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ROBERT BROWNING, PLAYWRIGHT

An Analysis of "Strafford"
and
Suggestions for its Revaluation.

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ABSTRACT

Browning wrote Strafford at an early stage in his career. He was twenty-four. He had not long completed Paracelsus, and was working on the composition of his most difficult poem, Sordello. The play did not outlive its premiere season on the stage, playing only four nights to moderate but by no means completely discouraging acclaim and critical review. Like the remaining plays in the canon - there were seven in all - it has fallen into disregard as a closet drama. The play is thus, definitionally, a failure.

A revaluation of the play appears timely. Such a revaluation would not necessarily demand its reinstatement on the boards, or as mandatory reading within the closet, but would certainly seek to establish its place within the Browning canon.

The exercise would also be worthwhile because it would go some way towards explaining why Browning continued to write for the stage, and towards illuminating the dramatic elements that are characteristic of his "best" poetry : character - specifically

'Character in Action'

devices of characterisation

diction

imagery

the substitution of process

for action.

In some respects, Strafford was ahead of its time. William Charles Macready at his prime, for instance, might have been better equipped to direct it, and might thus have secured for it more immediate acceptance. Browning's approach might have been more in accord with stage requirements. In the realm of fact, however, the play was mounted in a time at which the theatre was in decline. Too little work has been done in considering Strafford in the context of the contemporary theatre, and some space is devoted here to a brief survey of English theatre in the 1830's and '40's.

Again, elements can be isolated that point to problems and attempts at solving them in the development of theatre to our own time. Included here might be those of poetic diction in dialogue, motivation of characters, the isolate character, and departures from the Aristotelian norms. In this area, Browning has had little or no influence, and suffers some measure of undeserved neglect.

The present intention is to show, in examining Strafford, how Browning approached the theatre: not only the sort of play he wrote, but, by implication, the sort of writing he considered appropriate for stage presentation. This will lead to some estimate of the strengths and weaknesses of the play in performance. It ought also to open up an area of speculation about modern trends in thought and practice in the theatre.

Early Victorian theatre presents a paradox. It is at once in a state of grievous decline and sprawling vigour. Some understanding of its conditions and status is necessary to a balanced view of Browning's plays, and will be attempted under the difficulties imposed by access to a plethora of data and a dearth of authoritative judgment.

Finally, the major criticism of Browning's theatrical ventures will be reviewed, and this, with the questions raised above, will point towards a revaluation of Strafford in particular, and the remaining plays that Browning wrote, generally.

PREFACE

I do not want to resuscitate the Browning Society. If I did, I should like its membership to include not only the following, who well understand that the terseness of my thanks bears no relation to the depth of my gratitude, but many others within my own family, the English Department, and the Library, and not in those places only, whose kindnesses to me during a lengthy studentship make them feel they are included.

Dr Warwick Slinn, to whom I am indebted in the first place for the main part of my appreciation of Robert Browning's poetry, oversaw with great patience the start of this thesis.

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Peter Flynn

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1.

INTRODUCTION.

XI

"And what is our failure here but a triumph's evidence
For the fulness of the days? Have we withered or agonised?
Why else was the pause prolonged but that singing might issue thence?
Why rushed the discords in but that harmony should be prized?
Sorrow is hard to bear, and doubt is slow to clear,
Each sufferer says his say, his scheme of the weal and woe:
But God has a few of us whom he whispers in the ear;
The rest may reason and welcome: 't is we musicians know."

- Abt Vogler.

(After He has Been Extemporising
Upon The Musical Instrument Of His
Invention) (1964)

The esteem of critics and the response to his poetry that was in a large measure denied to Robert Browning in his own day, has grown steadily and continues to grow. Fresh insights appear in critical essays, to illuminate his mastery over words and rhythms, and his sensitive awareness of the processes of thought, and the effect on these processes of emotions, motives, and situations. The British public to which he felt himself impelled to appeal in the greatest and most dramatic of his poems, The Ring and the Book, has been augmented by readers in many parts of the world. The growing audience has undergone changes in outlook, to which the passage of time and events, shifts in social structures, developments in literature, science and philosophy, the growth of psychology, increasing literacy, and changes in moral and aesthetic outlook, have all contributed.

In his own day, Browning the poet was read, understood, and admired by a small group, misunderstood and vociferously attacked by a larger number of readers, and ignored by most. The main weapon in his critics' armoury was the charge of obscurity, and its immediate effects were to deter many readers from opening a book of Browning's, and to discourage others from proceeding beyond a page or two. His reputation as an "obscure" poet persisted through the first two decades of this century, but weakened progressively as the focus of literature, reflecting developments in the social sciences, turned on human motivation, and on the expression or imitation of subjective responses, and as experiments in literary genres have broadened and in some cases dispensed with the concept of decorum, or have explored or attempted to explode the theory of communication.

