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The Literary Forces: French And Italian Dramatists

The poetic dramatists of France will be mentioned in another chapter. There remains another group whom we may know by the name of the thoughtful dramatists, of whom one, Brieux, has gained a world wide reputation, and another, **Octave Mirbeau**, has made a unique position for himself by his handling of ideas. Mirbeau's peculiar standing comes from the fact that he is at once a master literary craftsman and an ardent partisan in social affairs. As a novelist he has a wide circulation among the literary fashionables. On the other hand the extreme Anarchists an influential body in Paris point to him as one of their own. His métier is that of novelist, but when he steps aside to write a play he invariably achieves something brilliant. *Business is Business* is a powerful and bitter satire on the modern Titan of Finance, a figure who is quite as impressive in France as in America, and the more outrageous to French taste because his self made crudities appear against an old and superrefined culture. Isadore Lechat, hero, villain and comic relief in one, is a permanent figure in French drama. He appears on the scene like some beer-guzzling Napoleon, tremendous in will power and vanity, tireless in the invention of devices for self flattery, mediaeval in tyrannical absoluteness, the terror of men and the laughter of the gods. The play is conceived in heroic proportions. The satirical touch is that of Molière, powerful, even heavy, but diabolically keen. The fable is built around the character. Lechat will have his own way ; he insists upon purchasing an aristocratic husband for his daughter, and upon making his son the leader of Parisian society, paying for him fabulous gambling debts. Can there be anything that money won't buy? The daughter runs away with the gardener, the son is killed in an automobile smash-up one night when he is out on a spree. Lechat, in a final scene that seems to have stepped out of an Elizabethan tragedy, is overwhelmed by the shattering of his plans, but overwhelmed especially by the mortal blow to his vanity. The play is not "well made." The plot is arbitrary; the catastrophe comes purely by chance. No "rigid logical development from the premises." Little loss! Lechat as an acting part, is one of the great achievements of the age. The play was tried in this country by William H. Crane, and failed. It demands an actor who is a great comedian and a great tragedian rolled into one. But though it has not given its author one-tenth the reputation of a Bernstein, it will remain as one of the great dramatic achievements of the present generation.

A more recent play of Mirbeau's, *The Hearth*, caused a scandal in Paris. It was a satire on organised charity, but no ordinary good-humoured fun-poking. Its bitterness and thorough-going philosophy had a sting which made an enemy of any middle class person who saw it. It was accepted by the Comédie, chiefly on its author's reputation. Then there was a reconsideration, and nothing more was heard of it for a time. The author protested ; he was advised to with-draw his manuscript. He brought suit. The direction of the Comédie insisted that the difficulty was a purely technical one of casting the parts. There was great talk of "influence from above." Finally the contract was sustained, and the play was put in rehearsal, the author consenting to withdraw the second act, in which the directors and patrons of the charitable institution for children visit their charges and display their characters. The bitterness of this act is beyond description. The play had its serious faults, but it is probably the enmity which Mirbeau made for himself which made it seem not worth while to try further to fight out his ideas among the fashionable theatres of Paris.

The remainder of his dramatic output consists chiefly in several one-act pieces for the Grand Guignol, the "thriller" theatre of Paris. One of these, *The Purse*, a delicious satire on the legal position of the Parisian pauper, has been acted at the Lake Forest Theatre in Chicago. Another, *Vieux Ménages*, is a remark-able half-tender, half-bitter satire on the jealousy which arises in idle old age. In all these plays we feel an intellectual dynamic, a vigorous sense of artistic freedom, which is different from anything else in modern French drama.