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# DRAMA

C R I T I C I S M

V O L U M E

26

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# DRAMA

C R I T I C I S M

Criticism of the Most Significant and Widely Studied  
Dramatic Works from All the World's Literatures

VOLUME 26

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## Preface

**D***rama Criticism (DC)* is principally intended for beginning students of literature and theater as well as the average playgoer. The series is therefore designed to introduce readers to the most frequently studied playwrights of all time periods and nationalities and to present discerning commentary on dramatic works of enduring interest. Furthermore, *DC* seeks to acquaint the reader with the uses and functions of criticism itself. Selected from a diverse body of commentary, the essays in *DC* offer insights into the authors and their works but do not require that the reader possess a wide background in literary studies. Where appropriate, reviews of important productions of the plays discussed are also included to give students a heightened awareness of drama as a dynamic art form, one that many claim is fully realized only in performance.

*DC* was created in response to suggestions by the staffs of high school, college, and public libraries. These librarians observed a need for a series that assembles critical commentary on the world's most renowned dramatists in the same manner as Thomson Gale's *Short Story Criticism (SSC)* and *Poetry Criticism (PC)*, which present material on writers of short fiction and poetry. Although playwrights are covered in such Thomson Gale literary criticism series as *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)*, *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism (TCLC)*, *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism (NCLC)*, *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800 (LC)*, and *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism (CMLC)*, *DC* directs more concentrated attention on individual dramatists than is possible in the broader, survey-oriented entries in these Thomson Gale series. Commentary on the works of William Shakespeare may be found in *Shakespearean Criticism (SC)*.

### Scope of the Series

By collecting and organizing commentary on dramatists, *DC* assists students in their efforts to gain insight into literature, achieve better understanding of the texts, and formulate ideas for papers and assignments. A variety of interpretations and assessments is offered, allowing students to pursue their own interests and promoting awareness that literature is dynamic and responsive to many different opinions.

Approximately five to ten authors are included in each volume, and each entry presents a historical survey of the critical response to that playwright's work. The length of an entry is intended to reflect the amount of critical attention the author has received from critics writing in English and from foreign critics in translation. Every attempt has been made to identify and include the most significant essays on each author's work. In order to provide these important critical pieces, the editors sometimes reprint essays that have appeared elsewhere in Thomson Gale's literary criticism series. Such duplication, however, never exceeds twenty percent of a *DC* volume.

### Organization of the Book

A *DC* entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** consists of the playwright's most commonly used name, followed by birth and death dates. If an author consistently wrote under a pseudonym, the pseudonym is listed in the author heading and the real name given in parentheses on the first line of the introduction. Also located at the beginning of the introduction are any name variations under which the dramatist wrote, including transliterated forms of the names of authors whose languages use nonroman alphabets.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author and the critical debates surrounding his or her work.
- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.

- The list of **Principal Works** is divided into two sections. The first section contains the author's dramatic pieces and is organized chronologically by date of first performance. If this has not been conclusively determined, the composition or publication date is used. The second section provides information on the author's major works in other genres.
- Essays offering **overviews and general studies of the dramatist's entire literary career** give the student broad perspectives on the writer's artistic development, themes, and concerns that recur in several of his or her works, the author's place in literary history, and other wide-ranging topics.
- **Criticism** of individual plays offers the reader in-depth discussions of a select number of the author's most important works. In some cases, the criticism is divided into two sections, each arranged chronologically. When a significant performance of a play can be identified (typically, the premier of a twentieth-century work), the first section of criticism will feature **production reviews** of this staging. Most entries include sections devoted to **critical commentary** that assesses the literary merit of the selected plays. When necessary, essays are carefully excerpted to focus on the work under consideration; often, however, essays and reviews are reprinted in their entirety. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- A complete **Bibliographic Citation**, designed to help the interested reader locate the original essay or book, precedes each piece of criticism. Source citations in the Literary Criticism Series follow University of Chicago Press style, as outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 14th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993).
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Thomson Gale.

## Cumulative Indexes

A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all of the authors that appear in a wide variety of reference sources published by Thomson Gale, including *DC*. A complete list of these sources is found facing the first page of the Author Index. The index also includes birth and death dates and cross references between pseudonyms and actual names.

