

Reading

A MONTHLY REVIEW

and

Collecting

OF RARE AND RECENT BOOKS

• • BEN ABRAMSON, EDITOR

THIS ISSUE CONTAINS

MARLOWE AND DAVIS:

A Play in One Act

THE EIGHTEEN NINETIES

by Willard Houglund

J. M. BARRIE

by J. M. Keddie

MESSER MARCO POLO SIXTEEN YEARS OLD

by Branch Cabell

WARD RITCHIE: Printer

by Lawrence Clark Powell

PARADISE LOST:

An Enduring Monument

by Doris B. Regan

ANTHOLOGIES

by Groff Conklin

WILLIAM SAROYAN GETS TO TOWN

An Acrimonious Exchange

THE CHINESE POET ANONY- MOUS

A Literoddity by Louis Paul

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OVIDS ELEGIES:

3. BOOKES.

By C. M.

Epigrams by J. D.

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At Middleburgh.

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Of Messer Marco Polo, Sixteen Years Old

By BRANCH CABELL

HOW LONG IT HAD BEEN SINCE I READ MESSER MARCO POLO, I did not recall; and for this reason I re-opened the tiny tan-colored volume with frank trepidation. To re-encounter, after some years of severance, one's former loves in literature, as in life, is an experience not always exhilarating. Only too often do they arouse a derisive wonder, and embarrassment, and flushed vagrant morbid speculations, as to your taste, or your sanity even, during those fled Aprils wherein any such lumbering triteness could have seemed to be all-glorious.

Well, but if I began dubiously, yet by-and-by I read with increasing contentment. Here the old magic had not faded. It was hardly dimmed at all. If somewhat I deplored an occasional saccharinity, the eye passed quickly over it, nor did the mind long retain it. And if some what—nowadays—I resented the infused Gaelic element, where it did not appear to me essential, that was merely because of my too complete knowledge as to Donn Byrne's later career. In this special book his perpetual and maddening insistence upon the, after all, not wholly unique distinction of being an Irishman, had done him as an artist no grave hurt, not as yet. Later, it bludgeoned his fine talents rather blatantly.

Still, then, I found *Messer Marco Polo* to be a splendid and sumptuous romance; and yet I found it also a pathetic wee ghost. (In common fairness, you observe, I cannot well write about Donn Byrne without using that ubiquitous "wee" which infests inconspicuously even his most lordlike prose, somewhat as lice prey upon lions.) For this book spoke to me not merely of the dead glories of Venice in her heyday, of the perished magnificence of the great Khan, Kubla, but of that far-away year of true grace, 1921, when *Messer Marco Polo* was first published. The book spoke, to me at least, of an incredibly remote time, when American fiction, under the stimuli of a strange brief renaissance, was, in the hackneyed phrase, riding off furiously in all direc-

tions. This *Messer Marco Polo*, I remembered, was only a single one of the many vivid phenomena of an all-vivid and zestful period, during which perturbing and most variously admirable, new novels appeared, as though in spates, plenteously; and when they were received—that was the odd part of it—with excitement. For nowadays no living person, I infer, is able to read a new novel, when it is duly superimposed upon him by his book club, with much more than, at utmost, some enjoyment and with sentiments of approval, politely restrained. We feel that mere fiction, except in the form of a fireside chat over the radio, is not really important among our so numerous current employments.

I do not know the reason of this changed attitude, of this lessened receptiveness. I know only that in the America of 1921 a new book could find readers, and indeed a host of readers, who were ardent about it. Well, and if, to the one side, this was an era in which an obsessed continent fulminated concerning *Main Street* and *Winesburg, Ohio*, and in which a lynching party awaited H. L. Mencken at all points south of Maryland, this 1921 was likewise the period of *Linda Condon* and of *Peter Whifle* and of *Autumn* and of *Jennifer Lorn* and of *The Hard-Boiled Virgin* and of *Messer Marco Polo*. In brief, America noted, in that era of more ardent readers, an ensorcelled handful, a coven, of bemused fiction-writers who pursued, more or less profitably, an elaborated style.

