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EUGÈNE BRIEUX  
BLANCHETTE

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Heath's Modern Language Series

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# BLANCHETTE

COMÉDIE EN TROIS ACTES

PAR

EUGÈNE BRIEUX

DE L'ACADÉMIE FRANÇAISE

*WITH INTRODUCTION AND NOTES*

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## PREFACE

In France to-day, Brieux, the author of *Blanchette*, is probably the most highly considered living dramatist, and in England and America, also, for the past twenty years, he has been the French dramatic writer, except possibly Rostand, most widely discussed and translated. Nevertheless, he has been, in France, the object of considerable criticism, of which some is doubtless valid, while the discussions in England and this country have lacked too often the knowledge of French dramatic history necessary to insure an adequate appreciation. He would seem, then, the French dramatist of to-day whose works could be studied with the greatest profit, not only to determine important tendencies of the French theater, but also to throw light on the Anglo-Saxon stage, or at least on present-day dramatic taste and appreciation in Anglo-Saxon countries.

In truth, the problems connected with Brieux's plays are several, and some difficult to solve. For example, his critics have not agreed in finding any point of view, or philosophy, that explains consistently his own plays. Again, his apprenticeship in the *Théâtre-Libre* has led to an identification that is in part, at least, false, so that similar eager reformers in England and America, the promoters of the New Theater movement and others, have put him forward as a champion with his dullest weapon; to many he is known only as the author of *Damaged Goods*, dramatically probably his poorest play. Also, by these admirers he is sometimes given credit for being the inventor of the "Useful Play," of which he is only a belated exponent. Finally, the reasons for the interest in Brieux, in this country especially, have not been clearly established. The chief object of our Introduction, then, in

addition to the aid it may give in appreciating *Blanchette*, will be to throw some light on the problems just mentioned, and in order to do this an attempt will be made to treat Brioux in his proper perspective, as far as is possible within the present brief limits.

MADISON, WISC.  
October, 1923.

H. A. S.  
H. M. L.

## INTRODUCTION

### A. — BRIEUX'S LIFE AND WORKS

EUGÈNE BRIEUX was born in 1858 in Paris. His father was a carpenter. Thus he comes from the common people, knows their life, and has never disavowed them. His regular education did not extend beyond the common schools. He was left an orphan in his early youth and at fifteen was earning his living as a clerk. However, he had a passion for reading and devoted to it all he could afford both of time and money. He even managed to acquire a fair knowledge of Latin. Quite early in life he had literary ambitions. In his address on his reception into the French Academy, he tells us that he had vowed at fifteen to become an Academician.

He began to write plays while young, and one of them, *Bernard Palissy*, written when he was twenty in collaboration with Gaston Salandri, was played at the *Théâtre Cluny*. It had only one performance and did not deserve more. He now entered journalism and spent several years in newspaper work in cities outside of Paris, and particularly at Rouen. Meanwhile he continued to write plays, but none of these early pieces was fortunate enough, or good enough, to secure a performance.

Brieux won his first real recognition, as did a number of other young dramatists of the times, at the *Théâtre-Libre*. His *Ménages d'Artistes* was played there in 1890, although his earliest important success was *Blanchette*, in 1892. Brieux pays warm tribute to Antoine, the founder of the *Théâtre-*

*Libre*, in the preface to the French edition of this latter play, and mentions that during the preceding ten years his plays had been rejected by all the theater managers of Paris. However, an examination of these early plays tends to confirm rather than to discredit the judgment of these managers.

Brieux is often spoken of as a product of the *Théâtre-Libre* in its effort to establish extreme realism on the stage, and the influence of this movement is in fact evident in several of his plays. But *Blanchette* deserved, and doubtless would soon have secured, representation in the well-established theaters, and it would be a mistake to judge Brieux simply as a disciple of the *Théâtre-Libre*.