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When citing criticism reprinted in the Literary Criticism Series, students should provide complete bibliographic information so that the cited essay can be located in the original print or electronic source. Students who quote directly from reprinted criticism may use any accepted bibliographic format, such as University of Chicago Press style or Modern Language Association (MLA) style. Both the MLA and the University of Chicago formats are acceptable and recognized as being the current standards for citations. It is important, however, to choose one format for all citations; do not mix the two formats within a list of citations.



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# Jacinto Benavente

## 1866-1954

(Also known as Jacinto Benavente y Martínez) Spanish dramatist, poet, prose fiction writer, and nonfiction prose writer.

### INTRODUCTION

The author of over 200 plays, Benavente dominated the Spanish theater for decades, regularly staging plays from 1894 until his death in 1954—a sixty-year career. By breaking away from melodramatic conventions that prevailed earlier in Spanish theater, Benavente inaugurated a new era. His plays are noted for their social and political satire and for their unusually egalitarian, admiring attitude towards women, especially remarkable in Spanish *machismo* culture. Although Benavente's oeuvre has suffered sharp attacks since his career peaked in the early twentieth century, he has maintained his status as a people's playwright.

### BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Benavente was born in Madrid to Mariano Benavente, a pediatrician, and Venancia Martínez. While he studied theater and practiced his dramatic writing skills as a young man, he entered the University of Madrid as a law student in 1882, but he did not earn a degree. Upon the death of his father, Benavente came into a sizable inheritance and afterward began to travel and work as a journalist. By some accounts, he also traveled with a circus and joined an acting company for a time. His first published work was a collection of poems. This was followed by a collection of fictional letters. *Cartas de mujeres* (1893) was successful enough to earn Benavente some renown as a writer. Around this time, Benavente also succeeded in getting the attention of Emilio Mario, a family friend who was the director of the Teatro de la Comedia. Benavente had been sending plays to Mario since leaving the university but had consistently been rejected. Undaunted, Benavente released a collection of plays in 1892 entitled *Teatro fantástico*. In 1894 Mario accepted what was to be Benavente's first produced play, *El nido ajeno* (*Another's Nest*). His next play was the widely admired *Gente conocida* (1896), which launched his reputation as a playwright known for his satirical comedies. Some of his best-known works in this genre include *La comida de las fieras* (1898), *Lo Cursi* (1901), and *La gobernadora* (1901; *The Governor's Wife*).



In 1899 Benavente was named the editor of the journal *Vida literaria*. The journal was closely affiliated with the movement known as the Generation of '98, a group of Spanish writers who wanted to break with past traditions in their country's literature. Benavente's new style of comedy and his social satire fit well with the aims of the Generationists. Throughout the first decade of the twentieth century, Benavente continued writing plays critical of corrupt politicians, social hypocrisy, and the victimization of the poor. Among the most important of these—and of Benavente's entire corpus—is *Los intereses creados* (1907; *The Bonds of Interest*). *The Bonds of Interest*, along with a later play from the Generation period, *La malquerida* (1913; *The Passionflower*), were translated into English and performed in New York—an indication of Benavente's international stature. In 1913 Benavente became a member of the Spanish Academy and in 1920 he became the director of Spain's national theater, the Teatro Español. In 1922, he received the Nobel Prize in literature. Though he was apparently at the apex of his career, the Nobel Prize in fact gave

Benavente's critics an opportunity to show how far the playwright had fallen in their esteem. Other writers affiliated with the Generation of '98 decried Benavente's selection for the award, arguing that the qualities that had made him a new voice for Spain were notably lacking in his later work. While that point remains in dispute, it is clear that Benavente continued to expand his range after establishing himself as a major playwright. He subsequently wrote theater pieces for children, adapted some works of William Shakespeare, and experimented with Surrealism. He was a supporter of Francisco Franco during the Spanish Civil War (1936-39), a political alliance that resulted in Benavente being placed under house arrest. His affiliation with Franco seriously damaged his standing in the United States and European nations, both during his life and for many decades after his death. Benavente was appointed president of the Spanish Theatre Council in 1936 and he won awards for journalism in 1947 and 1948. Few of his later plays are studied today, though one exception is the comedy *Hijos padres de sus padres* (1954), which was among the last produced in his lifetime. Benavente died in 1954.

