the art dealer, the art student, the art collector, the art patron, and the uninitiated. Carve is a rarity in the art world — he is wealthy and his name is well known. He could have lived as a celebrity if he had chosen to do so. But Carve cannot stand the trouble of being a celebrity and he constantly flees public attention. For Ebag, art is primarily a means of livelihood. Although he understands and appreciates art, the thrill for him comes from making money from art. Texel, the art collector, continues to buy paintings even though he is going blind. The collecting is important, not the appreciation of the work. The art patron, Lord Alcar, sees art as a reflection of national pride. England must be judged in part on how it treats its artists. That is why Alcar arranged the Westminster Abbey funeral. It clearly showed that England is a civilized and sensitive nation. Of course if Carve returned to life it would be a national disgrace, and at this level art and politics become interwoven. The general rule is that artists are neglected during their lives and

revered in death. It is also true that nations despise artists but worship art, as if there were no connection.

In Janet Cannot, Bennett presents the opinion of most people. She cannot understand why anyone would pay hundreds of pounds for a painting. Or if a painting is valuable, she believes it must be a beautiful landscape or include a person or place the buyer knows. Moreover, she wonders why artists want more art galleries when most of them are empty except when it rains. She notes that the lineup to the cinema is far different from the empty National Gallery. And yet Carve is quite at peace with Janet. He needs to paint, but he doesn't need either large amounts of money or adulation. Janet is the perfectly domesticated wife, able to pamper her husband, and she is free of any artistic temperament or pretensions. The parallels with Bennett's life are interesting.

This was one of Bennett's more successful plays - and it is easy to see why. It has a very well constructed plot with plausible events and crises. Although the case of mistaken identity is somewhat far-fetched, it seems plausible as Bennett creates the situation. As each new revelation occurs, a new crisis develops, but the solution to each seems natural. Moreover, in this play Bennett has some really interesting characters: the eccentric artist, the earthy wife, the flirtatious art student, the conniving priest, the greedy doctor. The play moves along quickly as the interaction of plot and character keeps the interest of the audience alive. And holding the play together as a coherent whole, Bennett has the ironic examination of the attitudes to art. The play has no dull or tedious

scenes. Bennett succeeded in writing a play that is very entertaining, yet he forced the audience to examine some of its national and personal foibles.

III

In the summer of 1918 The Title was presented at the Royalty Theatre, London. At the time, Bennett was heavily involved with his job at the Ministry of Information under Lord Beaverbrook. The play had 285 performances in London, but was not successful in the provinces and was a failure in New York. At the end of the year Bennett himself was offered a reward for his war work — a knighthood in the new Order of the British Empire instituted by King George V. Bennett probably would have accepted an honour recognizing his contribution to literature, but he did not want one for his war work. The sentiments expressed in The Title would have made the acceptance of an honour difficult in any case. When the subject came up again later, Bennett snorted, "Give it to Harry Lauder!"

The Title is a three-act comedy that takes place over three days in 1918. The comedic situation revolves around familiar battles of the sexes, but includes a battle between the "old-fashioned" woman and the "modern" girl. The conflict is based upon the acceptance of a title from the Government. The battles of the sexes take place between Arthur Culver and Hermione Culver, and between Hildegarde Culver and Tranto.

Arthur Culver is a very capable and successful Treasury official. He is responsible for maintaining the Government's fiscal integrity as the war effort drains the budget. Hermione Culver is a traditional woman. According to Bennett's introductory notes, "She is always fully conscious of the privileges and advantages of being a woman . . . she is usually determined to get her own way, and nearly always, with the help of her cleverness and attractiveness and unscrupulousness, she does get it." Hildegarde Culver, their daughter, is a "modern" girl. Again according to Bennett's notes, "She has the charm of youth, without in the least pretending to rival her mother's highly accomplished femininity." Hildegarde is a brilliant writer who writes under a pseudonym for a newspaper. It is her article rejecting the concept of titles that leads to a family squabble. Tranto, her publisher, has fallen in love with Hildegarde, but she is very concerned about defending her individuality.

Bennett creates his humour by showing the subtle shifts of power that occur within most families. In theory, Arthur Culver is the head of the family and maintains his power because of his prestigious job. In fact, Hermione Culver gets her way by being uncompromisingly pleasant. Hildegarde realizes just how powerful her mother is, but she cannot bring herself to use her mother's methods, which she clearly perceives. At first Hildegarde despises her mother's feminine trickery, but at the end she knows that the only way to defeat her mother is to use the same techniques. John Culver, the seventeen-year-old son, knows that his mother controls the household. But he cannot use feminine sublety. He

finally overcomes his mother by being brutal. He threatens to join the war as a pilot. His mother must give in to this threat, although the tactic is hardly fair and not acceptable to adults involved in the psychological battles between men and women. John, of course, won't really understand the rules of the game until he has a wife of his own.

The specific use of power has to do with Arthur Culver's accepting the title that has been offered to him. In Act I we find out that Arthur, Hildegarde and John are all opposed to titles. Arthur realizes, however, that his wife will be delighted to accept one. Arthur must prepare his wife for the refusal, then. He manages to do this by discussing the hypocrisy of the annual Honours List. When Hildegarde says, "The strange thing to me is that decent people condescend to receive titles at all", Culver replies, "Decent people have wives, and their wives lead them by the nose. That's why decent people take honours." When Mrs. Culver exclaims, "Well, I think it's monstrous!", Culver seems to have a solid position.[6] Moreover, he plans to make his position almost impregnable over dinner by enlisting Tranto's help. But the whole plan fails when Mrs. Culver hears the news over the phone and rushes to thank Culver and scold him for being a tease.

The rest of the play involves Culver, Hildegarde, and John trying to persuade Mrs. Culver to give up the title. She is adamant in demanding that Arthur accept the title, however, and using her guile she insists that that is what Arthur wants. Only with John's threat does she finally capitulate and promise meekly, "I hate to influence him, but for your

sakes I'll try to persuade him to alter his decision and refuse it [title]."(The Title, p. 85.) John is triumphant because his method has worked and Hildegarde's has not.

The plot then takes an unusual twist as the person (Sampson Straight) whose name Hildegarde used as a pseudonym shows up. The real person is a petty crook looking for money. However, his name, in place of Arthur Culver's, has appeared in the Honours List in tribute to his clever writing. The Culvers and Tranto now face a real dilemma. If the Government honours Straight, it will be honouring a person who doesn't exist, a criminal, or a woman. In any of these cases, the Government will look ridiculous and fall. Yet the Government must continue in order to continue the war. The solution, of course, is for Arthur to accept the title for the sake of his country. The play ends with Mrs. Culver triumphant, and with Hildegarde and Tranto in love, ready to begin their battle in married life.

The play is a good drawing-room comedy. The battle of wits among the protagonists is really quite funny. The play does not depend upon the brilliant aphorisms of an Oscar Wilde, the witty repartee of a Noel Coward, or the social commentary of a Bernard Shaw. And yet it does contain all these elements. The success of the play derives from the essential natures of the central characters. Each of them is determined to get his or her own way. We can respond with some hilarity as Culver's logic battles Mrs. Culver's guileful coyness, or Hildegarde's blunt honesty engages Tranto's worldly-wise naivete. As new events occur, each

character must take stock of his or her position and advance again to do battle with tricks successful in the past. Sometimes logic wins; sometimes coyness; sometimes honesty; sometimes cleverness; sometimes strength; sometimes weakness. But the combatants are always held together by their love for one another, and by their love of battle itself. It doesn't matter who wins at the end of the play because we know there never will be an end. Love's battles go on and on, and for a dispassionate viewer they are quite funny. Bennett realized that watching other people fight about great things and trivial things can be extremely amusing, especially if we suddenly understand that the characters on stage could be us.

IV

Bennett attempted a political satire some years later, perhaps thinking of his own experiences in World War I.

The Bright Island was produced by the Stage Society at the Aldwych Theatre in 1925. Bennett said of the reviews: "The worst Press any play of mine ever had." Shaw had read the play before it was produced and wrote to Bennett that

> Humanity cannot stand one hundred and fifty minutes unrelieved scoffing, no matter how witty it is. There must be refuges for the affection, the admiration, the detestation of the audience; or else you must fill the gaps with refuges for its concupiscence and ferocity, as the Restoration playwrights did, or enchant it with all the art of the opera and the ballet . . . .

Later Shaw wrote,

> There are gleams and strivings in that play which seem to indicate destiny. But like all inveterate novelists you will not take the theatre seriously enough. And you will study the wrong models. You have nothing to learn from Scribe and Co., and everything to learn from Beethoven.[7]

In this play Bennett uses the incident of British aristocrats arriving at an undiscovered island to make comments upon British social and political ideas. The play is not as philosophical and sophisticated as The Tempest, or as bitingly satirical as Gulliver's Travels. Bennett uses a mild satire for comedic effect. He satirizes traditional formality, democracy, the women's movement, aristocracy, government, bureaucracy, economic theories, and several other sacred cows. To this plot device Bennett adds some traditional characters from the commedia dell'arte — Capitan, Harlequin, Pantaloon — as inhabitants of the island. These characters from a traditional art form are limited to symbolic roles — even if the roles changed over the hundreds of years that the commedia dell'arte existed. Bennett's reason for using them would seem to be to indicate to the audience immediately that character development is not part of his plan and to establish immediately a slap-stick mood.

As the play opens, Susan Maddox and James Maddox come ashore. They are members of "the English governing class". Susan has become an explorer because she has tired of dance-clubs and cocktails. James is a British naval officer with an inbred sense of his own superiority. At first they think the island might be "one of those bally crown colonies". When Capitan appears, however, they realize they have discovered something quite different. Years ago a British ship was wrecked on the island and

there were three survivors. Now the inhabitants try to ape British customs and institutions. The process was further encouraged when "a box with immense quantities of English papers in it floated ashore". Susan and James, as part of their British right, want to see the king immediately. First of all, however, the Capitan points out the formal procedures and formal bribes that must be observed. And when the Doctor and Harlequin appear, the ritual becomes even more complicated. Harlequin describes the ceremony necessary to appear before the king:

> It will take about two hours—say two hours and a quarter. At the grand gate of the inner palace you will fill up the customary forms, giving the names, weights and ages at death—if dead—of your male and female ancestors up to the fourth generation. Then after the customary payments you will pass into the dissolving rooms—one for each sex—strip naked, submit to be searched, and clothe yourself in the costumes of audience. For your own garments you will take a receipt for which you will pay the customary fee. At the foot of the grand stair your portraits will be drawn, for purposes of identification, by the special artist attached to the Head Groom of the Ladder, and for this operation also you will pay the customary fee.[8]

Luckily, King Pierrot appears and languidly greets his visitors. Pierrot explains to his visitors some of the customs of the island, including the tradition that each man must have two wives and each woman must have two husbands, permanent officials run the island working six hours a day, the industrial population of the North does all the dirty work, all officials may be bribed, and so on. Pierrot doesn't agree with all these customs, however, and asks Susan and James to help him lead a revolution. Pierrot had recently seen conditions in the North

and he hopes to improve them. Before Pierrot can lead his revolution, though, the local democratic leader, Pantaloon, comes to power. Pierrot willingly leaves his throne.

After Pantaloon takes over the country he faces a general strike in the North, a counter-revolution by the aristocracy, a protest from the bureaucracy, and galloping inflation. Not only that, the new regime has made the mistake of letting the common people take dance lessons. Now no work is being done. In desperation, the court and Pantaloon turn to James Maddox and then to "a feminist", the elder daughter of Pantaloon, Isabella, to save the island. As the play ends James and Isabella appear ready to marry each other and govern the island.

The Bright Island is mildly entertaining as a political farce, but the play suffers from banal conversation and too little real action or wit. Most of Bennett's observations are accurate, but the observations are not new or cleverly presented. Phrases such as, "All men are afraid of all women . . ., and most women are afraid of each other", and "Students are always tories when reform is in the air, and always radical when reaction is in the air", are not clever enough to give the play sparkle. With an old plot device, the uncertain use of the commedia dell'arte tradition, and cliché ridden dialogue, the play is very uninspired. The Bright Island has only a few bright moments to relieve the long tedium of a failed comedy.