Nevertheless, there are sections of his voluminous canon which remain slightly regarded, going almost unread, and escaping critical attention. One of the most significant of these comprises the six plays he wrote, or seven, if the better known, and most frequently misunderstood Pippa Passes is included. For, while Browning's reputation as a poet has grown considerably over the last half-century, his dramatic reputation has remained virtually unchanged. His plays have been conveyed to a literary limbo. On the one hand,

theatrical tradition holds them to be unactable, and they are thus not read with any view to performance. On the other, literary tradition tends to view them as cabinet dramas of inconsiderable interest or merit. Has Robert Browning the dramatist been treated as unjustly as it now appears Robert Browning the poet was, at least for the first thirty years of his writing career?

The answer to this question is obscured by a number of considerations. Among these is, either to begin or end with, the formation of some sort of evaluation of the plays both as literary works and as theatre pieces - to ask, in fact, on what grounds they could be considered, in Browning's time, and how they should today be reconsidered, as "good theatre", and to define their literary qualities.

Three of the plays - Strafford, A Blot on the 'Scutcheon, and Colombe's Birthday, - enjoyed fleeting seasons. Pippa Passes, King Victor and King Charles, The Return of the Druses, and Luria were never seen by their author on the boards. The reason may lie partly with the condition of contemporary British theatre, with the tastes of theatre-goers of the time, with the spectrum of entertainment available to them. It may lie, partly, with the degree of access any playwright had to the stage in the early and middle years of the nineteenth century. It ought to include the tastes of contemporary dramatic critics, and the sort of power they wielded. Most importantly, it will be found in the essence of dramaturgy - an unquantifiable blend of what is "box office" and what substantial, what appeals to audiences in the time and circumstances of the play's first production, and what continues to appeal over a period of time and over a range of circumstances. The dramatist must be constantly aware that audiences need to have something to look at, something to hear, and something to think about. At any given moment, his play should be providing all of these things to as many persons in his audience as possible. He will succeed to the degree to which he is able to generalise his audience.

There is also, indeed there has been since Greek times, a cyclic process by which a "good" play ensures its own continuity by being at the same time "good" literature. Having seen a play, one can read its script with a keener appreciation stemming from heightened associations, increased expectations, and added insights. Having read a play, one looks forward more to seeing it on stage, anticipating lines and situations, finding deeper meanings and increased satisfactions.

To what extent can such a process be discerned in Browning's plays?

He remained a committed poet before, during, and after the relatively brief nine year period beginning in 1837 in which he interested himself in the stage as a medium. One can, then, look for elements of poetry, and indeed, the poet's vision, in his plays. This raises the possibility that they are poetic rather than dramatic. At the same time, it must be remarked that, as a poet, he excelled in the dramatic monologue form, in the analysis and subsequent portrayal of what he called "Action in Character".

Yet concentration on character may not be sufficient. The dramatist must communicate at second-hand (at third-hand, really, if the medium of print is to be included) through the actors with his audience, who must still, if they are to appreciate it fully, observe the literary bones of the play.

On occasion, a play that fails in this sort of transmission may still have considerable literary merit. It becomes a "closet" drama, in a lengthy and valued tradition that stretches back to Seneca.

In whatever light Browning's plays are to be regarded, the argument remains that they ought to be the subject of considerably more attention.

Changing tastes in theatre have made them more worthy of consideration, though very probably no more palatable, as stage presentations. Developments in dramatic criticism, the proliferation of dramaturgical theory, and an increasing interest in the theatrical history of Browning's time have given them an importance and an interest that might have been contemptuously denied them even a generation ago. In them may be discerned an awareness of, and an attempt to approach, problems like the design of a natural and effective poetic dialogue, or the representation of a psychological process, or the isolate character, that have since become major foci of interest for both the playwright and the student of drama.

Finally, the plays represent a stage in the development of Browning's poetic technique. This is recognised, say, by D.S. Hair in the chapter he devotes to the plays in his book Browning's Experiments With Genre (1) but would prove a fruitful field for further investigation and discussion.

The present intention is to examine his first dramatic venture, Strafford. This will show, first of all, how Browning approached the theatre: not only the sort of play he wrote, but, by implication, the sort of writing he considered appropriate for stage presentation. That he held his own theory about what a playwright could require of both actors and audience has been demonstrated in a series of statements beginning with his own preface to the play, and with those of its first-night reviewers, and continuing through the comparatively slight body of criticism of the play to the present day. How successful this theory was, and how it relates to contemporary thought and practice, will also be a subject for comment.

Some estimate of the strengths and weaknesses of the play in performance can also be made here.

(1) University of Toronto Press, 1972. Ch.2. pp.43-72

An area of increasing interest to critics and theatrical historians alike is centred on the study of the conditions obtaining in the theatre about the time Browning was writing. Very little work has been done in setting *Strafford* in the context of its first performance, so a brief survey of the influences and events of early Victorian theatre will be made, in an attempt to take a wider and more balanced view of the play than is the practice with its reviewers.

A review will also be attempted of the major criticism of Browning's theatrical ventures, which, with the questions raised above, will lead towards a revaluation of *Strafford* in particular, and the plays generally.