## MAJOR DRAMATIC WORKS

Benavente began writing for the stage at a time when the melodramatic, highly presentational style of playwright José Echegaray dominated Spanish theater. The freshness of Benavente's works heralded a new era in Spanish theater: where Echegaray was grandiose, Benavente was personal; where the old style was staid and serious, Benavente's work was witty and ironic. His plays showed a kinship with contemporary English authors, including George Bernard Shaw and Oscar Wilde, as well as the seventeenth-century French playwright Jean-Baptiste Poquelin Molière. The title of Benavente's first successful play, *Gente conocida*, which translates as "People of Importance," suggests his tone and purpose. In his satirical comedies of the 1890s Benavente critiqued the hypocritical lives of the aristocratic class as well as of the nouveau riche who ape the manners of the aristocrats. Some of these plays are set in Madrid, while others take place in the fictional town of Moraleda, a recurring setting Benavente used throughout his career. The first Moraleda play was *La farándula* (1897), which translates as "Bombastic Actors" and refers not to the theater but to the politicians of Moraleda. *The Governor's Wife* is the best-known of the Moraleda plays. The plot focuses on a liberal governor under attack for allowing the performance of a controversial play.

Benavente's plays from the early twentieth century demonstrate a more personal focus. Though still usually comic in tone, the plays embody a subtle shift from

satiric comedy to moral comedy focusing on marriage and relationships between men and women. *The Bonds of Interest* continues Benavente's tradition of social satire, including a scathing look at the Spanish judicial system, but it equally treats love and its capacity to counter worldly evils and injustice. Benavente also had great success when he wrote outside the comedic genre, especially with *The Passionflower*. This tragedy focuses on peasant characters from rural Spain—a setting also employed in such early plays as *Señora Ama* (1908) and *De cerca* (1909; *At Close Range*), as well as later plays, including *La infanzona* (1947)—and the death of a woman at the hands of her husband. *The Passionflower* is chief among numerous examples of Benavente's strong sympathy for women throughout his plays. Benavente often wrote his plays for specific actresses, so it is not surprising that the roles for women would be strong, but the consistency of his concern for women over sixty years of drama makes his feminist tendencies one of the defining characteristics of his career. Benavente also wrote numerous plays for children. Among these works are *La Cenicienta* (1919), *Y va de cuento . . .* (1919), and *La novia de nieve* (1934). Benavente's plays for children are typically more theatrical than his adult fare in both plot and staging. In his later dramas, Benavente's interest in ideas often resulted in plays focusing on moral questions rather than on character and plot.

## CRITICAL RECEPTION

When Benavente first began writing his satiric comedies, his contemporaries complained that they were not truly Spanish plays but were too much influenced by authors from other European countries. After twenty-five years of success and acclaim, Benavente also sustained criticism from fellow authors that he was conservative and traditional and that he had failed to fulfill his early promise of reforming the Spanish stage. By the end of his career, in the 1950s, Benavente's earlier works had entered the canon of European drama, but his later efforts were generally regarded as irrelevant to the literary and social scene of the time. The length of Benavente's career meant that critics began publishing assessments of his career before it was half over. In an English edition of Benavente's plays, John Garrett Underhill described *Los malhechores del bien* (1905; *The Evil Doers of Good*), *The Bonds of Interest*, *El marido de su viuda* (1908; *His Widow's Husband*), and *The Passionflower* as examples of the playwright's work at its full maturity, unaware that Benavente would continue writing for the stage for almost thirty-five more years. Many scholars have divided Benavente's work into phases, so that even in his mid-career it was possible to talk about his earlier plays as a distinct body of work. In an influential early study, Walter Starkie [see Further Reading] suggested that those plays written after *The*

*Passionflower* belong to a separate category. Later scholarship on Benavente's work has tended to focus on his use of language and his social views, especially his support for women's rights. Critics have noted Benavente's attention to the power of language. Mary Lee Bretz has observed that in Benavente's drama words often change meanings after several repetitions or reside in a gray area between truth and falsehood. Benavente's sympathies unfailingly lie with his female characters, who tend to have more complex psychologies. At the same time, Benavente's interest in the condition of women is closely linked to his broader sympathy for the disenfranchised of society—the rural poor, the widowed, the uneducated. As Robert Louis Sheehan has explained in his essay on Benavente and the Generationist movement [see Further Reading], Benavente often demonstrated his concern for the lower classes, despite his critics' accusations that his works were preoccupied with Spain's urban elite. In contrast to Starkie and many of Benavente's contemporaries, Sheehan insists that even in his later plays Benavente is unwavering in his commitment to the common people of Spain.