And with results now how alien! I reflected, as in the glowing saga of *Messer Marco Polo* I observed passage after passage, each one of which was a quite self-evident and a calmly self-conscious exercise in pure style. There was no paragraph but betrayed an unwearied quest of loveliness and leaned shamelessly toward dexterity in diction. There was hardly anywhere a sentence, for that matter, which was not an unmodish small miracle. For the entire brief book is beautiful; and we have nowadays no writer as yet indulging

un-timeworn flesh and blood who is capable of composing any halfpage among its 147 pages.

Hastily I add that, to the best of my knowledge, no one of our more generally acclaimed tale-tellers has, nowadays, the least desire to write in this fashion. We appear, for our sins' sake, to be passing—at a rate somewhat over-tardy, should you press me—through an off-season in letters, of which such unlively and thin literature as it produces is, for the most part, no less plainly neglected than it is negligible. Necessarily must the arts languish among an intelligentsia by whom moral earnestness in regard to the contemporary scene is accepted as a substitute for talent. Feebly most inspiration falters before judges who after having dismissed, with unconcealed abhorrence, the notion that a writer might advantageously know something about writing, demand of him browbeatingly that he should express his regret over the underprivileged state of the proletariat in the lank phrasing customary to a telegram of condolence. The cult of elaborated prose, in brief, is as far out of date as the corset, as obsolete as the epigram, as quelled as a congressman. And it really does seem rather a pity, to a misled handful of yet living persons, who once cherished authorship as being, of all unlikelihoods, a fine art.

Putting by these weighty reflections, I returned considerably toward still another aspect which *Messer Marco Polo* reveals nowadays. I mean the uniqueness of this tiny romance, if not necessarily in world literature, yet its most certain and surprising uniqueness among the long list of books by Donn Byrne. Not merely was this his best book; the point is that no one of his other romances has really anything in common with *Messer Marco Polo*. The others are not ill done; they entertain: and indeed they maintain an exceedingly high level of competence and of grace in writing. But they lack, and they all lack utterly, the special, the in-

communicable, small, tender, valiant magic of *Messer Marco Polo*.

Truly, each writer who is at all remembered must become hazily thought about, at rare intervals, in the wide range of posterity's more lively interests, as the author of his supreme book alone. Yet, as the rule, he will leave behind him, to survive sparsely among his especial admirers, some number of books, or at least one book, of which the merits differ from the merits of the received masterwork in degree rather than in kind. This, most precisely, is what Donn Byrne did not do. Instead (so nearly as I can phrase it), after unloosing in his fourth book a comet which swam instantly into the ken of all literate star-gazers, he went back, for the rest of his life, to his momentarily put-by vending of a superior sort of candy. Well, and a heavenly body, even though it be only a small bright asteroid, has not anything at all in common with bonbons. There is no known scale of comparison.

Now this, I repeat, is unusual. In fact, I do not recall but one other novelist by whom a display of clear genius has been confined, thus wholly and thus sharply, to just one volume. At first glance, Cervantes figures as a majestic analogue; but then *Don Quixote* is, after all, not one book, but two books, produced separately. And Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe, it is true enough, wrote copiously in addition to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* nothing else whatever of which even the title can be recollected, nowadays, except through a deplorable wasting of research work; yet I question if many persons regard *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as an epos of other than historical interest, or very often read it except under coercion. As a parallel to Donn Byrne, I can think only of the Mrs. Gaskell who wrote *Cranford*, as well as this and the other novel, every one of which has descended into oblivion's maw, a large deal deeper than ever plummet sounded or any except the merely professional pursued, leaving *Cranford* serenely immortal and always to be adored, upon its own sparingly ornamental, tiny, cool pedestal.

Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell and Brian Oswald Donn Byrne do, I admit, compose a droll seeming conjunction. Yet the conjunction, I think, exists. Among the haphazard and multifarious company of those who, at one time or another, have written adroit and permanent and well

colored English prose, it is with these two alone—to my finding—that genius has dwelt, briefly but lovingly, in order to beget, as offspring of the divine liaison, just one small masterwork, before quitting them forever and utterly. You cannot but admire the sardonic apologue, if only because it affords—so far as I can detect—no least possible moral.

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