V

A play that better combines human relationships and politics is London Life.

This play reflects Bennett's life: it is the story of "provincials" who come to London seeking fame and success. For some, London does mean both success and happiness: for others it means failure and despair. More particularly, the play examines political life in London.

The central character in the play is Simon Blackshaw. He is a successful lawyer from Bursley who is committed to social reform. Because Bursley is not a big enough stage for his talents, he has accepted a partnership in London. Eventually Blackshaw becomes a political force in the House of Commons and is given the post of Colonial Secretary in the Cabinet. His career is prematurely ended, however, because he accepts a stock market proposal that compromises his position. Along the way, he and his wife grow apart and he falls in love with Mrs. Oriana Opletree, a woman whose intellectual "salon" attracts political power brokers. At the end of the play Blackshaw is plotting his return to politics representing Bursley, and he is re-united with his wife. His last speech indicates the ambiguity of his position, "Power! Power! The cure for every disappointment! . . . Ideals are worth living for. Nothing else is. We must stick to our ideals."[9]

The play also has a number of stock characters: the politician's wife who fades into obscurity; the reluctant husband pushed into politics by an ambitious wife; a Jewish financier manipulating politicians; an old

roue pursuing a young girl; an idealistic journalist; an actress who goes from poverty and obscurity to fame and fortune. And the fates of all these characters depend upon the master politician, Winfred Holyoke, the new prime minister. Since Holyoke himself is capricious rather than judicious, their fates are determined by the whimsical use of power.

The play is, then, a study of the use of power — political, sexual, and financial. Simon Blackshaw uses these powers in his rise to prominence. He does become an extremely powerful man in his own right. But he is defeated by characters with more power in each of these areas — Holyoke, Oriana Opletree, and Howard Nathan. And yet Blackshaw is not a tragic figure. He never really seems committed enough to political influence, love, or money to be destroyed by their loss. He is a man battered and bruised by fortune, but as the play ends he is returning to the fray with at least an ironic, if not a cynical, viewpoint. In fact the play is basically satirical and humorous. Yet the suicide of Maurice Opletree underlines the serious implications in power struggles. Not all people can escape merely bruised.

The success of the play does not depend upon character or theme, however. It depends upon the structure. It is a very "well made" play. There are three acts and nine scenes. The action covers some twelve years. In Act I the characters are introduced in their "provincial" beginnings. The characters have made their decisions to go to London. For each of them there is a clear challenge, and there is the added burden of hurting other people in Blackshaw's and Oriana Opletree's

actions. Act I ends, then, with a strong sense of anticipation as these characters converge on London.

Act II takes place eleven years later, and all the central characters have found success in London. Blackshaw, Riggs-Falkiner, and Oriana Opletree are political powers. Howard Nathan is a successful financier and newspaper owner. Georgie Dream is a popular actress. Maria Blackshaw and Maurice Opletree, unfortunately, are miserable. Each of the scenes in Act II includes tension and suspense. In Scene I the government is about to fall and Blackshaw is instrumental in its demise. At the same time, Blackshaw and Oriana reveal their love. In Scene 2, Blackshaw is seduced by Nathan with the promise of money and control over a newspaper. In Scene 3, Blackshaw gets his cabinet post after much doubt.

The suspense and anticipation created in Act II is resolved in Act III. Blackshaw's financial involvement with Nathan becomes publicly known. It looks for a time as if Blackshaw might save his political career, but Holyoke, the Prime Minister, dismisses him. In addition, Oriana abandons Blackshaw after her husband, Maurice, commits suicide. A political career and an affair come to an end, then. Blackshaw is left to put the pieces of his life back together. The last scene occurs four months after the crises in Blackshaw's life have occurred. Blackshaw seems to have found peace with himself, and the audience is left with the feeling that a sense of balance has been restored.

As a result of this design, the play succeeds as entertainment. Bennett creates suspense and maintains it to significant dramatic points. The audience really does become concerned about Blackshaw's political and personal life. The crises in his life are real enough to cause concern. Even if there is no final tragedy in Blackshaw's life, the tragedy inherent in life itself is well illustrated in this carefully constructed play.

Bennett, of course, was very well qualified to speak about political life by the 1920's. He had served the government during World War I and he was a close friend of many politicians, including Lord Beaverbrook. Bennett's protagonist, Blackshaw, represents the ambiguity that many people feel towards politics. Blackshaw sees politics as a field for high idealism, but he also realizes how corrupt politics can be. Blackshaw himself can be both idealistic and unscrupulous. He has gained a reputation as a progressive politican feared by the wealthy. But when he represents Oriana in a court case, he arranges for a key witness to disappear. Blackshaw believes that one must play by different rules depending on the situation. When he faces down Howard Nathan, he remarks, "Of course in dealing with sharks one has to play the game as they play it, not as we play it. The code's different." (London Life, p. 58) Later, when both Nathan and Blackshaw have become successful, they form an alliance. At that time, Nathan explained to Blackshaw exactly what a politician needs: "In these days every first-rate statesman must have (a) Two alternative and contradictory policies, in case one fails to please. (b) A low handicap at golf. (c) A tame daily paper on the end of a

string. The modern method is to teach the mob to read not what it wants but what you want. This is called progress." (London Life, p. 91)

The other requirement of politics -- equivocation -- is demonstrated by Holyoke. As Blackshaw says of him: "When you've been in politics for forty years you never promise. You imply. You assume. You take it for granted. You nod. You pat on the shoulder. But promise—! There are two words in the English language that Holyoke has not used for a quarter of a century. Yes and No." (London Life, p. 110) Later, when, Blackshaw is caught in a scandal, Holyoke shows the ultimate cynicism. He drops Blackshaw from his Cabinet and remarks to him, "I'm sure you are entirely innocent of the charge brought against you, but you're guilty—pardon a word so crude—you're guilty of something much more serious; you're guilty of being found out. I'm sorry for you. But I'm sorrier for myself." (London Life, p. 156)

Bennett's portrait of the political power brokers is very unflattering. He suggests that the country is run by people who are inept and incompetent, or ruthless and cynical. Yet in Blackshaw Bennett has created a protagonist who offers hope. Blackshaw was never a naive idealist, but he was remarkably vulnerable when dealing with utterly amoral people. And in his love affair with Oriana he was a hopeless romantic. Nevertheless, Blackshaw was not destroyed by his defeats. He became neither broken nor cynical. He realized that politics is the blend of power and ideals. Perhaps this becomes the political pragmatism that allows certain idealistic goals to be achieved eventually. In any case, the

play does not end with the bleak denunciation of politics, but with the guarded optimism that well-meaning men can change things for the better. In this respect, Bennett expresses the hope that citizens in a democratic state cling to.

Notes for Chapter Two

[1]Frank Wadleigh Chandler, Aspects of Modern Drama (Michigan: Macmillan, 1939), pp. 5-6.

[2]Ibid., pp. 333-370.

[3]Arnold Bennett, What the Public Wants (Toronto: Musson, 1909), p. 42. Succeeding references are to this text.

[4]Reginald Pound, Arnold Bennett (New York: Kennickat Press, 1952), p. 281.

[5]Ibid., p. 281.

[6]Arnold Bennett, The Title (New York: George H. Doran, 1918), p. 44. Succeeding references are to this text.

[7]Pound, pp. 284-285.

[8]Arnold Bennett, The Bright Island (London, Chatto and Windus, 1926), p. 16.

[9]Arnold Bennett, London Life (New York: George H. Doran, 1924), pp. 170-171. Succeeding references are to this text.

CHAPTER THREE

HISTORICAL PLAYS

Judging by his introduction to Don Juan de Marana, Bennett had high hopes for his two historical plays. He felt that there was a limited number of great themes in art, and if an artist could capture the essence of these themes his work would rise above the ephemeral.

For Bennett, as for most modern dramatists, of course, the historical play must be used to illuminate his own time. Modern drama did not abandon the historical play, but the play based upon an historical person or event had to measure up to the new dramatic criteria. As the modern theatre and drama evolved, one of the major casualties was "the merely routine historical play popular during the greater part of the nineteenth century".[1] As John Gassner points out, most of the western world's drama has been historical in nature — the Greek theatre, the medieval drama, the renaissance drama. Within these great dramatic epochs, the historical play was always prominent, if not dominant. Even the great modern dramatists — Ibsen, Strindberg, Shaw, Miller — wrote historical plays.[2]

The historical play was viewed with suspicion within the modern theatre, however. Modern dramatists and critics tended to see the historical play as an exercise in academic pedantry or as "an escape from contemporary realities and a return to romanticism".[3] Because of this,

Gassner argues, the historical drama has not developed much since the triumph of modern realism. Certainly Bennett was not able to create a memorable historical play within the context of the modern theatre. And yet this could be done. Shaw succeeded magnificently with Saint Joan, and to a lesser degree with Caesar and Cleopatra. A play is neither bad nor good just because it is historical. The criteria used to measure the value of plays dealing with contemporary problems should be the same as those dealing with historical events. If the plays have interesting characters, language, and events, and can offer insight into the human condition, they will be worthy of praise. Bennett's historical plays must be judged on that basis.

I

Bennett wrote Judith for an old friend, Lillah McCarthy (the former Mrs. Granville Barker), who had been pestering Bennett for years to write a play for her. This was Bennett's first major project after the War. (The previous year Shaw had written Annajanska for Miss McCarthy.) Bennett began the play in January 1919 and finished it on January 28. The play was presented in April in Eastbourne. Miss McCarthy used the part as a "star" vehicle and seemed determined to display her physical attributes. As Bennett noted in his Journal,

> Above a line drawn 1/2 inch or 1 inch about the 'mont de Venus' she wore nothing except a 4 in. band of black velvet round the body hiding the breasts and going down to the skirt and so hiding the navel. Two thin shoulder straps held this contrivance in position . . . the skirt was slit

> everywhere and showed her legs up to the top of the thigh . . . She looked a magnificent picture thus, but a police prosecution would not have surprised me at all.[4]

Later Bennett wrote a letter to Miss McCarthy that showed that he preferred his actors to be subservient to him rather than too innovative.

> I hate to praise star-actresses. They get too much praise as a rule, especially when they are beautiful. I must, however, say that your performance wholly, entirely, completely, and rather more than completely, fulfils my expectations. It is a very great and very finished performance. Don't go and tinker with it. Let this be clearly understood henceforward between us.[5]

Despite — or because of — Lillah McCarthy's efforts, however, the reviews were generally bad, and the audiences and receipts soon fell off.

Judith is based upon the Apocryphal Book of Judith. The story concerns Judith's saving her village, Bethulia, from the onslaught of the Assyrian army in the 5th century B.C. As the play opens, Bethulia has been under siege for several weeks by Holofernes, a general of Nebuchadnezzar. Holofernes' strategy is to force the villagers to surrender by depriving them of water. The governor of the village, Ozias, wants to hold out as long as possible so that Judea may be saved and so that he will receive great glory. Judith is an extremely beautiful widow whom Ozias hopes to marry, but she has remained in seclusion since the death of her husband. As it turns out, Judith goes to Holofernes to save

her village and Judea. Acting, she says, as the agent of her God, she beguiles Holofernes and cuts his head off. The Assyrians, thrown into confusion by the death of their general, flee.

Bennett used the story of Judith to comment upon certain ideas and concepts. The tradition of re-telling Biblical and historical events from a contemporary viewpoint allowed the author to make comparisons and offer new insights. In this case, Bennett examined the role of the aged, the nature of ambitious men, the concept of religion, and the power of a pure woman over men.

The old man in the play is Chabris. He has emerged from his house because he has no water. He assumes that he has wisdom simply because he is old and can remember others as children. Yet Chabris does not even know that Bethulia has been under siege. In fact, Chabris is a cranky, arrogant, querulous individual, more interested in his own well-being than the danger facing Bethulia. When told the number of soldiers Holofernes has in the field, Chabris comments, "At any rate this will be the last war . . . Because plainly war cannot continue on such a scale. Or if it does, mankind is destroyed. Nebuchadnezzar has rendered war ridiculous." The audience, of course, had just lived through World War One, and the irony was obvious. Chabris really has no insights, then, and as the play ends, he is led away like a little child by his great niece.