## PRINCIPAL WORKS

### Plays

- Teatro fantástico* 1892; reprinted 1905  
*El nido ajeno* [Another's Nest] 1894  
*Gente conocida* 1896  
*Don Juan* [adaptor; from a play by Jean-Baptiste Poquelin Molière] 1897  
*La farándula* 1897  
*La comida de las fieras* 1898  
*Teatro feminista* [Feminist Theatre] 1898  
*Cuento de amor* [adaptor; from Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*] 1899  
*La gata de Angora* 1900  
*Lo cursi* 1901  
*La gobernadora* [The Governor's Wife] 1901  
*El primo román* 1901  
*Sacrificios* 1901  
*Alma triunfante* 1902  
*Amor de amar* 1902  
*¡Libertad!* [adaptor; from a play by Santiago Rusinol y Prats] 1902  
*En tren de los maridos* 1902  
*El hombrecito* 1903  
*El dragón de fuego* 1904  
*Las cigarras hormigas* 1905  
*El encanto de una hora* [The Magic of an Hour] 1905  
*Los malhechores del bien* [The Evil Doers of Good] 1905  
*Rosas de otoño* [Autumnal Roses] 1905  
*Más fuerte que el amor* [Stronger Than Love] 1906  
*La princesa Bebé* 1906  
*Los buhos* 1907  
*La historia de Otelo* 1907  
*Los intereses creados* [The Bonds of Interest] 1907  
*No fumadores* [No Smoking] 1907  
*Los ojos de los muertos* 1907  
*Todos somos unos* 1907  
*La fuerza bruta* [Brute Force] 1908  
*Hacia la verdad: Escenas de la vida moderna* 1908  
*El marido de su viuda* [His Widow's Husband] 1908  
*Señora Ama* 1908  
*De cerca* [At Close Range] 1909  
*La escuela de las princesas* [The School of Princesses] 1909  
*Por las nubes* [In the Clouds] 1909  
*El príncipe que todo lo aprendió en los libros* [The Prince Who Learned Everything out of Books] 1909  
*La señorita se aburre* [adaptor; from a poem by Alfred Lord Tennyson] 1909  
*El criado de Don Juan* 1911  
*La losa de los sueños* 1911  
*La malquerida* [The Passionflower] 1913  
*El collar de estrellas* 1915  
*La propia estimación* 1915  
*La ciudad alegre y confiada* 1916  
*La mal que nos hacen* 1917  
*Plays* 1917  
*La Inmaculada de los Dolores* 1918  
*La ley de los hijos* 1918  
*El audaz* [adaptor; from a novel by Benito Pérez Galdós] 1919  
*La Cenicienta* 1919  
*Plays: Second Series* 1919  
*Y va de cuento . . .* 1919  
*Una pobre mujer* 1920  
*Una señora* [A Lady] 1920  
*Plays: Third Series* 1923  
*Alfilerazos* 1924  
*Lecciones de buen amor* 1924  
*La otra honra* 1924  
*Plays: Fourth Series* 1924  
*La virtud sospechosa* 1924  
*Nadie sabe lo que quiere; o, El bailarín y el trabajador* 1925  
*Los nuevos yernos* 1925  
*El suicidio de Lucerito* 1925  
*La mariposa que voló sobre el mar* 1926  
*La noche iluminada* 1927  
*Para el cielo y los altares* 1928  
*Pepa Doncel* 1928  
*Los amigos del hombre* 1930  
*De muy buena familia* 1931  
*Literatura* 1931  
*La duquesa gitana* 1932  
*La moral del divorcio* 1932  
*Santa Rusia, primera parte de una trilogía* 1932

*El rival de su mujer* 1933  
*Memorias de un madrileño* 1934  
*La novia de nieve* 1934  
*No juguéis con esas cosas* 1935  
*Lo increíble* 1940  
*Abuelo y nieto* 1941  
*Y amargaba . . .* 1941  
*Al fin, mujer* 1942  
*¡Hija del alma!* 1942  
*Don Magin, él de las magias* 1944  
*Los niños perdidos en la selva* 1944  
*La ciudad doliente* 1945  
*Nieve en mayo* 1945  
*La infanzona* 1947  
*Abdicación* 1948  
*Adoración* 1948  
*Mater imperatrix* 1950  
*Su amante esposa* 1950  
*Tú una vez, y el diablo diez* 1950  
*Ha llegado Don Juan* 1952  
*Almas prisioneras* 1953  
*Caperucita asusta al lobo* 1953  
*Servir* 1953  
*Hijos padres de sus padres* 1954

