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Newsletter—Literary Issue

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Edited by Bernice Slote

Twice a year literary issues of the Newsletter will present new Willa Cather material: reprints of some of Cather's early, hard-to-find, and still uncollected journalistic writings; early reviews, interviews, and notes about Cather's work; bibliographical information; and—from Cather readers—original brief notes, observations, explications, or short critical articles. (Submit manuscripts to CATHER NEWSLETTER, 201 Andrews Hall, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, Nebraska 68508.)

... In This Issue ...

☆ Willa Cather: Pittsburgh Critic

A much-experienced, eloquent, and fearless drama critic on Lincoln, Nebraska, newspapers, Willa Cather was apparently welcomed to the PITTSBURGH LEADER columns almost as soon as she arrived in the city to edit the HOME MONTHLY in 1896. She wrote twenty-one signed play reviews—she used the signature of "Willa" once, "Sibert" thereafter—and a half dozen other unsigned but identifiable reviews for that newspaper during the 1896/97 theatrical season. Four of the LEADER reviews are here reprinted for the first time, unchanged except for the correction of printing errors and the omission of one announcement of a future performance.

☆ O PIONEERS! in London

Heinemann's English edition of O PIONEERS! in 1913 drew forth a number of good reviews. The passages here are from a full-page article in THE TATLER.

☆ Books and Magazines

Current news of Willa Cather.

WILLA CATHER: PITTSBURGH CRITIC

Four play reviews from the PITTSBURGH LEADER, all signed "Sibert."

"An American Citizen"

Evidently the public is very glad to welcome Mr. (Nat) Goodwin back from the land of boomerangs and kangaroos. In spite of the inclement weather there was a "full house" at the Grand last night and more-over a very enthusiastic one. At the end of the third act the audience demanded a curtain speech, which Mr. Goodwin obligingly made, delivering the usual platitude concerning American plays. And, indeed, Mr. Goodwin has every reason to say a good word for American plays; he has had the good fortune to meet with some very good ones in his time. I do not believe, however, that he will find in "An American Citizen" the same successful medium that he found in "A Gilded Fool" and "In Mizzoura."

It is a clever play enough, the dialogue is good and the situations are amusing, but you can't help

thinking all the time how much stronger the piece could have been made with just the same material. Why, for instance, in that third act, so full of good material, of sharp contrasts and general misunderstandings, should you not just once feel a little bit moved or excited? The actors are skillful enough, but the situations lack strength and point; they are merely interesting. Then each of the four acts ends in a weak fashion except, perhaps, the last. The piece is interesting and amusing, but with that plot it might have been something more. It does not call out the best there is in either Mr. Goodwin or Miss Maxine Elliot. It gives Mr. Goodwin no opportunity for those finer poetic touches that he gave occasionally in "A Gilded Fool," which was, in my humble opinion, the best of all his plays.

It is a play which admirably avoids sentimentality, but it avoids sentiment, too. The fourth act is probably the best, and the introduction of the waif, "Mercury," is a good stroke. But even there you feel that both Mr. Goodwin and Miss Elliot could do better things if they only had the opportunity. If as a public we demanded that a play should give us an actor at his best we would have fewer and better ones. I hate to see clever people wasting themselves on a play that entirely lacks grace and emotional energy.

Mr. Goodwin showed all his usual good taste when he selected Miss Maxine Elliot as his leading lady. Aside from the fact that beauty is in itself a form of genius and that Miss Elliot possesses a most striking and individual variety of it, there is an enchanting freshness and grace about her work. She gives you the blessed impression of youth.

As to Mr. Goodwin, well, he is just himself, just jolly, clever, easy-going Nat Goodwin—a most incongruous mixture of the good fellow, the scape grace and the artist. It is true that Mr. Goodwin is one of those actors who never escape from their own shadows, and that his personal mannerisms and his peculiar temperament limit him rigidly. He plays one role under many names. He is not one of those actors who can set aside personal limitations and "rise on stepping-stones of their dead selves to higher things," who are by some divine chance greater than they know or ever meant to be. But if this persistent temperament of his unfits him for some parts, it especially fits him for others—it particularly fits him for being Nat Goodwin, and it is in that character that the public clamor for him. After all, there is no good reason why we should not go to see an actor because of his individuality just as we read Heine or Stevenson for the man himself. Mr. Barron once told Mr. Goodwin that he could not be at the same time both a great artist and a good fellow. But the public wants Mr. Goodwin as a good fellow much more than it wants him as a great artist, and, like Francis Wilson and all the rest of us, Mr. Goodwin plays down to his crowd.