Ozias and Holofernes represent ambitious men. Ozias is the politician who has nothing but contempt for the people he governs. He manipulates them with scornful ease. Yet he knows that his power comes

from the people and he is careful to cultivate their good will. Ozias has a great deal of courage and he is prepared to face death if the siege succeeds. But he is also prepared to accept a position from Nebuchadnezzar. After all, religion should not stand in the way of political advancement. Holofernes, on the other hand, represents the military mind. He has no subtlety. He simply carries out the wishes of Nebuchadnezzar. His chief eunuch, Bagoas, has a politician's deviousness, but Bagoas cannot save Holofernes from Judith's power. Holofernes blunders along to his death, completely bewitched by Judith. There is the temptation to see contemporary figures like Lloyd George and General Douglas Haig in these portrayals, but Bennett probably did not have this purpose.

Bennett also looks at religion from a contemporary viewpoint. The two religions opposed to each other in the play are the man-centered religion of the Assyrians and the God-centered religion of the Israelites. Nebuchadnezzar calls himself a god, and he is determined to conquer the world. The elevation of man to the status of god had been traditional in the Middle East in ancient times, but Bennett may have seen the practice as possible in modern life. The man-centered religion might be seen as a form of humanism, or modern humanism might be seen as a destructive man-centered fanaticism. The triumph of Judea, on the other hand, might be seen as the triumph of the God of Israel, and the triumph of a mystical God. Yet the tenets of this God are broken both by Judith and Ozias in order to defeat Holofernes. Conclusions about Bennett's purpose

must remain tentative, because Bennett did not clearly develop this theme in the play.

In fact, the main emphasis in the play, and the only well-defined theme is the power of a pure woman over men. Both Holofernes and Ozias claim great power for themselves. They lead thousands of soldiers and citizens, respectively. But both throw themselves at Judith's feet and beg her to take them as her slaves. Each man would be a tyrant, full of power and pride in public, but a humble slave in private. Judith, of course, scorns the weakness of these men because she realizes their power is based on hypocrisy and dishonesty. Instead of these men, Judith takes, as her second husband, Achior, an Assyrian captain, who was driven from the Assyrian camp because of his inflexible honesty. Achior accepts the God of Israel as his god, and Judith as his wife, as the play ends. The point seems to be that hypocritical men, no matter how powerful, are fools before an honest woman, but an honest woman will willingly subjugate herself to an honest man.

And yet Bennett also seems to suggest that most men are easily ruled by women. Judith easily rules Holofernes and Ozias, and her waiting-woman Haggith, captured by the Assyrian soldier Ingar, soon has her captor following along like a trained dog. The same could be said of Chabris. He is treated like a misguided child by his great-niece Rahel. Bennett had presented this thesis before in the play The Title and the novels Hilda Lessways and Mr. Prohak, and it would seem to be one of his basic beliefs.

The play as a whole, however, does not present any of its themes forcefully or imaginatively. Nor does it offer any new insights into human behaviour or customs. It is a plodding effort that relies on an interesting book of the Apocrypha into which Bennett infused no new life or interest. The play offers no brilliant revelation about the Biblical characters or situation, nor any recognizable parallels in the contemporary situation — although World War One looms in the consciousness. Dramatically, the play moves along very slowly, with very little action or tension, and the characters are not interesting enough to overcome the static situations. Judith fails, then, both as a drama and as a critique.

II

In the introduction to Don Juan de Marana in 1913, Bennett explained why he was attracted to historical drama. He felt that the most important aspect of any form of literature was the theme. A great theme could elevate the work of a writer and make even an average piece of work better. In this respect, Bennett reflected the ideas of Ibsen and Shaw. But he went on to say that "The fatal mischief with the modern play is inadequacy, insignificance, puerility, absurdity of theme." Furthermore, Bennett wrote, "The dramatist, whose vehicle is at once the finest, the clumsiest, and the most debasing of all the vehicles of art, turns with relief and hope from the frivolous realisms of his day towards the heroic stories which survive time and whose virtue is independent of actuality and superficial plausibility." By "frivolous realisms" Bennett may

have meant the contemporary concerns of bourgeois drama such as women's rights, marriage, divorce, political ambition, and so on. And when Bennett hopes for a drama "independent of actuality and superficial plausibility", he may have been disillusioned with the well-made play and the preoccupation with verisimilitude.

Of course, Ibsen and Shaw had already shown that the modern drama could include more than contemporary issues within a carefully structured plot. Plays like The Master Builder, Peer Gynt, and Man and Superman revealed the wide possibilities within the general framework of the modern drama. Bennett wanted Don Juan de Marana to be based upon a great theme and not dependent upon plausibility. This could have been the criterion for a successful play. Yet Don Juan is not a good play. It is not a good play because the theme is not well expressed through character, plot, or events — plausible or implausible. Great themes expressed "undramatically" do not have to be tedious, but if the playwright strips his play of characterization and plot structure, he must replace them with sparkling speeches. In the set scenes that Bennett has created to express his ideas, the dialogues or monologues are very pedestrian and the ideas never take wing.

Bennett explained his search for a great theme in the introduction to the play. He had three great historical stories which he wanted to dramatize. He had thought about the Don Juan legend for some time, he said, before realizing that there were two great Don Juan stories — Don Juan "Tenorio" of Molière and Mozart, and Don Juan "de Marana".

After some study he realized that "de Marana" was quite different from "Tenorio", and the former version would suit his purposes. He found a play about Don Juan de Marana written by Dumas père, and Bennett readily acknowledged his debt to both Dumas père and the Spanish originals. In 1903 Shaw had written Man and Superman in which the theme of the Life Force was expressed, the Don Juan legend being incorporated in a dream sequence within the play. Bennett wrote his Don Juan de Marana to express the theme of Ideal Love.

The play begins at the castle of the old Duke of Marana. The description of the set ("The general effect is that of splendidly attired groups in brilliant illumination against a simple background beneath the heavy mysterious shadows above them") suggests the simple, "representative" sets of later plays. The characters are Grandees and Beauties with nothing to do but fall in and out of love. In the first scene, for example, Don Juan falls in love with Carolina and she immediately drops Don Luis for him. In turn, Juana leaves Don Pedro for Don Luis. Vittoria, however, who has been rejected by Don Juan, refuses to complete the circle by embracing Don Pedro. Vittoria clings to her ideal about love ("I cannot love twice").[6] Earlier Don Juan had stated the ideal upon which the play is based: "The perfect woman is all I ask — nothing more."[7] And later he states, "Each man seeks an ideal, and each woman is one . . . ."[8] The problem for Bennett is convincing the audience that such shallow and venal people can, in fact, be dominated by any ideals except ideal debauchery. When Shaw wrote Man and Superman the idea of a Life

Force that works through women to ensure the continuation of the race was repugnant to some. But in Don Juan de Marana Bennett created a protagonist who murdered, and cheated, and drove others to murder and cheat in the name of ideal love. Yet Bennett wanted the audience to be sympathetic to Don Juan and his pursuit of perfection.

Don Juan did not pursue this course without thought. He compared himself to the "first" Don Juan: "[Don Juan] was a voluptuary. I am more. I represent the tragedy of the grandees: I am the symbol of a doomed nation. And I will prosecute my ambitions magnificently amid disaster; . . . ."[9] Don Juan could have championed the concept of love triumphing over all economic and political set-backs. Spain had just suffered the loss of its Armada and the control over its colonial possessions. Just as Spain's economic and political system seemed to be self-destructive because it tried for too much, Don Juan's ideal of love was self-destructive for the same reason.

To seek his ideal love, Don Juan needs money and power. When his dying father tries to legitimize his other son, Don José, Don Juan kills the priest who had aided his father in the plan. Don Juan then callously waits for his father's death to inherit the family fortune. When Don José comes to visit his dying father he makes the mistake of telling Don Juan about his love. Don Juan immediately leaves his father and Carolina to see Don José's great love, Donna Inez. Don Juan courts her and wins her over just as Don José arrives. When Don José tries to fight him, Don Juan has him whipped by the servants. On seeing this, Donna Inez rejects Don

Juan because her pride is insulted. Don Juan, however, carries Donna Inez away. As a result of these actions, both Don José and Donna Inez commit suicide.

In the following scene, some time later, Don Juan wins Paquita from Don Luis in a dice game, and when Don Luis tries to regain his honour in a duel, Don Juan kills him. Paquita poisons the drinks which she and Don Juan are going to drink, but Don Juan outsmarts her and she alone dies. As her dying wish, Paquita sends Don Juan to see her sister Marta in a convent so that Marta can pray for her soul.

In the final scene Don Juan appears at the convent, falls in love with Marta, and tries to lure her away from her religious order. Don Juan argues that Marta could best serve God by returning to the world and bringing happiness in the practice of love. Marta seems persuaded by this argument, but just then the sky darkens and the ghosts of Don Juan's past appear. Don José's ghost fights a duel with Don Juan and Don Juan is saved only by Marta's intervention. She intervenes because, she said, Don Juan loved her. But Marta is too pure for Don Juan and he has to take the begging cloak of a Friar and leave. Marta is left with the peace of God.

The action of the play, then, is melodramatic. The extreme emotion, the verbose posturing, the meaningless gestures become increasingly tedious as the play progresses. From this framework of tedium Bennett hoped to wrest a Great Theme. And perhaps there is a worthwhile theme within the play. But the audience would have to

become very creative for the theme to become manifest. The problem is that the audience would become so bored by the play that it would be unable to apply its creative and intellectual faculties. The interplay of religion, political evolution, personal and national honour, God, love, social mores, and sex occurs in the play, and certainly each concept suggests a theme. Yet Bennett is unable to carve out a clear and memorable idea from this morasse of possibilities. In fact, the play sputters to an end with a cliché, rather than with a memorable insight.

And yet Bennett had several ideas in the play that could have been pursued and developed into valuable insights. For example, when Don Juan goes to court Donna Inez he rides up and down the street several times in full costume with his cortege, his personal valet Hussein close behind him. Later, when Donna Inez describes the effect on herself to Don Juan she says that he was "as pathetic as a lost child". The concept that Don Juan and Don Quixote can be both opposites and identical would be worth pursuing. The mythology has suggested the Don Juan is successful and cynical, and Don Quixote is unsuccessful and naive. Yet there remains the nagging possibility that these descriptions could be reversed. Don Juan may have been the mad idealist tilting at windmills, destroying himself and his world. But since Bennett did not develop this theme, the audience cannot.

Don Juan de Marana fails as a play, then, for several reasons. It fails as a stage piece because neither the characterization nor the structure is well done. There are no really memorable characters in the

play, not even Don Juan himself. The action depends upon a number of unconnected set pieces used only for declamatory speeches. And the speeches are mundane and cliché-ridden, reminiscent of the falsely emotional speeches of the melodrama. More importantly, Bennett failed to satisfy the one criterion which he stressed in his introduction. He did not develop and examine a theme which would capture the interest of the audience. There were no intellectual or emotional fireworks exploded in the minds of the audience, only the soggy fizzle of clichés and half-developed concepts.

Notes for Chapter Three

[1]John Gassner, The Theatre in Our Times (New York: Crown Publishers, 1954), p. 483.

[2]Ibid., p. 484.

[3]Ibid., p. 486.

[4]Margaret Drabble, Arnold Bennett (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974), p. 241.

[5]Ibid., p. 242.

[6]Arnold Bennett, Don Juan de Marana (London: T. Werner Laurie Ltd., 1923), p. 10.

[7]Ibid., p. 5.

[8]Ibid., p. 14.

[9]Ibid., p. 27.