Since it is prevailing practice, more than any inherent reason, which has determined that modern realism, and especially naturalism, is to deal largely with the vulgar and sordid in life, or, at least, with common, everyday life, and rather its physical than its spiritual side, we must, on the whole, classify Brieux as an outright realist, like the others in the *Théâtre-Libre* movement. Not only are his dramas the product of observation, but many of them deal with sides of life that are not beautiful. But it is important to note why Brieux is to be classified as a realist. Undoubtedly the manners and pretensions of the front parlor can often be better judged by entering it through the back yard and kitchen, and the character of one's dreams may be explained sometimes by the naturalistic practice of looking into the contents of the garbage can, but there is no indication that Brieux has any morbid fondness for exploring back yards and garbage cans *per se*. In general, he sees these only because so many of his personages have no front yards and must throw their garbage into the street. His interest is after all in the living room — which is often the only room for the classes he treats. Only occasionally is he a writer of *comédie rosse*, the "Tough Comedy" so often affected by the extreme realists, where all the characters are too despicable to deserve the interest of re-



spectable people. He is neither morbid nor a pessimist,<sup>1</sup> and even his technic, where it resembles that of the naturalists of the *Théâtre-Libre*, is probably more often due to lack of dramatic skill than to *parti pris*.

With the success of *Blanchette*, which has remained one of the best and most popular of his plays, Brioux had returned to Paris, and, although he continued for a few years to write as a journalist, he finally gave himself up entirely to the stage. For the past thirty years, Brioux has produced on the average a play a year, except during the Great War, when he threw all his energies and resources into relief work. In 1910, he was elected a member of the French Academy. He has shunned publicity and his private life is little known.

In addition to *Blanchette*, five or six other plays of Brioux stand out as significant. Among these is the *Trois Filles de M. Dupont*, appearing in 1897. Although its theme is not so generous as many of Brioux's, and its tone and realism are those of the *Théâtre-Libre*, it offers some of his strongest character drawing, perhaps because in it, as in *Blanchette*, the author is not obsessed by his thesis to the point of neglecting his characters.

In 1900 appeared his *La Robe rouge*, an attack on the abuses of justice, and often called his strongest play. Its dramatic action is firmer than that of *Blanchette*, but it is doubtful if it, or any other play of Brioux, is better or more enduring than his first success.

In 1901 were given two of his most significant pieces, *Les Remplaçantes*, a very effective thesis play aimed at the evils of wet-nursing, and offering excellent characterizations of peasant life, and *Les Avariés*. This latter play, widely discussed and translated, is a plea for reform in combating the

<sup>1</sup> One might note a specific declaration on this point. He says: "Humanity is perfectable. The world is improving, and we may as well do all we can to hasten that education which nothing can prevent or stop." — Interview in *Daily Mail*, 1907.



social diseases. It marks the farthest point in the development of the thesis play, and is, in fact, hardly more than an illustrated dramatic lecture. Perhaps two of the most important plays since 1901 are *Maternité*, in 1903, a thesis play of the same violent and reformatory character as *Les Avariés*, and *La Femme Seule*, in 1913, a plea for the economic emancipation of woman. Of considerable interest to Americans, although not one of his strongest plays, is *Les Américains chez nous*, appearing in 1919.

In France, Brieux has been much criticized as a dramatic artist. This is natural in a country where form and style are national virtues, and where the art of writing plays has been brought to a point hardly short of perfection. Nevertheless, measured by less exalted standards, there is justification for this criticism. Brieux's insufficient training and lack of familiarity with the classics are reflected in his language and style, although these are in part due to his free treatment of the uneducated classes. His peasant characters taken from life and is effective.

His construction and dramatic technic often leave much to be desired. Here, it is true, opinions differ in proportion as the critic is a supporter of the "well-made play" of Molière and Dumas, or a partisan of the "slice of life" theory of the extreme realists of the *Théâtre-Libre*. Brieux has usually been claimed by the latter group, and often highly praised for his reaction against the too logically constructed play. Bernard Shaw has set off a whole tempest of thunder and lightning to this intent, which has been somewhat feebly re-echoed in this country by H. L. Mencken.<sup>2</sup> Space does not permit

<sup>2</sup> *Three Plays of Brieux*, Introduction by Bernard Shaw; *Blanchette and The Escape*, by Brieux, Preface by H. L. Mencken. It is obviously out of place here to consider at length these articles, which are as astonishing for their abundance of paradoxical assertion as for their indigence of real information on the history of the French drama. Nevertheless, it is much to be regretted that Brieux's presentation to English readers should be so injudicious and so imperfect.