### Other Major Works

*Cartas de mujeres* (fictional letters) 1893  
*Versos* (poetry) 1893  
*Figulinas* (sketches) 1898  
*Vilanos* (sketches) 1905  
*El teatro del pueblo* (nonfiction) 1909  
*Conferencias* (lectures) 1924  
*Pensamientos* (essays) 1931  
*De sobremesa: Crónicas* (nonfiction) 1940  
*Recuerdos y olvidos (memorias)* (memoir) 1959

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## OVERVIEWS AND GENERAL STUDIES

### John Garrett Underhill (essay date 1920)

SOURCE: Underhill, John Garrett. Introduction to *Plays by Jacinto Benavente*, translated and edited by John Garrett Underhill, pp. vii-xxv. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1920.

[In the following excerpt, Underhill credits Benavente with initiating a renaissance in Spanish theater, emphasizing the playwright's sparseness of detail and his understanding of human motives as crucial aspects of his art.]

Jacinto Benavente was born at Madrid, August 12, 1866. He was the son of Mariano Benavente, a physician and distinguished specialist in the diseases of children, who had come up to the capital from Murcia, that most African and somnolent of European cities, some years before. If Adam should return to this earth, says the Spaniard, Murcia is the spot he would recognize first, for of all places it has changed the least. There is in many of the most fascinating pages of Benavente the sense of this semitropical, parched, unchanging landscape, where, as he himself has put it, civilization has not yet murdered sleep. Along the upper reaches of the River Segura lies many a town, baked into the arid hillsides through centuries of torrid noons, from which never a name has come forth into the currents of European life.

As a young man he entered the University of Madrid and there studied law, without, however, completing the course. But no routine study fixed his attention. In particular, he was avid of intercourse with persons of all sorts and conditions, especially with those whose lives were uncouth and primitive in their surroundings, and who were simple and childlike in nature, where the heart was never very far beneath the surface and the emotions ingenuous and strong. For a while he travelled with a circus; it is even said that he performed in the ring. Clowns fascinated him. All classes of itinerant folk have been his friends ever since. Subsequently he became an actor, appearing in the company of María Tubau, where his first part was that of a sportsman, at that period an exotic, incredible, not to say highly ridiculous figure in Spain. He has always been a peregrine, adventurous genius, and of the type nobody ever finds dull. He has travelled extensively and is conversant with the languages and literatures of western Europe and of America, in which he is familiarly at home. No vital subject is alien to him. His field is world-wide, and his sympathies are of cosmopolitan range.

While still at the University he gave evidence of literary predilections. His first volume was his *Poems*, published in 1893. This was followed by *Plays of the Imagination*, which contains some of the finest specimens of the lighter Spanish prose, and *Vilanos*, or *Thistledown* preparing the way for his *Figurines* and *The Ladies' Letter Writer* masterpieces in a cameo-like perfection of workmanship and fluent satiric style respectively. These early volumes are at once the model rhetoric and the inspiration of the writers of the younger generation, who have fashioned a new literature and moulded into a finer instrument the stately Castilian tongue.

With the exception of Cervantes and of certain other robust spirits, more or less associated with the vein of the romances of roguery, Spanish literature, since the day of Lope de Vega and the triumph of the romantic



theatre, has been prone to generalizations and to broad emotions. It has been essentially a fabric of imagination and eloquence. It was not only brilliant, but splendid, with its heroic sentiment and its purple patches of diction, yet nevertheless compact of convention and conclusions *a priori*, exemplified in the traditional honor of the dramas of Calderón, the consecrated types of Zorrilla, the poisoned rings and unrevealable secrets of the elder Echegaray. But with the coming of the generation of 1898 a great change took place in the spirit of Spanish art. The forces of the New World penetrated the life of the Old. The loss of the colonies awakened the nation to a realization of the fact that it had been walking in a political and literary dream. Its traditions had become anachronisms of which it must rid itself before it could assume a position among the progressive peoples. Spanish letters to-day, in the hands of contemporary writers, such as Martínez Sierra, Pío Baroja, Valle-Inclán, Juan Ramón Jiménez, Antonio and Manuel Machado, Azorín—a company from which the name of Rubén Darío must not be disassociated—is a generalization from experience, not an imitation of books. It is founded upon observation and insists upon detail, which must precede generalization, no matter how plausible. The style becomes supple, delicate, adapted to reflect the facets as well as the general form of the subject. Through the impetus of the new movement, Spanish criticism also took on new life, and cut its way through both the old and new literatures, to which the test of practical reason was relentlessly applied. So sweeping a revolution would not have been possible in any other country in so brief a time, but the intellectual life of Spain is centred at Madrid, and in a small circle at Madrid, the prestige of whose names is unquestioned wherever the Spanish language is spoken. The new era had been delayed longer than elsewhere, but nowhere had the triumph of its principles proved so radical or so absolute.