CHAPTER FOUR

CLASSES, ROLES, AND CONVENTION

The modern theatre was very critical of specific legal, political, economic and social institutions. These were easy targets. The modern theatre also criticized customs and conventions which were not as easy to define, however, but which it considered just as pernicious. Any society develops systems of behaviour which govern its citizens. Some of these systems are regulated by institutional laws; others are regulated by unwritten convention. Both these methods of regulation can inhibit or even destroy an individual, and in many ways unwritten conventions can be much more destructive. At the end of the nineteenth century, European countries were still very highly structured, by today's standards. There had been some colossal upheavals in Europe that challenged age-old institutions (The French Revolution, and the revolutions of 1848, for example), but individuals were still very restricted. The old order was not really shaken until the cataclysm of World War I.

The old order was based on a class society. Before the upheaval of World War I, Europe was dominated by royal families and the aristocracy. The mercantile class had vast economic power, but it needed to marry into the nobility to gain prestige. Below these classes were a series of other levels. These classes were not easily defined, but people were very aware of their position in this hierarchal society. Beyond the

restrictions imposed by class, there were very definite ideas about the roles which individuals could accept. Women simply could not do certain jobs. Teachers and clergymen were expected to behave in a particular way.

The sons of a merchant were expected to conform to different rules than the sons of a lawyer. Over the generations very complex conventions had evolved. These conventions might vary slightly from town to town, but generally they were very inhibiting. Lower-class children, for example, might be allowed to play outside on a Sunday afternoon: middle-class children could not. In addition, the conventions of a provincial town would be far more restrictive than those of a large city.

All of these restrictions, then, had to be challenged if the modern concept of individual freedom was to be realized. The battle was fought on many fronts. The problems and heartaches caused by class prejudices, restrictive roles, and outdated conventions were shown on the stage. Bennett felt very strongly about this personally because of his own background. He felt that his upbringing within a Methodist community was stifling. His father's attempts to force him to fit a certain role, to become a lawyer like him, were disastrous. And, of course, Bennett challenged convention in his choice of homes, wives, and friends. Throughout his plays there runs a recurrent theme of challenge to authority and established practice from a man who was considered an arrivé in both literary and social circles.

I

In August, 1911, Bennett began work on the play that would bring him his greatest success, Milestones. The idea for the play had come from Edward Knoblock whose play Kismet had been very successful in that year. Bennett and Knoblock had been persuaded to collaborate by Frank Vernon who had produced Bennett's Cupid and Commonsense. Knoblock was wise enough to turn down Bennett's suggestion that they write a play on the theme of Don Juan. Instead they agreed to work on an idea Knoblock had had for several years and which he had titled "The Family". Bennett thought of the title "The Milestones", and agreed to Knoblock's suggestion that it be "Milestones". Apparently the two men worked well together, but Bennett wrote in his diary on August 13, 1911:

> Whenever he [Knoblock] adds a phrase of his own it is heavy and uncolloquial, and has to be altered. Still, he knows the stage, and his help is valuable. Also the original idea of the play was his, and the skeleton his. But nineteen-twentieths of the actual imagination and invention of the detail is mine. The thing would have been tremendously inferior if I had allowed him to do the draft. In getting half the kudos and the money, he is doing well for himself. Nevertheless I do not in the least regret the collaboration. It will have occupied me less than a month.[1]

After the success of the play, Knoblock generously said, "I might possibly have written the play by myself after finishing the scenario. But it would never have turned out to be a play of the same mellowness, the same dignity, the same restraint. All these qualities Milestones owes to Bennett."[2]

In Milestones Bennett and Knoblock were concerned with time, change, and conventions. The play has three acts, set in 1860, 1885, and 1912. As in Bennett's novels The Old Wives' Tale and the Clayhanger trilogy, the passage of time becomes the leitmotif. Time means change — some change is pleasant; some, unpleasant. Some people can adapt to change; some cannot. The play deals with the issues raised during some fifty years — fashion, morality, class tension, new technology, family relationships, sex roles. The startling ideas of one decade become passé in another; avant-garde thinkers become stodgy conservatives.

The play revolves around two families, the Rheads and the Sibleys. There are a brother and sister in each family, John and Gertrude Rhead and Sam and Rose Sibley. John and Sam work for the same family firm and they would have married each other's sister. John Rhead and Sam Sibley represent the contrast in economic and technological thinking. Rhead is the progressive industrialist, embracing new technology as his "religion". He is determined to participate in the new phenomenom, iron ships. Sam Sibley is content to let things happen as they have always happened. He rejects any new-fangled ideas. Similarly, Gertrude Rhead represents the "new woman" of 1860. She runs her household along new "scientific principles" and scandalizes her mother and fiancé by buying French fashions. Rose Sibley, on the other hand, willingly submits to John Rhead's dream. She says passionately to him: "John, you say I don't realize how much I mean to you. Perhaps I do though. But it's impossible

for you to realize how I want to give my life to you, to serve you. No man could realize that. A woman could. I shall be your slave."[3]

Because of the argument over iron ships, Gertrude and Sam break their engagement. John and Rose wait some months until Rose's father dies and then marry. (They would not break convention and defy the father's desires.)

In Act II, twenty-five years later, the results of earlier decisions are shown. John Rhead is a very prosperous — and conservative — businessman. His daughter Emily wants to defy convention and marry an up and coming inventor. John Rhead, however, won't allow his daughter to marry a "socialist" who espouses the building of ships made from steel. Rose is still submissive to her husband and supports an arranged marriage with Lord Monkhurst, an old family friend. Gertrude Rhead has become an embittered old maid who hopes that Emily will do what she couldn't — break the rules and marry for love. Sam Sibley has become fat and insignificant. He married his former secretary and at fifty years of age becomes a father. Much of his time is spent pushing a perambulator up and down the street.

The last act of the play occurs in 1912. Emily has married Lord Monkhurst and becomes an unhappy widowed socialite with two children. Her son has become a vacuous member of the House of Lords. Her daughter wants to marry Sam Sibley's son, an engineer, despite her mother's and grandfather's disapproval. The romantic crisis is resolved only when Rose Rhead defies her husband for the first time in fifty years

of marriage and encourages her granddaughter to marry for love. At the same time, Emily seems prepared to marry the lover she had rejected twenty-seven years earlier. John Rhead is shaken by the changes in family tradition and in the structure of society. Obviously the traditional family and traditional society of 1860 has radically changed. The play ends, however, with John Rhead, even at his advanced age, sharing a willingness to re-think some ideas. As the play ends, he sighs, "We live and learn."

In this play Bennett and Knoblock reveal a fine ironic sense. They remind the audience that many values and ideas change with time. Yet within the constant change, certain things seem unchanged. Among these is the tension between convention and love. The problem for each individual is to differentiate between ephemeral and permanent values. Those who commit themselves to ephemeral values soon find themselves rejected by new people with new values. In this play, the "faddist" and the narrow-minded conservative are both rejected. John Rhead finally understands the tension between temporal and permanent truths, but he is in his seventies before he sees this, and his own life has been a battleground for the process. Yet the play itself is not a boring tract on this theme. The ironic situations are quite humorous, and although several lives have been unhappy, the play ends quite optimistically.

All in all, the play is rather good. There are some very good insights into British family life, politics, and the class structure over a period of fifty years. The insightful presentation of former times always

allows a better understanding of our own times. Because of that, the audience is persuaded to think about and question its own current values. There are also interesting portraits of certain types of people: the new industrial barons, the inept aristocracy, the "new" women of each generation. And yet Bennett and Knoblock have created more than symbols. The characters really do breathe and live. Their lives change and evolve. And at the end of the play the audience has a sense that it has learned from the lives of interesting people portrayed over fifty years with humanity and humour.

Bennett and Knoblock show that each generation, class, profession, or family establishes a number of conventions which it uses to shield itself from change. Ibsen's attack on convention was very bitter, Shaw's was satirical, but Bennett and Knoblock's is ironic and humorous. In Milestones the conventions are seen as being more restrictive than destructive, more internal than external. In Act I, for example, Gertrude Rhead breaks convention by coming home alone in a hansom cab, wearing French fashions, and introducing modern home appliances. The irony, and humour, of course, is that what seemed so daring in 1860 is commonplace in 1915. As well as clothing conventions and household conventions, the playwrights portray the conventions buttressing parent-child relations, male and female behaviour, industry, and the class structure.

One of the great conventional figures during these years was the "Victorian father". John Read represents this type. Yet by the end of the play the institution is seen to be crumbling. Rhead had both his wife and

his granddaughter rebel against his absolute rule. Rhead also represents the manufacturer or industrialist who is innovative in his youth but becomes narrow-minded in his later years. In his case, he becomes the champion of his generation's conventional way of building ships. Each shipbuilding generation surrounds its methods with a sort of romantic aura which it uses to fend off change. Each new technology is resisted because it is impractical or de-humanizing. But once it is accepted it becomes defended by convention, and new change is resisted.

The play also looks at each generation's conventional sex roles. Over the period of years shown in the play, women continue to fight for increased freedom. Yet by the last act in 1912, there are still conventions which must be observed. Ridicule is heaped on Sam Sibley because he married and had a child in later life, and because he spends a great deal of time with his child. Fathers were expected to ignore their children. And, of course, Sibley also broke class convention by marrying his former secretary. The irony occurs when Sibley's son Richard defies convention by "marrying up". Actually Bennett and Knoblock portray the upper class (the Lord Monkhursts) as being idle and vacuous and the middle class (Richard Sille and Arthur Preece) as being energetic and intelligent.

The play is not dominated by ideas, however. It is not an exercise in intellectual perception. The play succeeds on the first level as good entertainment. It has a fine sense of humour and irony which the audience can appreciate immediately. It is only after some thought that the

audience appreciates the intellectual underpinning of the play. The play combines the sadness inherent in the passage of time and the ageing of people with the criticism of needless convention. The result is a sensitive yet humorous study of interesting characters living out their lives within structures established by families and societies.

II

Bennett decided to use a farfetched plot device in another of his social plays to show the results of class distinctions.

The plot in Body and Soul depends on the idea that people under hypnosis might be able to exchange personalities with a willing partner. The central characters who decide to do this are Lady Mab Infold and Blanche Nixon. Lady Mab is a young wealthy socialite who is the toast of London. Everything she does and every comment she makes is duly recorded by the London press. She is, as she says, a "public institution". As Lady Mab explains to her new fiance Aaron Draper, "I don't know how it's happened. It came gradually. It began when I was eighteen, after father and mother died, and I took rooms in this hotel and had them furnished according to my own ideas. From that moment I couldn't blow my nose without the affair getting into the Daily Mirror."[4] Needless to say, Lady Mab wants to change her life and become independent and anonymous. Her marriage to Draper would be the beginning of a new life.

Lady Mab finds a willing partner in her scheme when she meets Blanche Nixon. Blanche has come to Lady Mab's apartment to sell Lady

Mab's secretary a new typewriter. Lady Mab's secretary is ill, however, and Lady Mab impersonates her. The two women begin to discuss the writings of a quack called Procopo who has a theory on the "exchange of individualities". Blanche, who is a determined, self-made woman, agrees to the change of individualities for a lark.

At the same time, Lady Mab convinces Draper that the experiment would mean their eventual happiness and that he must go along with the change. She tells him that Blanche can be easily fooled into thinking the change has occurred even if Procopo is a fraud.

That evening the seance occurs with Procopo supposedly hypnotizing both women and transferring the personality of one to the other. Since both women are determined to go along with the scheme, they willingly allow themselves to be fooled. The next morning they begin their play-acting with Blanche as Lady Mab and Lady Mab as her secretary. Draper then pretends that he is Blanche's fiancé and Blanche plays up the relationship. Lady Mab has a certain amount of trouble restraining herself at times, but she does carry out her role admirably well in the beginning.

The first social function Blanche decides to perform as Lady Mab is the laying of a cornerstone for a Health Institute in Bursley. Since Blanche had taught school in Warrington and had cultivated a London accent only for professional reasons, she feels right at home in the district. In fact, Blanche becomes a real favourite of the Mayor and Mayoress of Bursley, Mr. and Mrs. Clews. Blanche then becomes a

favourite of the whole region when she lambastes the directors of the Health Institute for their short-sightedness and hypocrisy and ends her speech in the local dialect. Later the local inhabitants become ecstatic when Blanche donates £25,000 of Lady Mab's money to the Institute. Lady Mab, naturally, is not happy. She feels that Blanche has stolen Draper from her, and the £25,000 was the bulk of her estate. For her, the game has gone far enough and she demands an end to it. Blanche, with a certain amount of sadism, has Lady Mab locked in her room under the pretense that she is ill.