It seems to me that Mr. Goodwin's acting with the little street waif is very much the best and most genuine thing he does in this play. It's a new tack for Goodwin and he does it amazingly well. He is as gentle and sympathetic as Mr. (Sol Smith) Russell used to be, and (Russell's) "A Poor Relation" will have to look out for his laurels. (March 9, 1897, p. 4)

Nethersole's "Carmen"

In speaking of Olga Nethersole's production of "Carmen" I shall not stop to mention her support or the stage settings, though they were excellent enough. It is strange how little those things, which count for so much in an ordinary performance, matter in an impersonation like that; strange how all the garish lights and accessories by which we are accustomed to judge a production are darkened and dimmed before one flash of that fire immortal. I suppose it is rather late in the day to casually remark that Miss Nethersole is a genius, and yet such good news cannot be too often told and repeated. I should say that her "Carmen" is a contribution to universal dramatic art. By this I do not mean that it is absolutely perfect and has not its rough places, but Miss Nethersole has time in her favor, she is so hopefully, so gloriously young. The flower that is full blown in the morning withers before the blinding heat of noontide. If Miss Nethersole can do such work as this now, what may she not do ten years hence?

I am quite unable to say whether her marvelous power is due to perfect naturalness or to perfect simulation; whether it is of the openly emotional school or of the school of "repression"; and after all, it doesn't matter much. Perfection of any sort amounts to the same thing, and when all is said, genius of any "school" is simply—genius. Miss Nethersole played last night to one of the most apathetic audiences that has ever assembled in the Alvin theater. By the end of the second act she had it so wrought up that curtain call followed curtain call until I quite lost count of them. She wrung the sympathy out of her audience as she did out of "Don Jose," as she could out of a marble statue if she wished.

In the first place one must always consider a player's physical adaptability to his or her part. Of Miss Nethersole's in this play there can be no doubt. Any one who has seen her in that second act as she glides about the stage with those svelt, mobile hips of hers and those heavy, languorous eyes that are like two Spanish nights, cannot question that. Her slenderness, not to say thinness, is not at all against her; it seems to suggest the burning Sappho. Her "Carmen" seems worn by some nervous force, consumed by some inner fire. That way she has of leaning her head on the balustrade in the first act is wonderfully effective, but she is too wise to repeat it in the second. Of course after the second act the play weakens. Miss Nethersole's card playing by the fire light is too long drawn out. The sympathy of the audience leaves "Carmen" after her betrayal of "Don Jose" and the actress must suffer the consequences. In the last act the interest is chiefly with Mr. Nathaniel Hartwig in his admirable acting of "Don Jose."

The second act is the great act of the play, and what an act that is anyway, and yet it would be very dull reading. The lines in themselves mean nothing; she makes them mean everything. In that act she runs the whole gamut of "Carmen's" nature: her se-

duction of "Don Jose" from his duty, her frank statement that like "Falstaff" she doesn't know what "honor" means; that little touch of melancholy when she feels that she cares for "Don Jose" differently than she has cared for other men; the intoxication of her passion when he returns to her, and the presentiment of her future unfaithfulness that grows stronger and stronger toward the end of the act.

I have said a good deal and yet I have not told you what Miss Nethersole does as "Carmen." To do that I should have to be another Nethersole. I only know that she is the only English-speaking actress whom I should think of comparing with Duse or Bernhardt. I should like to know what her future will be as an artist, what passions, what suffering, what terrible laughter will look out of those dark eyes of hers. (March 16, 1897, p. 4)

John Drew in "Rosemary"

John Drew opened his annual engagement at the Alvin last night. So much has been written and said about his play "Rosemary," that the plot is generally known. No play presented this season has attracted more attention, and yet the play as such is not strongly written. The dialogue is light and often quite irrelevant, there is not one thoroughly dramatic situation from beginning to end, and yet the piece undeniably has charms of its own. I suppose that lies largely in the delightful old fashioned atmosphere, the quaint costumes, the quaint forms of speech, the whole flavor of unusualness about the piece. But it is well enough that the picturesque element is there—for there is a minimum of action, and even if you are quite under the charm of the piece, you can scarcely forgive the careless writing and shallow pretenses that the author continually foists upon you. Did you ever hear anything more shallow and apparent than the captain's remarking that he wishes it were "William" his daughter has run away with. And then that oft repeated chestnut of the captain losing his voice and asking his wife to complete his sentences for him; it was worn as thread-bare as the deaf man's, "Yours is the only voice," in "An American Citizen." Personally, I resent the whole part of the captain; it is written in a glaringly low comedy vein and is quite out of place in a drama whose only claim upon the sympathies of the audience is through the delicacy and harmony. For it is a pretty play, though I do not remember of having often seen one which so completely lacks the element of power. The interest of the audience is never above 70 degrees, and I defy any one to grow excited, even for a moment. It is a pretty little piece of half lights and dainty association and quaint costumes and that is all that can be said of it.