Although in no sense its promoter, Benavente has been the most stimulating and compelling figure in this latter-day renaissance. By a coincidence, perhaps, his evolution has kept pace strictly with the successive phases of its development. His first play, *Thy Brother's House, El nido ajeno*, was acted in 1894, and failed to attract unusual attention. It was not an unusual play. On the performance of his second work, *Gente conocida, In Society*, at the Teatro de la Comedia, Madrid, in 1896, it was at once recognized that an extraordinary talent had appeared. Here was a comedy which had no affinity with anything hitherto seen south of the Pyrenees, suggesting rather the technique of Lavedan or the Countess Martel than that of native writers, such as the Padre Coloma, whose sensationally popular sketches of Madrid life, *Pequeñeces*, had been the nearest approximation known until that time in the Spanish capital. The actors viewed the new play with suspicion during the rehearsals, and as time went on, even with utter disgust. At last

the author himself lost faith. Yet the result confounded them completely. Its triumph on representation was instantaneous and final.

*Gente conocida* was followed by a brilliant succession of satirical comedies, dealing with Madrid society or with the fortunes of political adventurers from the capital condemned for a while to service in the provinces. *The Banquet of Wild Beasts* and *Lo cursi* are among the most typical of these plays, in which metropolitan routine is depicted as systematic preoccupation with everything in life which is not worth while. An even more mordant satire is *The Governor's Wife*, apparently respecting nothing, much less virtue—or is it merely the eternal fool? For the greater part, the plays of this period were written for that most spirited of comediennesses, Rosario Pino, and the association of these two remarkable talents, romping and slashing and making holiday together through every convention of the dull, the selfish, the idle, the commonplace, remains in the popular mind as the brightest and most dazzling feature of the modern Spanish stage.

At the beginning of 1905 Benavente had been active in the theatre for eleven years. He had written over thirty plays. A decade of varied production had brought the Spanish-speaking peoples to feel, as by common consent, that here was an achievement without precedent in the modern annals of one of the great dramas of the world. It might well have been accounted a life-work. A shorter period has almost invariably witnessed the rise and decline of the favorite Parisian playwrights. Yet Benavente did not purpose to decline. Instead, a subtle change takes place in his style, such as had come over that of Cervantes between the first and second parts of *Don Quixote*. He renews himself. His phrase becomes transparent, at the same time richer and more simple, more suggestive. It pervades the whole work with the effortless clarity of the last manner of Velázquez, which is as if it had never met with an obstacle in the world. Such a style is the synthesis of the experience of a great writer, and comes only to the maturity of a great artist. It has been said that every idea of Benavente's is an idea and a half. We see not only the thought, but its reverse and its ramifications, its genesis, as well as the nature by which it was conceived, against the background of the common mind.

"I do not make my plays for the public," he writes: "I make the public for my plays." This is true not only in the matter of fundamental conception and arrangement, but there is an entire absence of the lesser tricks and artifices of the stage. Indeed, few writers of the first reputation have been such practical men of the theatre. Not only was he an actor in the beginning, but he has recently impersonated Don Juan Tenorio in Zorrilla's play of that name, the warhorse of all great Spanish actors. He created the rôle of Pepe in his own *Sin querer*,