Lady Mab returns to London after this as a chastened woman. She has no money and no longer wants Draper for a husband. The independence she said she wanted no longer appears very attractive. Luckily, she finds out that an agent for lecturers in America would find her very attractive since her recent triumph in Bursley. As the play ends Lady Mab is making arrangements to go to America to entertain and educate the colonials. Meanwhile, Blanche and Draper have decided to go out and have lunch together.

The play is quite a well-written and clever comedy. The device of people changing personalities or stations is quite common, of course. Shakespeare, for example, used the disguise technique frequently. But Bennett uses the old technique with new situations and insights. Lady Mab is an aristocrat who realizes that the old order is passing ("My caste is no good. We're done for, we aristocrats. To be the daughter of a marquis nowadays is simply damnation"),[3] but she cannot really become

something else because she loves the privileges that her position bestows. Lady Mab remains a spoiled socialite despite her faddish claim to egalitarianism. When things get difficult, she stamps her feet and demands a return to her former position. She has not reckoned with Blanche Nixon, however. Blanche is an independent woman -- and a tough one. She is not overawed by Lady Mab's position and she has the Midlander's sense of self-reliance and self-esteem. She is, in fact, what Lady Mab had hoped to become. But Lady Mab doesn't realize that a self-confident sense of independence must be won through a school of hard knocks: it cannot be granted by a sudden change of social position. It is to Lady Mab's credit that she accepts a lecture tour of America and is ready to begin her education for independence. This hard truth about personal independence is presented in a humorous way by Bennett, nevertheless. And although Lady Mab is sometimes uncomfortable, discomfited, and hysterical, she never appears to suffer so much that her ordeal is anything but humorous. She is like the classical story of the snob whose top hat is knocked off by young boys throwing snowballs. The snob is deflated, but no permanent damage is done, and to onlookers the action is genuinely funny.

If the play has heroes, they must be Blanche Nixon and Mrs. Clews. Here we see Bennett's pride in being a man from the north. Blanche is certainly a self-made person. She left the Midlands and her teaching job in disgust. She mastered a London accent and the manners of a salesperson. She became a "professional" — a professional seller of typewriters. And she is very proud of her accomplishment. Yet she is just

as capable of playing Lady Mab with panache. She is an adept diplomat who easily wins over the Clews and the Bursley townspeople, although the townspeople's easy seduction doesn't seem too complimentary to them. Mrs. Clews is one of those easily won over by Blanche. She seems a bit like Decius's description of Caesar: "But when I tell him he hates flatterers,/He says he does, being then most flattered." But she is a pleasantly honest person and her domination of her husband is complete. She is determined to be a blunt Midlander who is not impressed by either aristocrats or Londoners.

The play does not really present serious themes or heroic characters, however. It is a comedy based upon turning stock-situations upside down. The actions and reactions of Lady Mab and Blanche define the nature of the comedy. They are by turns pugnacious, whimsical, frustrated, overwhelmed, scheming. They must re-define their personalities as they play new characters. The range of their reactions is really impressive. The play makes quite difficult demands upon the actresses. But for talented actresses the rewards would be great. Body and Soul is a really well-written comedy that would be a great showpiece for resourceful actresses, and the audience would be delighted with the results.

Notes for Chapter Four

[1]Reginald Pound, Arnold Bennett (London: Kennikat Press, 1952), pp. 221-222.

[2]Ibid., p. 222.

[3]Arnold Bennett, Milestones (New York: George H. Doran, 1912), p. 15.

[4]Arnold Bennett, Body and Soul (London: Chatto and Windus, 1922), p. 20.

CHAPTER FIVE

MEN AND WOMEN

Bennett has received his greatest praise as an author for his ability to describe the effects of the passage of time. But Bennett is also very good at recreating the various relationships between men and women. Perhaps because he spent so many years as an editor for a ladies' magazine, Bennett gained a great deal of insight into the interests and problems of women. The argument that a man cannot write from a woman's point of view and vice-versa rages on, but Bennett wrote frequently from a female's perspective. In the novels Hilda Lessways, The Old Wives' Tale, Anna of the Five Towns, Bennett successfully captured the special circumstances of female protagonists. Bennett was also able to write convincingly of the various stages in the life of a woman. In his novels, Bennett wrote at length about young girls and old women, and all the stages in between. He also chose women from many walks of life and from different social strata.

In addition to looking at the general or universal characteristics of women, Bennett was very interested in the "new women". There was a whole new class of women emerging at the turn of the century — the career girl. Offices and factories were crying out for typists and stenographers. Girls were leaving the typical lower class jobs as domestic helpers and teachers, and claiming a new independence in large cities.

These women were actually seen unescorted at various functions — dances, music halls, and theatres. The older generation was often shocked and scandalized, but Bennett was very sympathetic to these women. And after seeing the more liberal attitude in France, Bennett was even more certain in his opposition to the social restraints in Britain. Like many men then and now, however, Bennett had trouble with independent women in his own life. Both of Bennett's wives were quite independent and Bennett had trouble accepting his own philosophy in practice.

With Ibsen's A Doll's House, the doctrine of women's independence was clearly and unequivocally stated. Although initially people were scandalized by Ibsen's, and later Shaw's, opinions of women, romance, and marriage, their ideas eventually became the starting point for other dramatists. Ibsen's Nora (A Doll's House) and Hedda Gabler (Hedda Gabler), and Shaw's Candida (Candida) are representative of the "new" perception of women. At first, of course, Ibsen was banned from the British stage and Shaw had a very cool reception. But shocking ideas often become quite acceptable and commonplace within a short time. By the time Bennett treated these subjects in his plays they were no longer considered outrageous. Both Bennett and his audience were able to look at divorce, infidelity, adultery, pre-marital sex, et al. with a gentle and detached irony. What had been shocking in Ibsen and Shaw was amusing in Bennett. In a sense, Bennett's audience was more sophisticated about these matters. But it meant that Bennett could not attract an audience merely because he had a controversial subject. Bennett had to present the

current ideas with dramatic effectiveness and new insights. In this sense, then, Bennett's success or failure depends more on his skill as a dramatist than on his ability to perceive and popularize current ideas.

I

In the spring of 1909 Bennett moved from Fontainebleau back to Paris. He complained of "a nervous fatigue that is positively acute", and of "appalling migraine". He gave up his journal for some months and concentrated on finishing The Glimpse and a new play, The Honeymoon. In October, Bennett wrote to Frank Harris: "I am too deep in my new play to be able to talk about it. It is a very light comedy of a honeymoon, and it all takes place between the wedding and the consummation of the marriage! Though a light comedy, I deem it to be true to life."[1] The play was later produced at the Royalty Theatre, London.

In The Honeymoon Bennett is again examining the roles of men and women in marriage. The uneasy tension between individual freedom and the compromise of marriage leads to many disagreements, and Bennett uses this tension as the basis of the play. The plot depends upon the possibility of a husband and wife being able to immediately "unmarry" after their first disagreement. In this case, the marriage can be re-examined because the curate who married the couple was an imposter. The couple is Flora Lloyd, a young widow of great beauty and devastating charm, and Cedric Haslam, a famous aviator. Their first disagreement

occurs when Cedric wants to interrupt their honeymoon to enter an aviation contest.

On the day of their "marriage", Flora and Cedric have agreed that one of the most important aspects of marriage is the honeymoon. They both think that they should have one full month of uninterrupted bliss. They plan a trip to Hungary with no address for letters. Unfortunately, this bliss is disturbed by the news that a German aviator is planning to fly over Mount Snowdon to win a cash prize offered by a British aircraft club. Cedric sees this as a challenge to the honour of Britain and he feels he alone can save Britain's self-respect. He naturally feels that Flora should drop her honeymoon plans and support his efforts to upstage the German challenger. Flora, of course, feels that Cedric wants to make their marriage secondary to his aviation career.

When Cedric's family bursts in to tell them that their marriage is not legal, Flora and Cedric have a chance to reconsider their commitment. Cedric is willing to give in to Flora's demands, but he thinks she is unreasonable. Because she knows that he feels that way, Flora does not want to "re-marry" him. She believes that Cedric should think as she does — that their marriage is more important than anything. She doesn't believe the honour of England is affected by a German plane flying over Mount Snowdon. Moreover, Flora argues that a woman's role should not be subservient to that of a man. She believes that her beauty, wit, and charm are just as important as Cedric's flying ability.

When Cedric's mother, a famous novelist, argues that a woman who does not have a special talent should not consider herself equal to her husband, Flora replies that her qualities have made her unique. When she walks down a street or enters a room, people notice immediately. Her inherited talent, beauty and wit, and her acquired ability, charm and social grace, are just as noteworthy as a novelist's inherited talent and acquired ability. Flora is not prepared, therefore, to take second position to her husband and sacrifice her own interests for the sake of his career. In Cedric's mother's case, Cedric's father has become subservient to his wife, although Mrs. Reach Haslam likes to pretend that the opposite is true. As Flora realizes, both men and women can become subservient in marriage if they do not believe in their own importance. The fact that one spouse may have a career or a profession does not mean that the other should consider himself or herself less worthy in the marriage. Each partner in the marriage must consider his or her qualities equal to the other's. If that is not possible, then the marriage is not based upon equality.

This basic issue is not resolved in the play, unfortunately. In a sudden twist, Flora decides to remarry Cedric because he has lied to win her back. He pretends to give in to her ideas when he hears the German aviator cannot compete. Flora finds this out, but instead of repudiating Cedric, she states:

> Can't you see how amply you've proved that you look on marriage as seriously as any woman could desire — more seriously than any woman ought to desire. Last night you hesitated to sacrifice your

> aeroplane to me. But this morning you tell the most frightful lies on the chance of getting hold of me -- although I gave you every encouragement to be truthful. . .You behave meanly, miserably. You forfeit even your own self-respect. Cedric, that is what I like. It's just that that shows how much in earnest you are.[2]

The Honeymoon depends for its success, then, upon the issue of independence and respect within marriage, and the plot device of the invalid marriage. The question of dominant and subservient roles in marriage has always been, and always will be, current. Bennett created two marriages to show that it is more than female subservience in marriage that is an issue. One marriage is female-dominated: the other could become male-dominated. In the first marriage Mrs. Reach Haslam has all the mannerisms of the dominant woman, and Mr. Reach Haslam seems to be the henpecked husband. The simplicity of appearance is challenged, however, by Mr. Haslam's personal philosophy. As he explains to Flora, he has his own private life and his own collection of private opinions which he keeps safely in his head. Mr. Haslam is not subservient because he never surrenders his intellectual or mental freedom. Mrs. Haslam can bluster and domineer all she wants, but he remains his own person.

In the case of Flora and Cedric, Flora must sustain the argument that qualities which people do not normally consider paramount are just as important as qualities which gain fame for a person. And, of course, in a marriage that is true. Bennett presents an argument that certainly

deserves some thought, although it is not an issue that can sustain a play by itself.

The plot idea of the illegal marriage is interesting, and Hollywood has used the concept, but here Bennett is not interested in developing the possibilities. The character who impersonated the curate, Mr. Frampington, has dramatic possibilities, but Bennett did not develop him. The plot remains quite simple and the twist at the end of the play is not very effective or believable.

The Honeymoon, in summary, is a play that doesn't have either the intellectual content or plot structure to be very successful. Bennett hoped, perhaps, that Flora would have the dramatic force of Ibsen's Hedda Gabler or Shaw's Candida, but Flora remains a rather superficial person and her decision at the end of the play undermines any intellectual uniqueness she may have had.

