

**STUDY & STAGE: A
YEAR-BOOK
OF CRITICISM**

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Study & stage: a year-book of criticism by William Archer

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WILLIAM ARCHER

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Preface

WERE it not that Mr. Quiller Couch had already made use, and excellent use, of the title, I should have called this little book *Adventures in Criticism*. For it is one of the alleviations of the journalist-critic's in the main unenviable calling that it is above all things adventurous. He plods no mill-horse round of unvarying toil, but sallies forth day by day into the forest of contemporary literature, blissfully uncertain as to what good or evil chance may await him. Destiny, working for the most part through the instrumentality of Editors and Managers, metes out to him many a tedious and well-nigh degrading task, but does not fail to intersperse a fair proportion of spirit-stirring and delightful happenings. He never knows what adventure may await him round the next turn of the glade. It may be the championing of Beauty in distress, baited by a rabble rout of paynim Philistines. It may be an ambush set for him by some felon knight. It may be (and this is not the least agreeable contingency) a splintering of lances with some courteous comrade-in-arms, in defence of a contested Ideal. And ever and anon, in some richly-dight pavilion on a lilyed lawn, aerial harmonies will allure him to a magic banquet, quickening alike to sense and soul.

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This book, then, chronicles such of my critical adventures of the past year as seemed to possess more than an absolutely ephemeral interest. The principle of selection it would be hard to define, and somewhat unprofitable to boot, since the most cogent principle of selection could not force the reader to find an article interesting which, in fact, appeared to him trivial or tedious. It may not be out of place, however, to state briefly the main consideration which induced me to believe that such a selection could possibly have any interest at all.

We are apt, I think, to draw too hard-and-fast a line between literature and journalism, and to ignore, if not the existence, at any rate the right to exist, of the debatable land between the two. We assume that there is, or ought to be, no middle course between addressing our remarks exclusively to the passing day, and ridiculously essaying to shout them down the vista of the ages. As soon as a piece of writing appears between two boards (or even in paper, stitched) we apply to it the standard of a colossal abstraction named LITERATURE, and finding it, in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred, pitiably below that standard, we cry "Out upon it! Why cumbereth it the ground?" But I submit that, as there is in fact, so there ought to be of right, a wide borderland between the absolutely ephemeral and the would-be eternal. After all, there are other measures of time than the day, or even the week. We do not step from Saturday night straight into kingdom-come. It is possible, and surely legitimate, to aspire to a literary life of six months or a year, without making any ludicrous assault upon immortality. We all of us, every year of our lives, read scores of books with pleasure and profit, which we should not care to treasure

upon our shelves, and do not dream of regarding as possessions for ever. I may, of course, be wrong in imagining that this chronicle of a year's adventures in criticism has in it the stuff to give even such transitory pleasure to any human soul. But at least I am guiltless of the arrogance of conceiving that in bringing together these despatches, so to speak, of the campaign of 1898, I am "laying great bases for eternity."

In one respect, the book may claim a certain originality. I am not aware that any one hitherto has dared to treat the English acted drama as literature, and to place literary and dramatic criticisms not only on the same plane, but absolutely in the same rank, shoulder to shoulder. I trust the reader will not find that the variety thus imparted to my subject-matter amounts to a distressing heterogeneity. Perhaps the sagacious reviewer may discern in this division of my interests a source of weakness, and decide that I write about the drama like a literary critic and about literature like a dramatic critic. If he can forgive me for taking the jibe out of his mouth, he may perhaps admit, on reflection, that it is no bad thing for a critic here and there to bring with him to the theatre some of the standards of the study, and to carry back to the study some of that rapidity of perception and penetration which is, or ought to be, engendered by the habit of making snapshot records of the passing pageant of the stage.

Let me own, however, that I have not applied the same principle of selection to theatrical and to literary articles. The reason is plain: it is impossible for any one man to do more than dip at random into the lucky-bag of a year's literature, whereas it needs no superhuman

industry or grasp of mind to present a tolerably complete account of all the noteworthy theatrical events of a season. Such an account will, I believe, be found in the following pages. Indeed, I have perhaps too liberally interpreted the term "noteworthy," and have included articles on certain productions of very slight intrinsic interest, because they seemed symptomatic of the trend of popular (or managerial) taste. Literature, even the literature of a single year, is a wide champaign which no one man can hope to survey in any detail; the drama is a narrow road running through it, of which it is quite possible to note all the characteristic features. "A road running through the champaign!" some people may exclaim with scorn, "Say rather skirting it, and none too closely!" But I think the impartial observer will admit that even the beaten highway of the English drama (to say nothing of bypaths) is taking such a turn as may one day lead it into the very heart of English literature.

For permission to reprint such of the following articles as appeared in the *World*, I have to thank the Trustees under the will of the late Mr. Edmund Yates. Most of the literary articles originally appeared in the *Daily Chronicle*; but one is reprinted from the *Academy*, and part of another from the *Outlook*. To the Editors of all these papers my grateful acknowledgments are due.

W. A.

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