a discussion of these conflicting theories, but it is certain that the extremists on both sides are wrong, and it is well to remember that the opposite of the well-made play is the badly-made play. As a matter of fact, the majority of Brioux's dramas adhere no more to the "slice of life" theory than they do to that of the "well-made play." A few only are strongly constructed, and some are very poorly constructed, but it is difficult to see in any case that this is due to realism and fidelity to life as opposed to an artificial logic. Few other authors have revised their plays more often, as the result of advice or criticism, and these revisions have usually been along the lines of better construction. The evidence is that Brioux has quite regularly constructed his plays as well as he could, without any conscious adherence to the theories of the Naturalistic School. That he does not have exceptional skill in this respect is certain. In fact, he hardly has the minimum skill which to us may seem a maximum — that appears to be the right of every French dramatist. Evidence of this is characteristic but when we see Brioux simply take the scissors to the *L'École des Belles-Mères* from *La Couvée*, that is, a lecturingly good one-act comedy from a very poor three-act play, when he takes a strong novel such as Hervieu's *L'Arrière-pensée* and makes from it an insufferably dull and heavy play, it is clear that his chief merit is not his skill as a playwright.

One must add to this that Brioux lacks notably the usual French *esprit*. At the most he has, and that somewhat rarely, a certain comic vein, which is not light or gay enough to relieve greatly his tragic or painful scenes. His plays are often, it must be confessed, somewhat heavy and depressing. In short, Brioux is certainly not a dramatic artist — a fact which, by the way, he himself readily admits.<sup>3</sup>

Since it is not the dramatic artist that we find in Brioux, nor the ability to entertain by wit or amuse with the comic,

<sup>3</sup> The editors recall very categorical statements to this effect, made only last year by Brioux himself, both in public and later in private conversation.

we must look elsewhere for an explanation of his dramatic power. Obviously, much of this lies in his themes and subject matter. And he is important for these especially, and not at all as a creator of any new forms of drama, as English and American critics, ignoring the plays of his predecessors, are so prone to assert. Of the Theater of Ideas, of Social Drama, of the Thesis Play, of the Useful Play, not once is he a creator. These were all invented, popularized, and exploited long before by Dumas fils and Augier.

However, he has widened the scope and interest of more than one of these forms. We all know that Dumas, great as were his originality and dramatic power, dealt with a very small fraction of Parisian society, and his one subject immoral love. Augier, it is true, was more representative; he gives an excellent picture of the comfortable bourgeoisie with an interest centering largely on money and marriage. However, both of these classes are toward the peak of the pyramid made up by the social strata of the French people. Brieux's slice of life is cut from the base of this pyramid, from the stratum of the common people, and is immense and broader. Here is one of the great secrets of his power and of the wide interest he has attracted, not only in France but elsewhere. The base of society is of equal concern to all, if the foundation is shaken, the whole pyramid falls. Moreover, this foundation, the common people, is in its psychology and problems much the same in all countries.

One needs to make but the hastiest survey of Brieux's plays to see the large number of themes of broad or of universal interest: education of the masses, political corruption, organized charity and pauperism, gambling, rearing of children, the courts and justice, social diseases, illegitimacy and birth control, superstition and religion, economic independence of women, and so forth. Obviously, he has greatly extended, beyond that of Dumas and Augier, the scope of social drama, and especially marked is his superiority in this respect over so



many of his contemporaries, who have tended too often to choose some ingenious paradox on society for the subject of their plays.

The interest of Brieux's themes is evident, but these do not offer, after all, the final criterion in judging a dramatist. It is not sufficient to be simply an observer and reproducer of life, however important that may be. Drama is not a snapshot of life, but a moving picture, and the director has more to do than to set the camera, close his eyes, and turn the crank. He must select and combine to make the picture a harmonious whole, and if this picture is to mean anything in an artistic way, the dramatist must have a point of view of his own. In other words, he must have a philosophy of life. No better definition of modern drama has been invented than to say that it is a judgment on life, if one will accept this criterion in its most liberal meaning.