II

In 1908 Bennett visited London for the production of Cupid and Commonsense. This play had been accepted by the Stage Society and was produced by Frank Vernon at the Shaftesbury Theatre, London, on January 26, 1908. Bennett attended rehearsals and found his spirits both raised and cast down by them. He took a curtain call at the dress rehearsal, but the first-night ordeal frightened him and he had trouble facing a first night again.[3] The play was generally well received. In 1910, however, Bennett noted in his journal: "A couple of years ago I said

enthusiastically that if 'Cupid and Common Sense' was produced in Hanley it would play to 500 a week. Today I got the figures for the three performances in Hanley. Total £75 13 s. 10 d." And a week later: "'Cupid and Common Sense' was an absolute frost in Cardiff last week."[4]

In this play Bennett examined two things that particularly interested him: the tyrannical, miserly father, and the characteristics of a woman's love for a man. The play has two distinct parts. The first part involves Eli Boothroyd's treatment of his daughter Alice. Mr. Boothroyd is a cruel miser who has accumulated a great deal of money through sharp practices. He treats his two daughters Alice and Emily very badly. The family lives in a small home with the minimum expenditure on food and clothing. As the play opens, Emily is teasing Alice about the possibility that Ralph Emery, an up-and-coming young businessman, is going to begin a courtship formally. Emery appears to be attracted to Alice not only because of her personal qualities but also because of her father's money.

Alice's feelings towards Emery are confused, however, because she feels a responsibility towards Mr. Beach and his son Willie. Without any warning, Eli Boothroyd suddenly revealed to Alice that she has inherited a great deal of money from her maternal grandfather. Boothroyd has been keeping the money in trust for Alice until she turns twenty-five. Now Alice owns the building that houses Mr. Beach's small pottery business. Mr. Beach is behind in his rent because business is poor and his manufactory is out of date. Alice wants to be kind to Mr. Beach, and

Willie comes to her to beg for some consideration, but Boothroyd forces Alice to demand the back rent. Eventually, under all this pressure, Mr. Beach commits suicide and Willie signs a false credit note to try to save the business. After Mr. Beach's suicide Alice does manage to save Willie from prosecution, but Boothroyd never forgives her for her kindness towards Willie.

The portrait of Eli Boothroyd was apparently very representative of the Victorian father. The father was a tyrant in the home, and he gave very little love or attention to his children. Daughters were expected to stay at home to act as housekeepers for widowed fathers, and even adult children had little freedom. At this time Alice is twenty-five and must beg her father for every shilling, even though she is a wealthy woman. Boothroyd even objects to Alice's marrying Emery, although it would be a good match. Bennett himself knew this kind of tyranny because his father had been a very forceful personality. Luckily for Bennett, he had been able to move away from home. Alice, as a woman, did not have this option. Alice's only future, in fact, was to advance from being a housekeeper for her father to being a housekeeper for her husband. In both cases she must remain subservient to a man, even though her wealth should have made her independent. Alice cannot break free because she is incapable of thinking in those terms. She is a victim of a class-ridden society and her social conditioning.

Eli Boothroyd, too, is a manifestation of the social conditioning of the Victorian period. His preoccupation with money was a perversion of

Wesleyan Protestantism. The possession of money was a sign of virtue. He is very proud of his role as a former treasurer of the church. To live as cheaply as possible was a triumph. The applications and consequences of this perverted Protestant ethic are certainly well known. The other concept, of course, was the tenet of obedience. Boothroyd would be obedient to his superiors and to the dictates of his social class. Just as he was obedient, he expected absolute obedience from his children. Again, obedience was a sign of righteousness. In the reverence for parsimony and obedience, however, virtues such as kindness and mercy were neglected. Boothroyd thinks nothing of destroying Mr. Beach, because he feels the rigid laws of business are God-inspired laws. If a man is unsuccessful in business, it is because of moral weakness, and that man deserves no kindness. Mr. Beach was destroyed by God's wrath and Boothroyd was God's obedient servant. Boothroyd is the personification of a cruel and twisted ethic, and because of this, he is almost an unbelievable character. Yet it would seem that fathers like this did exist, and Bennett may have been personally familiar with some of them.

When Alice defies her father to save Willie, she takes a small step towards independence. But this small step is all that a woman of Alice's background could take. Alice knows that her role in life is to be a housekeeper — nothing more. While breaking free of her father's absolute tyranny, Alice willingly turns over control of her money to her husband. As the first part of the play ends, Alice has exchanged the cruel dominance of her father for the benign dominance of her husband.

The last act of the play occurs six years after Alice's marriage. Eli Boothroyd is now a senile old man who begs money constantly. Ralph Emery is a successful businessman and Mayor of Bursley. Alice is a shy but reasonably successful Mayoress. As the act begins, Alice is preparing an open house for town officials. The proceedings are interrupted by the return of Willie Beach. Willie fled to Canada after the scandal of his father's bankruptcy and suicide. Willie was lucky enough to marry a very wealthy woman who adores him. But Willie has changed because of this. He is no longer the cringing, ineffectual businessman. As Mrs. Copestick, Emery's aunt, says, "There are some people who are only at their best when they are to be pitied. . . But he's [Willie's] no longer miserable, and so he's objectionable." Alice admits to Mrs. Copestick that she once loved Willie and even considered breaking her engagement to Emery. The question for Alice seemed to be whether to break convention and marry a man below her station whom she could dominate, or to accept convention and marry a man who was her social equal and would dominate her.

For Alice, the possibility of marrying a man she could dominate or a man she could be equal to didn't seem as socially acceptable as marrying a man who would dominate her. This seemed to be the Victorian ideal as Bennett perceived it. Yet, at the same time, Bennett suggests that there is something deeper in a woman's psyche, something that goes beyond Victorian conditioning — the need to pity and mother the male creature. This was a theme that Shaw had dealt with earlier in Candida. The female chooses the man who most needs her. In Alice's case, the

pitiable Willie certainly did seem to need her. Yet the wise Mrs. Copestick has the solution for Alice. She must simply imagine that Emery is struggling for survival in Canada. Then Alice will be able to live with a man who succeeds in everything he does. The trick would seem to be to imagine a weakness in a man so that a woman can love him.

In addition to the relationships between Alice, Willie Beach, and Ralph Emery, Bennett has portrayed several other interesting relationships between men and women. There is the "clinging vine" love that Edna Beach has for her husband Willie. Her only unhappiness is thinking that some women cannot have the happiness of having Willie for a husband. Then there is the ancient housekeeper Miranda Finney who laboured for twenty-eight years serving Mr. Beach and Willie. At the end of her life she has nothing but seventeen pounds with which to be buried, and the knowledge that she was never treated as a servant. The spinster housekeeper who serves a man and his family for most of her life and sacrifices her own happiness certainly is worth a long psychological study. Finally, there is the self-sacrifice that Emily wants to impose upon herself. Her father, Eli Boothroyd, was always a cruel tyrant in the household. Yet when he becomes senile, Emily is prepared to nurse him until his death. She refuses to have him institutionalized. Bennett has drawn a second woman in the play, then, who seems to enjoy caring for a man who has treated her badly. Again the psychology of this type of woman would deserve a further study, and Bennett did examine women like this in his novels Riceyman Steps and Hilda Lessways.

The play also contains several themes that Bennett often dealt with: the Methodist religion, the business ethic, and the small-town milieu. The attitude of the characters is dominated by their participation in the church. Alice is a Sunday school teacher. Ralph Emery has risen to afternoon Sunday school superintendent. Willie is the afternoon secretary. Mr. Beach is the Sunday school superintendent, and Boothroyd had been a church treasurer. As stated before, this Methodism affects the attitude to business success and failure. Boothroyd is a perversion of the Methodist business ethic. But Emery is a fair representation of it. As Emery says, referring to Willie Beach, "In the first place, I never have anything to do with failures. And, in the second place, he's no good. He was never made for a business man." Arthur Miller's Willie Loman certainly has a good antecedent in Willie Beach. And Bennett was always interested in portraying the environment of the small provincial town. His greatest success as a novelist was based upon his portrayal of the Five Towns, and in this play the characters respond in a way peculiar to their small-town background. When the outsider from Pittsburgh, Edna Beach, arrives, she finds everything quaint and humorous — much to the annoyance of Alice and Mrs. Copestick. Bennett himself became an outsider to his birthplace and his attitude became both critical and defensive.

Cupid and Commonsense was adapted from Bennett's novel Anna of the Five Towns. In Anna, however, the Willie Beach character commits suicide. The themes of the novel and the play are significantly different as a result. In both the novel and the play, however, the female

protagonists, Anna and Alice respectively, suffer from a tyrannical, miserly father. In the novel, however, Anna is left married to a man she doesn't love speculating over the lover who killed himself. In the play, since Willie Beach and Ralph Emery are shown later in life, an analysis of love becomes the central theme. The play is a very insightful study of women in a society that is Methodist, Victorian, and provincial. Alice, Emily and Miranda are all in some ways victims of this society. And yet Bennett has also been able to suggest deeper currents that run within women's souls, and the portraits demand a careful and studied response from the audience.

III

The Love Match is a play about love and money. Hugh Russ and Mrs. Nina Dibble have fallen in love. Unfortunately, Adrian Dibble is still in love with his wife. Because Russ and Dibble are friends, Russ saves Dibble from bankruptcy. But at the same time, he breaks the news to Dibble of his relationship with his wife. The result is that the Dibbles are divorced and Hugh Russ and Nina Dibble marry.

The play examines the relationship between a man who controls the family finances and a dependent woman. At the beginning of the play, Nina complains that Adrian Dibble has treated her like a doll, protecting her from reality, and treating her to chocolates like a child. Nina insists that she has the right to know all her husband's affairs, good and bad. She feels that Dibble should have told her about his financial difficulties

instead of protecting her. But Dibble feels that it is a man's responsibility to protect the woman he loves. Hugh Russ also has difficulty believing that Nina really wants to be anything but a pampered child. He thinks that beautiful women really deserve to be spoiled by their husbands, but in return they must not intrude upon male decisions.

Once Nina and Hugh are living together this difference of opinion becomes manifest and troublesome. Nina begins by trying to make changes in the decor of Hugh's bachelor apartment. Moreover, she tries to control Hugh's man servant Straker. Hugh considers both of these actions a terrible imposition on his rights and the intrusions of an irresponsible woman. Nevertheless, Nina continues the battle by calling Hugh away from work while he is very busy so that he can meet Nina's sister. In a very short time, then, Nina has changed a bachelor's home furnishings, argued with his long-standing servant, and interrupted his work. Nina feels that all these areas are the rightful domain of a loving wife. Hugh feels they are the unthinking intrusions of a woman with no responsibilities.

To teach Nina a lesson, Hugh pretends that he has lost all his money in a dangerous business gamble. They move into a very small flat and begin to live on very little money, after they have ostensibly sold off everything to pay their debts. Nina is quite willing to live with Hugh in poverty, even when her former husband begins to prosper. Yet Nina still has trouble dealing with servants, in this case a comic day-servant named St. Pancras. Eventually, however, Nina discovers Hugh's trick and there is a confrontation.

As the play ends, Hugh takes Nina in his arms and says, "Am I your master? Am I? (Nina nods.) I'm not then. I'm your blooming slave, and you know it."[5] Once again the battle of the sexes draws to an inconclusive and ambiguous end. Both Nina and Hugh realize how illogical marriage is, and it is love not logic that binds them. Both partners in a marriage often feel that the other is treating him or her shamefully. A sense of being wronged exists on both sides. The roles that society imposes on both men and women make the situation even more difficult. The male must appear to be masterful and wise; the female, docile and ignorant. Yet individuals cannot be satisfied with such meaningless concepts.

Bennett's treatment of this subject is light and humorous, however. The Love Match is really quite a funny play with unpleasant truths pleasantly presented. The male-female battles are funny skirmishes of pouts, hot rages, wheedling, misplaced logic, false analogies, self-pity, and affronted dignity — typical domestic strife. Added to these scenes are the episodes with Nina trying to cope with the servants. Straker simply has too much dignity to accept a mistress. St. Pancras hasn't an ounce of servility. Nina simply cannot order them or persuade them to obey her. Whether mistress of a wealthy home or an impoverished one, Nina is the victim of domestic help. But she is a brave and determined lady, and she fights back against the dictates of society, her husband, and the servants. At the end of the play we realize that Nina has formidable restrictions and prejudices to overcome.