*In Perfect Innocence*, and only a year ago he appeared at the Teatro Lara and assumed the leading part in his latest drama, *La ciudad alegre y confiada*, preventing thereby the closing of the house when the actor Thuillier was taken ill before one of the earlier performances. Benavente is in no sense a professional actor—far from it; these things have been the diversions of a restless and inquiring mind. He assisted in the formation of the Art Theatre, which was inaugurated by a series of matinées at the Lara, and played in his comedy, *A Long Farewell*, at the opening matinée. His *House of Good Fortune* was staged by the Teatre Intim at Barcelona, and in 1911 he associated himself with the actor Porredón in the foundation of a Children's Theatre, after the manner of the Educational Alliance of New York, contributing, among other things, *The Prince Who Learned Everything out of Books*, an allegorical fairy-tale of great delicacy. Unfortunately this venture proved short-lived. His greatest successes have uniformly been attained in the established houses, the Comedia, the Lara, the Español, and, of late years, the Princesa, to the distinction of which, under the direction of María Guerrero and Fernando Díaz de Mendoza, he has contributed in large measure. Only a master of the theatre could be so independent of its parade; rather he has espoused every reform by which the stage might be broadened or made more sincere. The theatre has been his workshop, not his life, and after each period of productivity he has withdrawn from public view, perhaps to his country home near Toledo, perhaps to travel, to lecture or to write, returning again with a fresh orientation and a keener sense of living values. "Ah!" he exclaims in the second volume of his "Table Talk," "let us have done with all counterfeits, of which the most common in the theatre are these: the confusion of the rapid with the literary, of the dull with the profound, of the extravagant with the new, the banal with the poetic, the gross with the courageous and bold. All these equivocations invariably end in one other—an empty house, which is explained by saying that the play failed because it was art and the public was unable to appreciate art. But the true art of the theatre is to do good business, and to do good business you must do good art. Shakespeare and Molière were both managers, and as managers both made a great deal of money."

No dramatist is less theatrical, yet none has written more theatrical plays. Especially during his earlier years, he composed a large number of occasional pieces for the benefits of friends, or otherwise for their accommodation, or to tide friendly stages over emergencies. There are many of these—one-act plays, musical plays, farces in one, two, and three acts. They are the fruit of his lighter moments, and are theatrical not in the usual acceptance which implies a distortion of the theme through resort to artifice, but in the very nature and conduct of their action, which is of the theatre, conceived for the purposes of an evening's entertain-

ment, rather than out of the sphere of actuality and experience. On the other hand, as in compensation, Benavente has taken an unusual interest in the best in foreign drama, and has made some notable translations from the English, Catalan, and French. An adaptation of Molière's *Don Juan*, first seen in 1897, was his initial undertaking in this field. His *King Lear*, a prose version of the tragedy, is an admirable example of the translator's art, while his graceful, flexible rendering of *The Yellow Jacket*, the fascinating Chinese drama of George C. Hazelton and Benrimo, is so successful that it almost cries to be turned back into English as an original work.

Nevertheless, these productions are secondary in the history of his reputation. They have interested him but momentarily or in some very special connection, although they exceed in bulk and importance the accomplishment of the ordinary playwright. The real dramas of Benavente, in which he has expressed himself, recorded his impressions of life without hesitation or reserve, and made a distinctive contribution to the theatre, are far more numerous, as well as of greater richness and variety. *A Lover's Tale*, an improvisation upon the theme of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, is held by fastidious judges to be one of the finest examples of modern Spanish prose. It was followed by other works in the same vein, and, after the close of the century, the series of comedies written for Rosario Pino was capped by *Sacrifice* and *The Victor Soul*, both of a more sober nature, generally regarded as pessimistic in tendency when contrasted with the lighter works which had preceded them. The two great cycloramic spectacles, *Saturday Night* and *The Fire Dragon*, in which the satirical, emotional, and moral elements were intertwined so inextricably that the public was confused and held its judgment for a time in reserve, brought the first decade of activity to an end. Benavente has since tried his hand at almost every *genre*, and he has been successful in them all—peasant drama and the tragedy of blood, so long associated with Spain in the minds of foreigners, satires of provincial and metropolitan society, of the aristocracy, dramas of the middle class, court comedy in the most subtle and refined of forms, in which by birth and breeding the personages are all royal. He has written romantic comedies and dramas, rococo spectacles, imaginative fairy plays of genuine poetic worth. Only the play in verse has remained unattempted, implying, as it no doubt does, through its diction a certain artificiality in the very processes of thought. In all these different *genres* he has moved with consummate ease, without the suggestion of effort, until the drama of character has seemed the most facile and casual of arts.

The four plays which make up the present volume have been chosen from the later works of the author, in which his style has attained full development. They are as representative, perhaps, as four plays selected for the

purpose of introduction to an entirely new circle of readers can be. They will provide some basis for an estimate not only of the more superficial aspects of his genius, but of his conceptions and methods—to an extent of his opinions, as also of the personality which underlies them. It is not difficult for one versed in the theatre to recognize when the voice of the author speaks in his plays.