Most significant French dramatists do have, regularly, a point of view or a philosophy; for example, the greatest of them, Molière, is the philosopher of good sense and measure. Dumas fils also had a philosophy of his own, paradoxical as it was, and Augier was always the intuitive champion of the sacredness of the family and the defender of stable society. Ibsen, who is perhaps Brieux's greatest contemporary, sees life controlled ever by a few primary instincts, such as egoism, which are constantly breaking through the veneer of civilization. What is the point of view or the philosophy of Brieux? It must be confessed that the answer to this problem is most difficult. As a rule, Brieux's Anglo-Saxon critics have either ignored the importance of the question or have ascribed to Brieux a multitude of aims which in no way can be combined and harmonized into a basic philosophy, while the French criticism, which is keener, has tended to deny to Brieux a consistent personal guide to life. The latter critics are probably right if Brieux is judged by usual French standards, according to which a philosophy should be, first of all, an intellectual

guide to life, one capable of rational justification. It is doubtful if any such key can be found to the work of Brieux.

Nevertheless, a careful survey of Brieux's significant drama does show a common motive in their conception, and on which quite regularly explains his conclusions in the numerous problems of life which he has raised. This philosophy Brieux, if philosophy it can be called, is that of *social pity*. It is Christian charity based on sentiment and is dependent entirely on feeling, the feeling of a kind, honest, and sincere man, and is thus purely a philosophy of the heart. So that if it has a consistency, it is certainly not that of the intellect. This explains why Brieux so regularly may arouse our feelings of pity, sympathy, or indignation, but so rarely offers a reasoned solution — if he offers a solution at all.

One can note how this feeling of pity dominates in all of his plays.<sup>4</sup> In *Blanchette*, we are gripped both by the tragedy of family estrangement, and by that of Blanquette's economic helplessness. But the first is the inevitable progress, and, as for the second, no solution is offered. In *L'Engrenage*, we are indignant at the political corruption, sympathize with the weak but honest man who succumbs, but what does Brieux propose to remedy this? In *Les Bâilleurs*, he finally disclaims intelligent charity, but we give at random, for the sake of the giver's soul, whatever the social consequences. Our hearts are grieved over the sad fate of the three daughters of M. Dupont, but what shall we do about it? We pity the unfortunates in the *Résultat des Courses*, but the dénouement is not a solution, or even a judgment; it is only a sentimental family reunion. In *La Robe rouge*, Brieux's pity and indignation are so great that the chief victim is made to assassinate the chief author of the injustice done — in reality a passional crime. *Les Remplaçantes*

<sup>4</sup> In his address before the American Academy of Arts, he has clearly stated this dominating motive: "It has been my desire that the amount of suffering in the world might be diminished a little because I have lived."

a moving plea, filled with pity and indignation, for the child, and *La Petite Amie* and *Maternité* are similar pleas for the child-mother. Even *Les Avariés*, thesis play as it is, is infinitely more an appeal to our feelings and to our indignation than it is a rational treatment or proposal of reform.

In *Le Berceau*, Brioux's pity for the child and parents, tortured in their filial and parental love, finds no real solution. It is against divorce, yes, but logically it would call for a second divorce. In *La Déserteuse*, his sympathy for the child would dismiss the unworthy mother and give another her place, despite mother love, but in *Suzette*, he would, on the contrary, pardon and take her back because of his sympathy for her mother love, and at last, in *Simone*, he shows how much Christian charity revolt at Dumas' advice to kill the faithful wife and mother. Finally, in *La Foi*, while denying the gods and religion, Brioux has so much pity for the misled and ignorant that he would restore them a god and something to pray to, even if it were the cruel god, Stork, rather than the harmless god, Log.

In all these, and in other plays, we see that Brioux is regularly on the side of the weak and defenseless, usually the child or woman,<sup>5</sup> and his motive is pity and sentiment rather than reasoned justice. Perhaps this is not a philosophy, but it is quite strikingly the doctrine of Christian charity.

Moreover, Brioux is certainly not an intellectual socialist. He pities the lower classes, but he does not justify them. His socialistic utterances are too scrappy and inconsistent to be called a theory. In fact, it may as well be said that Brioux is not primarily a thinker, much less a scientific one. Only a

<sup>5</sup> In at least ten of his plays, pity and sympathy for the child, or the children, form the dominating motive. This making the child a center for his plays, and also his corresponding criticism of parents who spoil or who meddle with the lives of their children are practically *idées fixes* in Brioux. He is not at all a consistent defender of the sanctity of marriage. In fact, in the problems of marriage and divorce, the child seems to be his only real concern.



critic as uniquely original as Shaw could find him both. However, although his philosophy is one of sentiment, it is not necessarily sentimental. He has too much good common sense for that. And finally, his tendency to follow the intuitions of a charitable and honest heart has saved him from the finely-spun theories and artificially logical conclusions so often found in that other great dramatic moralist and reformer Dumas fils.

