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Paul Vincent Carroll's PLAYS, PURPOSE and PROPAGANDA

Last week, speaking of Paul Vincent Carroll's plays, I said there were some other things to be explained in order to clarify what I had already written. In the first place Mr. Carroll has a grievance. He has two grievances, one against the Irish school system, the other against the Irish conscience. To understand his plays, it is, accordingly, necessary to know what is really in the Irish school system which he paints with so much passion in such odious coloring; also what are the causes of his grievances. This I will try to explain next week.

What I wish to say this week is something different. Carroll's plays have received the highest praise from dramatic critics on the secular press, even on part of the Catholic press. Of some of these critics I could say that I know as much about drama as they do. That would not necessarily be much. But that I could not say of such eminent critics as Brooks Atkinson, Richard Watts and George Jean Nathan. How then can I condemn a play that has been so highly praised by such eminent critics? Very easily. They praise Carroll's plays for one reason. I condemn them for another which does not interest these eminent critics.

OTHER THAN DRAMA

In the first place a play may be excellent as drama while it is utterly false in its philosophy, in its history, in its presentation of the life and motives and character of those it brings to the stage as types or as historical personages. Shakespeare was a great dramatist. But will anyone believe that Henry VI (first part) is a fair presentation of St. John, of the English nobles, of the siege of Orleans? Or take a contemporary example. When Shaw's "St. Joan" was first produced, it was hailed by critics as the greatest play in English since the death of Shakespeare. As drama it is splendid. There can be no doubt about that. But it is utterly false in its philosophy, in its characterization of St. Joan, of the motives of those who condemned her and of the position of the Catholic Church in regard to private revelations and the requisites for canonization. The reader will have to excuse me for dwelling a little more on Shaw's "Saint Joan" because this play and the manner in which it was treated by the critics shows the necessity of distinguishing between the merits of a play as drama and its philosophy, history, etc., in a word the purpose of its author. The play was first produced in New York, December, 1924, and in London in March, 1924. It was then living "over there" in Spain, and, as I have already said, had the advantage of going over a bundle of English periodicals every week. I saved some articles on "Saint Joan" — in number. Today they make interesting reading, for Shaw is still with us, and according to the literary critic of the Sunday Times, is "the greatest master of English now living"; and "Saint Joan" will undoubtedly live long after its creator.

As Christopher Hollis wrote at the time: "Revolutionaries asked if the great Revolutionary had become a Fascist, Freethinkers whispered Browning's Last Leader to one another." But I am concerned here only with the attitude of the Catholics. Some saw the play for what it really is. Some thought it showed at least a change in Shaw's opinions of the Catholic Church. But some went very much farther, wondered why such a man did not become a Catholic; and the report was spread around that he was preparing to enter the Church! Shaw himself disposed of the conundrum with a characteristic remark: Mr. Chesterton had already taken the step, and there was not room for two popes at the same time; the experiment had been tried in the past and had not succeeded. Thoroughly Shavian.

CHANGES OPINION

At the moment the most interesting in my bundle of clippings are two articles by the same writer in the Catholic Times (of Liverpool). The writer had read the play, and in the first article he condemns it outright. Two weeks later he had seen the play acted, changed his opinion and praised it highly. That, as I have already intimated, illustrates the attitude towards Carroll's plays of many Catholics who have seen them acted without studying them in cold print — and of some professional critics who went to the premiere and reported their emotions. As George Jean Nathan wrote in 1940

in a preface to "Five Great Irish Plays": "It is hardly news that the drama is primarily an instrument of emotion, and that thought is merely the occasional lubricating grease."

"When we were boys" the novels of Marion Crawford were for two decades the best sellers. I can recall an article of his on the novel in which he wrote: "A novel with a purpose is a fraud. A novel should present life in its reality." Today he would say that a novel which is chiefly propaganda is a fraud. That is just what 99 per cent of contemporary novels really are. That is what all Shaw's writings, novels or plays really are. And that is what Carroll's plays really are.

CITIZEN SHAW'S MISSION

Shaw has a philosophy of life. His god is the Life Force, Evolution, Aristotle, Bergson — with Shavian modifications. His mission is to emancipate the human race by teaching them to obey the Force. Whence it comes or whether it is urging us does not matter. Its present purpose, so far as we are concerned, is to emancipate us from all inhibitions of past conventions, traditions and religions. But first of all you "must rid your mind of Jesus." Obey the upward urge. As for Joan she is a "temporary materialization of the Life Force," but "endowed with an excessive evolutionary appetite." "The voices told her nothing she

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