Of course, every one knows that Mr. Drew shaved his mustache to play "Sir Jasper"; no tonsorial event has created such excitement since the German emperor shaved his. But Mr. Drew seems to have laid aside more than his mustache. There were a number of his fetching "Parlor Hamlet" ways that I could not find last night, and to tell the truth, I missed them.

If Mr. Drew would do more such work as he did in the third act last night it would be better for him in the long run. For the final reputation of an actor, the estimate which outlives him and by which he is remembered, is his actual achievement, his actual contribution to dramatic interpretation.

The play "Rosemary" properly should stop with

the third act, the only excuse for the fourth act is that it gives Mr. Drew a chance to do some excellent work, quite the best work he does in the piece, and that is excuse enough. He never did anything better than his "God save the queen!"

Miss Maude Adams, of course, does the guileless maid in her own charming and winning fashion. She is quite alone in her ability to handle such parts effectively. Mr Arthur Byron does excellent work as the hot-headed and touchy master "Williams," who went about with a chip always on his shoulder. Daniel Harkins played "Jograms" most effectively, and "Jograms," I would have you know, is really the best written part in the play, a regular Master Partridge, Samuel Johnson part, that might have stepped right out of one of Harry Fielding's novels and smacks of the days when learning and declamation were inseparable. In fact, the charm of Mr. Drew's play is very largely due to the clever work of his company. But of them all, the sweetest, freshest and prettiest bit of this old English picture, was Ethel Barrymore as "Priscilla." I never saw a small part more gracefully handled. (April 6, 1897, p. 4)

Mansfield's "Shylock"

Richard Mansfield opened his engagement here with "The Merchant of Venice" at the New Grand Opera house last night.

Whatever Mr. Mansfield does commands respect and admiration. He is not always satisfying, but he has this unmistakable mark of greatness, that even his mistakes are great mistakes, never ordinary blunders. And after all it is by his mistakes that a great man is best characterized, their very strangeness prove how different in all his processes of thought he is from his fellows. It is only the commonplace that damns an artist hopelessly and irrevocably. That is the death from which there is no resurrection, and certainly no such fate is reserved for Richard Mansfield.

I should not call his "Shylock" one of Mr. Mansfield's greatest achievements. When a man plays a Shakespearian part he must be either faithfully conventional and traditional or he must be entirely great—greater than even the greatest actor of to-day. I have seen all the American "Shylocks" since Booth's and found Mr. Mansfield's very much the best of the lot. I did not, however, find it as great as Mr. Mansfield. When you see him in others of his parts you are conscious all the time that no one else in the living world could play them just as he does. This peculiar and distinctive quality I did not find in his "Shylock." But this is certainly true, that in spite of all the talk about his distorting the meaning of "Shylock," Mr. Mansfield's "Shylock" is both in exactness of reading and in stage business the most faithfully Shakespearian presentation of the character that has been put on our stage for many a long day. His interpretation is intellectually a high one. He makes you feel with singular vividness what it meant to be a Jew in the middle ages; a man without country, without legislation, without redress, with no protection but that of money. You feel the weight of persecution, you see a patriarch become a haggling money lender because there is but one source of power left his people. That is the note that predominates in Mr. Mansfield's "Shylock," the Jew, the Jew of the Orient, not of the "sign of the three balls" on the Bowery. He is a Mosaic Jew; his tenacious racial passions are burning in him as they did in "Morde-

cai" and "Ezekiel" in the earlier days of innumerable exiles of Israel, and that is Shakespeare's "Jew of Venice."

Of course Mr. Mansfield's best scene was the trial scene, though his "At our synagogues!" spoken to "Tubal" is one of the pregnant things he does. At the close of the trial scene he seemed to me to rise quite to the full measure of his power. What other man's face can speak as his did when the law came down upon him stroke by stroke, divesting him of everything? That last pitiful attempt to hold fast to his dignity by gathering his robes about him, that broken defiance was superb. I have seen men fall all over the stage there and not express half so much. His staggering exit is worth sitting through a whole play to see. He can make the silences speak, that man. It is quite superfluous to speak of Mr. Mansfield's reading of blank verse, or of what is infinitely more difficult, Shakespearian prose. It is very much better than that of any of his contemporaries.

And yet, despite so many undisputed virtues, it seems to me that there is something, and something very important, lacking in Mr. Mansfield's "Shylock." Perhaps it is only the thing that is always lacking when a temperamental artist plays the compositions of a classical master. Mr. Mansfield is distinctively the artist of the eccentric. He plays a dozen parts all dealing more or less with some unusual mental state, some psychological problem, not one normal red-blood man among them. They are all of them, with the exception of "Brummel" and "Prince Karl," Poe-like creations, exquisite studies of unusual and somewhat revolting types. Now this is art and great art, but it rather stands in a man's light when he comes to handle full-blooded characters like Shakespeare's.