The old adage that love conquers all applies in this play because Bennett has chosen to have his characters shrug their shoulders at the end of the play and smile wistfully about things they cannot change. Nina and Nora from A Doll's House are caught in the same situation. When Nora left husband and children she proclaimed a new female manifesto. When Nina left her first husband to declare her independence she married a second only to demonstrate that proclamations of independence are not easily put into practice. Nora chose independence over love: Nina chose love over independence. But of course Hugh has made the same decision. When two people decide to marry, both lose independence. When both people realize this, they can either cry or laugh. Bennett has shown that the best way to cope is to laugh, and out of this laughter will emerge a new sense of freedom.

Notes for Chapter Five

[1]Reginald Pound, Arnold Bennett (London: Kennikat Press, 1952), p. 207.

[2]Arnold Bennett, The Honeymoon (London: Methuen and Co., 1911), pp. 119-120.

[3]Pound, p. 218.

[4]Pound, p. 218.

[5]Arnold Bennett, The Love Match (New York: George H. Doran, 1922), p. 117.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

For a number of years Arnold Bennett was perhaps the most successful playwright in Britain. From 1908 to 1913 he had five plays on the London stage. Milestones and The Great Adventure ran for more than 600 performances each. In 1913 there were 2,700 performances of Bennett's plays around the world. After the Great War, however, Bennett had limited success as a playwright, although his earlier plays continued to be produced. All in all, Bennett wrote some thirty-six plays from 1899 to 1929, many of them never produced. Yet Bennett seemed to have rather ambiguous feelings about the theatre. On the one hand he stated that plays were much easier to write than novels, and that he wrote them simply for money. On the other hand, he laboured long and hard to write successful plays, and he always had a very active interest in the theory and practice of the theatre.

Of course none of these things could be considered a suitable criterion for judging whether or not Bennett was a good playwright. Bennett's early failures, his later popularity, the number of plays he wrote, the number of productions of his plays, and the short amount of time spent writing certain plays cannot be used to decide if Bennett's plays do have some lasting value. There is always the argument that good literature and drama will stand the test of time. Good literature will

continue to be read long after it is published. Good plays will be performed centuries after their first production. Yet of all the vast body of literature and drama very little is constantly read or performed. Certainly Bennett is not Euripides, Shakespeare, or Shaw. There are no permanent theatres devoted to his plays — although recently his plays and novels have been presented on British television and in local festivals.

If Bennett's plays are not produced, then, how can he even be judged today as a playwright? In his book Drama From Ibsen to Eliot, Raymond Williams addresses this problem. He states that the "practical criticism" of Eliot, Richards, Leavis, Empson and Murry in poetry, and of F.R. Leavis and Q.D. Leavis in the novel, could be applied to the drama. Moreover, he argues that the distinction between "drama" and "literature" should not prevail in contemporary English. He disagrees with those who believe that a play can be good without being good literature — with those who see no need for literary criticism of the drama because the theatre critics who have reviewed the performances have examined the only valid form of the play, its stage presentation. But Williams believes that "criticism which succeeds in broadening judgment by overcoming the limits of the purely contemporary view is always potentially useful."[1] Williams notes that the play is a controlled product of an author, although when the play becomes drama an essentially singular literary statement becomes a plural statement. Williams recognizes T.S. Eliot's statement that it is just as fallacious to suggest that plays have no existence except on the stage as to say they exist only as literature. The

essential thing to do in the literary criticism of the drama is to examine those elements which would remain constant from performance to performance. These constants would be derived from the verbal structure which the author has created.

In The Author's Craft, Bennett compared the writing of novels with the writing of plays and examined the role of the playwright. He states:

> The drama does not belong exclusively to literature, because its effect depends on something more than the composition of words. The dramatist is the sole author of a play, but he is not the sole creator of it. Without him nothing can be done, but, on the other hand, he cannot do everything himself. He begins the work of creation, which is finished either by creative interpreters on the stage, or by the creative imagination of the reader in the study.[2]

Bennett knew that a playwright cannot complete the entire work of creation. The creativity of many talented people must follow the author's if the play is to be a success. These people must be given scope for their genius: the author must not attempt to do everything.

When Bennett talked about "the creative imagination of the reader in the study", he accepted the idea that the play can be studied as literature, as a text without a physical stage presentation. The reader, of course, with his creative imagination must imagine the play on stage to understand the author's full intention. With experience in literature and the drama, the reader or critic can judge the effectiveness of scenes and speeches. Often this means imagining the stage set, the actor's movements, the lighting and so on. But the reader can evaluate the work

of the author exclusive of all the other ingredients which will be added to it before it is presented on stage. In practice, of course, plays are always judged or criticized before production. The playwright must present his text to producers, directors, and actors before he can get it produced. These people are the first, and perhaps the most important, critics.

That leaves the question of whether a play can be good literature but poor drama. Is it possible that certain plays might "read" very well but cannot be presented on stage effectively? The most common complaint in these cases is of the "wordiness" of certain plays. The stage is designed for action. When a playwright decides to give prominence to speech, he must be a very talented writer. But even the plays of Shakespeare and Shaw have been cut for stage presentation. Moreover, modern audiences seem intolerant of long monologues presented in the declamatory style of acting. The presentation of Waiting for Godot, Two for the Seesaw, Don Juan in Hell only indicate exceptions to the general tendency. It is probably true that plays that read well in private are even better on stage. If plays don't read well, probably no director or actor can save them. The most important aspect of a play, then, is its written form — the form given to it by its author. That being true, literary criticism of the drama is certainly both appropriate and possible.

Using practical criteria for literary criticism — such as characterization, plot structure, theme, verbal effectiveness, and insight — the plays of Bennett which were examined here could be divided into

three groups: obvious failures, moderate and temporal successes, and general and long-lasting successes. The plays which are considered failures are those which "read" so badly that they did not deserve their initial production. The plays which are considered to be moderately successful are those which might have been successful when first produced but do not deserve a revival. The plays which are considered general successes are those that are so well written they can still entertain and instruct.

The first group, the failures, includes Judith, Don Juan de Marana, The Bright Island, and What the Public Wants. If Bennett had any glaring and irrefutable failure as a playwright it was his attempt to write historical drama. Judith and Don Juan are very poor plays. Bennett chose historical figures that he felt personified certain significant and age-old themes. Judith was to represent a certain pragmatic femininity which triumphs over male rigidity and short-sightedness. Don Juan was to represent the destructive pursuit of perverted or unrealistic ideals. Yet plays can collapse if they are weighted down with preachy themes. The themes must be supported by interesting characterization and plot structure. Plays that hammer away at a single theme without any effective dramatic presentation become as boring as a two-hour sermon. In Judith and Don Juan, Bennett says, in effect, "Look. I have some very profound things to say in these plays. I have used historical figures because that gives great weight to what I have to say." It is as if

Bennett felt that choosing the correct theme and historical figure would free him of the arduous chore of making the play effective dramatically.

In the nineteenth century, apparently, playwrights who used the historical drama eventually turned the plays into ponderous costume pieces. The sets and costumes became more important than characterization, plot, or theme. It was theatre as spectacle. With the modern preoccupation with ideas or themes in the drama, historical drama was altered to suit this theory. But the historical drama of ideas can be just as stereotyped and ineffective as the historical drama of spectacle. Both are poor theatre. Unfortunately Bennett's historical plays are examples of how a particular genre can be misused.

One of the possibilities in historical drama is the presentation of a different perspective. Historical figures or situations may allow a modern audience to see contemporary problems in a different light. Very often seeing the mistakes and foibles of the past allows a more objective view of the present. This historical detachment is often invaluable in coping with current movements or crises. Another way of getting a different perspective is to imagine present-day characters moving into unique situations. Often the characters move through space or time to confront completely different social, political, and economic situations. This dislocation forces the characters to take a good close look at their own cherished conceptions. The device is particularly good for satire and humour. In The Bright Island Bennett uses this device, attempting a satire of the British political system. When British political and economic

theories were attempted on the isolated island, disaster soon occurred. Most of the contemporary political shibboleths were held up to ridicule: democracy, universal suffrage, minimum wage laws, free trade, and so on. The play does have some good insight into the inanities of any political system, and there are some verbal barbs that would cause politicians a great deal of discomfort. The ideas in the play become repetitious before long, however, and the actors are forced to pronounce old clichés rather than offer new perspectives with witty monologues or repartees. Before the end of the play, the characters seem both pompous and ineffectual. Once the spark and fire between opposing personalities and ideas die down, the stage seems to be filled with fatuous characters. Somewhere about half-way through the play the whole process becomes very tedious, and long before the end the play is excruciatingly boring. Bennett's attempt to be a political satirist failed dismally here.

In What the Public Wants Bennett tried to be a social satirist. Instead of limiting his attention to the political system, he looked at a number of aspects of society by examining the role of the popular press. Bennett cast a satirical eye on the self-made man, the cult of efficiency, the prodigal son, the dependent woman, the modern theatre, the great theatre impresario, the sensational press, and so on. He was able to point out a number of social foibles and injustices in these situations. The problem with the play is that Bennett takes stereotypes and tries to make them into unique characters. This can be done, of course, if the character is given enough force to catapult out of the stereotype and become an

individual. The playwright must give him characteristics which are fresh, even if the type seems familiar. Unfortunately, Bennett does not succeed here. The audience sees the charming, lackadaisical, wastrel brother present insights which the hard-working, success-oriented, money-grubbing brother cannot see. The egocentric, foppish, cruel theatre director fires the self-sacrificing, loyal, impoverished widow. The small-town, upright, traditional doctor supports his blunt, forthright, and naive mother. Because Bennett has created such flat characters, the actors would find it almost impossible to make them into three-dimensional people.

Once the characters become recognized as bloodless stereotypes, their situations seem unimportant. The situations cannot provide tension or freshness because the audience knows how the characters will react. Several of the situations could have elicited new aspects of the characters' personalities and given them more dimension. There are the confrontations between businessman and theatre director, ardent suitor and disillusioned widow, bullying son and stern mother. Yet these confrontations never create any tension because the characters' personalities are fixed with their first stage appearance and never change throughout the play. If characters in a play cannot be altered by events, cannot gain insights, or at least be aroused to self-examination, the audience cannot be expected to learn either. In a good play, the audience travels with the characters through a process of self-discovery. In What the Public Wants there is no voyage of discovery for either the characters in the play or the audience. Certain flat characters are

presented as funny or undesirable types, and certain social situations are shown to be undesirable. But Bennett never demands from either his characters or his audience the difficult soul-searching from which personal and social awareness arises.

The common fault in Bennett's dramatic failures is his inability to create characters to represent his ideas. In several instances (in Judith and Don Juan, for example), Bennett has profound insights which he cannot express effectively in dramatic form. In other cases (particularly The Bright Island), Bennett has tried to pump fresh life into political and social observations which had become cliches. In these cases, the man of ideas did not work hard enough on the particular demands of the theatre.

The plays which could be called moderate successes are The Great Adventure, The Honeymoon, and Cupid and Commonsense. In The Great Adventure Bennett constructed a plot which kept the audience in suspense throughout the play. The play is an adventure story with all the twists and coincidences of a good thriller. At times the events seem a little far-fetched, but the play was designed for entertainment. It is, however, a play with a sugar-coated message. Bennett does raise some serious questions about the role of art and artists within a nation. These questions are still with us, of course, but the issue always takes a slightly different form from year to year and country to country. Because the play depends upon certain conditions in Britain at the early part of this century, it would not be as humorous today. The comedy depends upon familiarity with a very particular time and place. Yet Bennett did show in

this play that the construction of a play is very important. Both comedy and tragedy depend upon a rising and falling of emotions that must be carefully orchestrated.