*His Widow's Husband*, performed at the Teatro Príncipe Alfonso in 1908, is a comedy of provincial life, and as such was received with a certain disfavor by the more precious critics of the capital. By the public it was at once accepted as a thoroughly characteristic triumph. Here is a play whose theatrical qualities are obvious, dear to the actor's heart. In structure a farce, it is primarily an adventure in provincial psychology, and condenses into effectiveness the provincial atmosphere—the town itself, its society, its intellectual status. The characters seem to have no mentality; their minds are atrophied and slow. We become conscious of the outward feel of things, of the streets of the city as they appear to the eye; the personages seem to be present before us in the body, through which the retarded action of their thoughts struggles to the surface with effort. It is astonishing that one of the most spirituelle of writers should be capable of conveying such a vivid sense of crass reality. More closely considered, this Protean quality is implicit in his method. Benavente never describes characters; he has no inclination to serve them as tailor, nor does he give their ages away. In his plays there is no description either of persons or of locale. He does not set his scenes—the settings are implied, and the effect attained by an acute perception of mental processes which in themselves suggest the environment. Herein lies the secret of his versatility, in the highest art of description, which finds most perfect expression in *Señora Ama*, wherein the Castilian plains are painted in human terms, their bright, hard lights and vast, treeless distances being projected from the austere poverty of the minds of the *aldeanos*, or peasants, whose voices seem to break upon the surrounding void and are heard in the great silences of space.

In *La Malquerida* the process is carried even further from the point of view of drama. The tragedy was written at the close of 1913 as a tribute to María Guerrero, and is . . . [perhaps the most notable] of the series of peasant dramas presented with such distinguished success by the Compañía Guerrero-Mendoza. The detail is of the most meagre. We are shown a small town, apparently ill lighted or not at all. A brook, or *arroyo*, runs near by. Evidently the country is a rolling one. There are fields, a grove, a mill in the river bottom, a long road with a crucifix beside it, and mountains in the distance—"those mountains"—to which no adjective is ever applied. On the mountains there are brambles, thickets, and rocks. This is all. The drama is an

emotional one in which the landscape and action are exteriorized from the realm of character and conscience, and partake of its nature, vague and blurred of outline, seemingly painted in broad but ill-defined strokes, which harmonize with a pervading sense of doubt and uncertainty, bewilderment of conscience and impending doom. The subject is the struggle of the individual conscience against the conscience of the mass, which is embodied in the talk of the town, almost the identical theme of José Echegaray's "Great Galeoto," but now developed in the manner of a peasant drama by Guimerá. It is the sort of drama that the Catalan would have written could he have written this sort of drama, in spirit and execution a creation entirely apart from its predecessors. Once before, Benavente had performed a similar sleight-of-hand, and it is difficult to acquit him of a certain malign pleasure in the achievement. *The Eyes of the Dead* is obviously just such a tragedy of mystery as those to the composition of which Echegaray had devoted a lifetime. Having proved to the actors that true drama cannot be written around papers, letters, mysterious rings, or any such momentous hocus-pocus, and having actually convinced actors of the fact, he now turns about and through a typical transformation writes precisely such a drama, demonstrating that the mysterious letter is a device of the purest water, in no way incompatible with the possession of exacting taste.

Contrasting with a farce which is a comedy and an emotional drama which is a tragedy of character in reverse, *The Evil Doers of Good* is a comedy of manners, according to the classification of the schools. It is obviously a satire of complacency, of those fruits of religion which are not things of the spirit, and as such it was received at its first performance at the Teatro Lara, where it gave glorious offense. The Lara is the home of the *sábado blanco*, or innocuous matinée. No stage could have been selected where such an offering would have proved more unwelcome. Many ladies prominent in Madrid society and active in organized charity arose and left the house. Yet *The Evil Doers of Good*, for all its wit, was in fact directed neither against piety nor organized beneficence. Benavente does not satirize individuals; he puts his finger instead upon inherent inconsistencies which need only to be presented in their native contradiction to appear what they are. His is a civilizing rather than a destructive or reforming force. In this comedy, character and environment react upon each other in the domain of the will, and its significance is to be sought in the story of Jesus and Nativity, washed in together from the sea, which is destined again to carry them away. In *The Graveyard of Dreams*, the same two lovers, now called Cipriano and Rosina, are driven apart forever by a relentless poverty against which no satire can avail. An apparent contradiction; the solution is different, although the problem is the same. In the domain of experience every problem is a special problem, to be determined by the condition of