Mr. Mansfield's company did not distinguish themselves last night. Miss Beatrice Cameron unfortunately sees fit to invest "Portia" with a soubretteish and kittenish gaiety quite impossible to that "Princess Osra of Belmont." Her elocution, always faulty, is simply abominable in blank verse. The lawyers of Venice must have been very stupid people to have been deceived by so evident a ruse. Her "Portia" is totally without dignity and quite without charm. (April 20, 1897, p. 9)

O PIONEERS! in London

Passages from a review by Richard King in THE TATLER (London), September 3, 1913, p. 284.

Sometimes, as I stand crushed and rather stifled in the lifts of the city tube stations, I am astonished at the number of "dead" men and women who surround me. They are not ugly, their expression is not bad; it is simply unemotional—flat. Their faces simply say Clapham-Bank, Bank-Clapham, every day of their lives. Their tragedy, too, is not that they are suffocated but simply that they are commonplace and content. I wonder whether they have ever felt the call of the wilds, been goaded to flight by the coming of spring, ever loved not wisely but too well, been damned and risen again from this mound of ashes. I wonder, too, whether their hearts would stir at all at reading the description of the prairie spring which prefaces Miss Willa Sibert Cather's fine new story, "O Pioneers" (Heinemann, 6s.). (Here the poem "Prairie Spring" is quoted.)

. . . As a story "O Pioneers" is distinctly interesting—interesting not only for the vivid pictures it gives of this wild, lonely Canadian (sic) life, but for the many

beautiful descriptions of scenery scattered all through the book. One seems to feel the clear, fresh breezes of the prairie blowing across the face as one reads of the rolling hills of golden corn, the fierce storms of winter, the semitropical loveliness of summer. The characters, too—these pioneers—all stand out vivid, arresting, alive. They are real men and women doing great things. The whole story smells of the open-air life, of big ideals, big successes, big failures. It is a book to read and enjoy, and to read again.

BOOKS AND MAGAZINES

Japanese admiration for Willa Cather and her work shows no sign of slackening, and it now extends to Miss Cather's youthful writings. During the past two years Japanese publishers have acquired rights to bring out, either in translation or in English with Japanese notes, the following early stories: "A Singer's Romance," "Tommy, the Unsentimental," "The Affair at Grover Station," "The Clemency of the Court," "The Sentimentality of William Tavener," "A Death in the Desert," "The Sculptor's Funeral," "A Wagner Matinee," "The Joy of Nelly Deane," "On the Gulls' Road," and "The Namesake." Among her later short fiction they have shown particular interest in the two Kitty Ayrshire

stories, "A Gold Slipper" and "Scandal," and in "Coming, Aphrodite!"; also in the essay "Escapism."

The spring of Willa Cather's centennial year, 1973, will see the publication of a new Cather volume, *UNCLE VALENTINE AND OTHER STORIES: WILLA CATHER'S UNCOLLECTED SHORT FICTION, 1915-1929*. It will include a novelette and a story with Pittsburgh settings—"Uncle Valentine," first published in 1925 in two installments in *WOMAN'S HOME COMPANION*, and "Double Birthday," which originally appeared in the *FORUM* in 1929—and four stories and a novelette whose scene is New York: "Consequences," first published in *McCLURE'S* in 1915; two stories from the *CENTURY*—"The Bookkeeper's Wife" (1916) and "Ardessa" (1918)—and, from *SMART SET*, "Her Boss" (1919) and "Coming, Eden Bower!" (1920). The latter is a somewhat different version of "Coming Aphrodite!," the opening story in *YOUTH AND THE BRIGHT MEDUSA* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1920). The collection, edited with an introduction by Bernice Slote, will be published by the University of Nebraska Press, as part of its program of bringing back into print Willa Cather's early and uncollected writings. With the publication of this volume all of Willa Cather's known signed stories will be available in book form.

"Bertha Torrence"

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- By contributing to the restoration fund.
- By contributing to the scholarship fund.
- By contributing your Willa Cather artifacts, letters, papers, and publications to the Museum.
- By contributing your ideas and suggestions to the Board of Governors.

AIMS OF THE WCPM

- To secure the bonding, insurance and housing of a permanent art, literary and historical collection relating to the life, time and work of Willa Cather.
- To identify and restore to their original condition, places made famous by the writings of Willa Cather.
- To provide for Willa Cather a living memorial in the form of art and literary scholarships.
- To perpetuate an interest throughout the world in the work of Willa Cather.



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