In Cupid and Commonsense and The Honeymoon, Bennett chose subjects very close to his own experience. Bennett suffered from a tyrannical father who tried to shape his life: Alice Boothroyd in Cupid and Commonsense is dominated by a miserly father. Alice wins her independence only by small degrees and the passage of time. She has several abrasive arguments with her father which she really cannot win. Every time she asserts herself, her father withdraws his love. Her father will love her only if she remains docile. This, unfortunately, was the plight of many spinsters and bachelors in Bennett's time. These unhappy people were dominated by their parents well into their forties and fifties. Once Alice gains both freedom and rejection from her father, she must choose a husband. Bennett suggests that women who have been dominated by a strong father often choose a similar husband, although often there is a transitory period of rebellion against their fate. In this play Bennett reveals his understanding of and sympathy for the women of his time. Women seemed to face the choice of being ruled by a father or ruled by a husband. And yet by the end of the play, Alice has triumphed over her circumstances. She is about to become a Mayoress. She has looked at the possibilities which life presented her and realized that she has acted wisely. The play is part of the protest begun by Ibsen, Strindberg, and Shaw which concentrated on the unfairness to women in both society and

the family. In that sense the play is quite derivative. Nevertheless, Bennett has successfully transferred the protests of Ibsen and Strindberg to a British setting, and at the same time revealed the problem within the framework of a lower-middle-class family. In A Doll's House, Hedda Gabler and Miss Julie, the protagonists were from the upper or upper middle classes. The suggestion is that only the woman with leisure can feel trapped. But Bennett showed that the sense of entrapment was common to women of all classes, although the causes and results might differ. Fortunately, Alice's predicament is not very common today. Women have still many restrictions to overcome, but the peculiar circumstances that enslaved Alice have virtually disappeared in Western society. The play would be interesting as a historical piece, but Alice, unlike Hedda Gabler, is not a character who has become timeless. Hedda suffers a personal psychological hell that is created as much by her own personality as by the strictures of her society. Alice is very much a symbol of a situation that has passed. In this case, Bennett was not able to create a protagonist who could survive beyond her own historical period.

Similarly, The Honeymoon suffers from a sense of the passé. Every period seems to have a number of current personal and social problems with which it must deal. Recently the theatre and film have dealt with extramarital affairs, children of divorce, and homosexuality. In Bennett's time, marriage and divorce were also issues, but the problem seemed to be based upon the role of the new woman and traditional marriage. Divorce really was a rare phenomenon at that time. Marriage

really was an extremely strong institution. Bennett tried to show, however, that marriages and husbands would have to change to accommodate the newly independent women. Of course, the strong-willed new woman of 1909 seems terribly old-fashioned now. Flora is the symbol of perfect womanhood for that time — beautiful, charming, gracious. Yet her role is entirely dependent upon a man. None of her attributes can shine except in marriage. She demands equality with men in marriage — but she must have marriage.

Bennett has captured the battle of wills that most marriages seem to be. In that sense, there is a timelessness to the play. Yet most aspects of marriage have changed so radically since Bennett's time that the underlying theme of marital discord is hard to perceive as basic. Women today would not model themselves on Flora. At best they would despise her. More likely, they simply wouldn't understand her. Like men, women more and more define themselves through their careers rather than through their families. At the same time, a play that depends for its denouement on an "unlawful" marriage seems almost silly today. The modern audience, familiar with flexible relationships and open marriages, would wonder what all the fuss was about. Once again, Bennett has written a play that is locked into a specific time frame and the passage of time has made it irrelevant.

There are, however, five plays of Bennett which have qualities which would recommend them to a modern audience. They capture the essential comedy or tragedy of life so well that they attain a

universality. They fulfil the requirement of great literature in being of one time and for all time. Of course, there are situations or expressions which would date the play, but these would be minor problems. And the plays are not great masterpieces of the theatre of the twentieth century. They are plays which could be produced as part of larger theatrical festivals or programmes. They would do very well, for example, as alternative plays at the Shaw Festival at Niagara-on-the-Lake or as productions for the second stage at Stratford, Ontario.

Two of these plays are comedies, The Love Match and Body and Soul; two are family studies, The Title and Milestones; the last is a study of politics and power, A London Life. Both The Love Match and Body and Soul depend for their comedy upon the idea of people suddenly changing their station in life. Nina Dibble in The Love Match goes from being a wealthy, pampered wife to being a frugal hausfrau. Along the way she learns a few things about servants, money, and love. As Nina tries to cope with independent servants the audience laughs at situations which have never changed. Masters and employers are always ruled by servants and workers. It is only the middle class that doesn't understand this. It is only when the employer understands his position and accepts it that peace can be created in a household. Nina's hand-wringing frustration in dealing with servants mirrors the audience's frustration in dealing with store clerks, mechanics, taxi drivers, and all those modern servants in the "service industries". As the audience sees each new predicament that Nina gets herself into, it witnesses the humour that results when anyone tries

to fight against opponents or situations that are simply intractable. Nina's great plans come shattering to the ground with the simple refusal or shrug of her servant. When this happens, she huffs and she puffs in futile resistance. But as her exasperation increases her goals recede. The play has some beautiful set encounters which a talented comic actress could turn into pure theatrical joy.

In Body and Soul the stage could be dominated by two comic actresses. Here a young woman from the lower classes changes position with a young woman from the upper classes. The secretary becomes a titled socialite and vice-versa. When a normally subservient person becomes dominant he usually becomes either cruel or comic. Here the secretary becomes so tyrannical that she becomes a parody of the ruthless employer. Her transformation from servility to arrogance makes her a delightful villain. As she goes through her new duties, she shows that a person who rises to power can be far more manipulative than a person who inherits power. The demagogue is more dangerous than the aristocrat. When Blanche Nixon has the blunt, earthy inhabitants of Bursley eating out of her hand by simply duplicating their accents, the recollection of twentieth century demagoguery is both funny and disturbing. Years later Charlie Chaplin would show the same insight in The Great Dictator.

For Lady Mab, the change from idle aristocrat to secretary is a challenge which she soon regrets. Like someone who has committed himself to a project, a task, or a goal with the best intentions, she begins

to wonder about her decision soon after it is taken. Lady Mab is a naturally strong-willed and independent young lady. When she begins to receive orders rather than give them, she shows all the despair of a person trapped by hastily made resolutions. With each new imposition, she practically chokes on her false subservience. The audience realizes that it is only a matter of time before Lady Mab explodes. The verbal duels between Blanche and Lady Mab make for fine theatre. It is as if the hundreds of years of British class struggle are personified in the steel wills of these two young ladies. The characters, like the classes they represent, swing wildly from rage to impotence, and the audience knows exactly how they feel. By the end of the play, however, the audience recognizes a force which will play a significant role in this century — the force of determined women who will not allow their talents to be restricted by class or social convention. Bennett's fascination with and respect for the new woman allowed him to capture with humour and insight the essentials of this movement and represent it effectively on stage. And Blanche and Lady Mab seem as fresh and relevant today as they were in 1920.

Bennett's two studies of the family combine irony, humour, social criticism, and perceptive observation of the forces of love and hate which dwell side by side in family structures. In The Title there are four family members who dearly love each other but just as dearly love to get their own way. The father is befuddled and brilliant. The mother is self-sacrificing and ruthless. The daughter is idealistic and self-centred.

The son is helpless and merciless. When each of these individuals fights to get exactly what he or she wants, the audience can watch with either horror or humour at the great pitched battles in the household. The ostensible issue, whether or not Arthur Culver receives a title, allows Bennett to satirize the British system of dispensing "Honours", but the real issue is power. The decision could be about the purchase of a car or a house, or the choice of holiday. The essential question is who is going to wield the most power in a family when decisions have to be made. As each of the protagonists brings his or her weapons and strategy to the fray, the audience can share in the essential humour of family battles that it knows will always end inconclusively and begin again the next day. As long as there are family units, Bennett's play will always instruct and entertain.

In Milestones, Bennett showed the family as it changed and developed over a long period of time. In The Title Bennett showed that members of a family will fight like cats and dogs over crucial decisions. Milestones shows that there are certain decisions which can dominate a family for generations. A decision made in 1860, for example, can still have repercussions in 1912. In that play, right decisions are shown to bring happiness; wrong decisions bring a lifetime of regret and bitterness. Because Bennett shows so clearly the irrevocable nature of certain choices, there is a sense of sadness within the play. But, at the same time, Bennett shows how funny the immutable cycle of life can be. He shows how people almost inevitably begin as liberals or progressives and

end as conservatives. Young people who are treated with scorn because of their innovative ideas turn around and do the same to the next generation as they grow older. Because the play demonstrates so clearly and effectively these immutable truths, it has an important message for each new generation.

Another play that will always be relevant is A London Life. The play deals with ambition, idealism, and political power. It is always fascinating to watch ambitious people clawing their way to the top. The situations can be as diverse as those in Macbeth, Room at the Top, or The Price. In this play, the audience sees the rise of a politician, an actress, and a financier. Bennett shows that some people rise to the top without effort. They are extremely hard working, talented, ruthless — or all these things. They enjoy both the climb and the final achievement. Other people pay a terrible price for success. They either hurt other people or they mangle their own souls. They enjoy neither the climb nor the summit. Since each person must decide for himself the price he will pay for his idea of worldly success, the play speaks to everyone.

The other question which the play examines is the interplay among idealism, pragmatism, and compromise. The simple statement that politics is the art of the possible doesn't encompass the tremendous struggles that occur in politics. Politicians are capable of the most sublime idealism and the most shoddy compromises. The political system makes for fascinating study. Bennett knew at first hand exactly what it was all about. His friendships and his brief stint with the government

made him very knowledgeable about the people who roam the corridors of political power. The characters in the play are probably based upon people that Bennett knew very well, and they move through the play with the gritty realism of historical figures. The interesting parallels between Simon Blackshaw and Joe Tynan in The Seduction of Joe Tynan reveal the recurring dilemmas that politicians face. There are countless politicians like Simon Blackshaw in novels and plays, of course, but Bennett's creation ranks with the best of these characters.

In conclusion, then, Bennett's general reputation as a second-rate dramatist, as a small footnote to the history of twentieth century drama, is a fair assessment. Despite the large number of Bennett supporters, very few seem interested in defending his ability as a playwright. Of the thirty-six plays that Bennett wrote, only thirteen were ever produced. Of these thirteen, only five could be considered good enough to appeal to a modern audience. None of these five plays would merit the financial risk involved in putting them on in an independent theatre. The plays could be produced as an adjunct to a larger festival, by university groups, or by theatrical companies interested in examining the history of the theatre. Under these conditions, Bennett's best plays would be appreciated. They capture the unchanging essence of human nature. Many of the situations, although dealing with specific conditions in Bennett's time, could be easily understood and related to current problems.

If it is true that second-rate dramatists and novelists better capture the essence of an age, Bennett's plays are certainly worth

examining. Often playwrights and novelists who are revered later are virtually ignored in their own time. The popular playwrights and novelists really reflect what is happening in the theatre and in literature. Bennett's wide success and popularity in the theatre before 1914 shows that he captured the mood of the times. In doing that, of course, it means that he was neither too innovative nor "too arty". Generally speaking, Bennett's success in these years showed that the public wanted plays that were presented on a proscenium stage with "realistic" sets, that dealt with current issues, that were well-constructed, that combined entertainment with instruction. This was a theatre that was far removed from both the melodrama and the music hall. Bennett supported and reflected the avant garde without being avant garde himself. He was a dramatist who followed successfully in the wake of others who were more innovative. His concern with financial success would not allow him to settle for his plays being presented to small groups of intellectuals in obscure theatres.

When Bennett was able to capture new ideas while they were still fresh, his plays sparkle, but when he settled for ideas which had become clichés, his plays are colossal bores. When a popularizer like Bennett succeeds, the ideas he has borrowed seem insightful. But when the popularizer seizes ideas which have already worked their way into the national consciousness, both the playwright and his actors appear fatuous. Sometimes it would seem that an author must choose between contemporary popularity and a longer-lasting admiration. Bennett chose

the first: he was so anxious for immediate success that he never made the effort which might have brought him later respect.

Notes for Chapter Six

[1]Raymond Williams, Drama From Ibsen to Eliot (London: Chatto and Windus, 1961), p. 8.

[2]Arnold Bennett, The Author's Craft (New York: George H. Doran, 1914), pp. 86-87.

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