Brieux did not invent the useful stage or the thesis play. Dumas not only preceded him, but expounded even more forcibly than he the theory of such drama. However, Brieux, perhaps because he is less a dramatic artist than Dumas, owes more especially his success to this side of his drama, and his influence has been so great that one feels called on to examine anew these theories. Does art exist for art's sake, or must it have a utilitarian aim? Is the primary purpose of the theater to amuse, or should it instruct and reform?

Probably it is true wisdom to avoid either extreme. The dilemma is, after all, an invention of logic. In actual life nothing is rarer. So there is hardly need of being impaled on either horn. In a general way, all art may have as its aim human improvement; certainly it does if culture, or even civilization, itself, is an improvement. But this does not mean an obvious moral. In dramatic art, there is probably no valid objection to the thesis play if the thesis is the honest working out of the author's philosophy in presenting the life and action of his characters, rather than the prepared plea of the lawyer. In this better sense, *Tartuffe* is perhaps a thesis play.

We can commend, then, such plays of Brieux as *Blanchette* and *La Robe rouge*, where life, character, and action are not sacrificed to a thesis. On the other hand, *Les Avariés* represents a doubtful tendency of the stage, and this not simply because it is didactic, or useful, or propaganda, but because it is not primarily dramatic. The partisans of such drama may,

it is true, prophesy differently and appeal to the judgment of the future. None the less, there is hardly need to wait a hundred years to learn that it will be interest in the dramatic rather than in the didactic which will prevail. We have the history of the past to guide us. French drama is a thousand years old, and in its beginnings in the Christian Mass it was entirely didactic. We find, however, even before it changed its speech from Latin to French and escaped from the Church, that the dramatic impulse and interest began to prevail at the expense of the didactic, and this process has continued ever since. For five hundred years, after its birth in the Church, it proclaimed its pious or moral aim, but its dominating tendency was always to interest and amuse.

It is sometimes claimed that Brieux is more popular in England and America than in France. An explanation of this should be interesting.

We have seen that the forms of drama he has used were created forty years earlier, but he is their best exponent at a time when such forms have been attracting the most interest in Anglo-Saxon countries, so that, often, he has been mistakenly given credit for them. Furthermore, Brieux's limitations as an artist, his style and form, so much criticized in France, are hardly handicaps when he is translated and played in English.

However, it is especially his themes which have attracted. He has largely given up the too frequent triangle play and has created themes of more general interest, not only in France, but everywhere. Moreover, in America especially, the "Useful Play," of which Brieux is the best present exponent, was bound to attract great interest, as the utilitarian always does in this country. Brieux not only carried it into fields in which we are interested, but he has been the champion of a number of ideas with which we, perhaps, sympathize more universally than the French, such as independence of youth, economically and in marriage, economic and social independence of women.

anti-gambling restrictions, protection from social menaces by laws, and, finally, reform through sentiment. In fact, it would seem exactly this basic philosophy of Brieux, mentioned above, which is one of sentiment and feeling rather than of intellect or reason, that makes him especially sympathetic and comprehensible to Anglo-Saxons. French literature has always been differentiated nationally from Anglo-Saxon through being more constantly rational and intellectual, rather than emotional or sentimental. In Brieux we have found a kindred spirit.

### B. — *BLANCHETTE*

Brieux has done nothing finer than *Blanchette*. He has occasionally shown better technic, has several times invented a more interesting plot, and has often attacked more striking themes, but not once has he written better and more enduring drama. In no other play is life more perfectly represented by real characters in situations that are fundamentally, even if not stressfully, dramatic.

One reason for this is that of the dramatist, moralist, and reformer, who are found united — perhaps sometimes divided — in Brieux, this play is the work of the dramatist. At the very most, the other two are present to judge and applaud. As a rule they take a larger part in the representation, with the result that, although we may often find more intense creations or personages, who kindle more quickly our pity or indignation, we soon discover that their warmth is largely the reflected heat of the reformer or moralist, and is not from their own hearts. And we grow a little cold over the deception. Also, there is here no *raisonneur*, in front of the play, to get in our light.

There are two good dramatic themes, closely united, in this piece: the futility of Blanchette's education and her