

MADAME MODJESKA.

OF the many foreign actors who have played during the last ten years in New York, not more than four, Salvini, Ristori, Bernhardt, and Modjeska, have acquired a permanent reputation. The great German artists who have visited us from time to time have acted in their own tongue and, chiefly, before their own countrymen, and cannot justly be said to have appeared before the American public at all. Charles Fechter—French, English, and German in one—was a cosmopolitan, and can scarcely be included in the category of foreigners. There are no names but these whose memory is likely to outlive the present generation or the fame of many English-speaking actors. The triumphs of Ristori already belong to the past; and it is uncommonly doubtful whether Bernhardt, great artist as she is, could repeat the successes achieved by her during her first engagement here. The public excitement attending her performances then was almost largely due to the notoriety insured by skillful management; and her audiences grew steadily smaller, both in numbers and enthusiasm, when the curiosity concerning the personal appearance of so reckless and eccentric a woman had been satisfied. That she is a consummate mistress of her art cannot be questioned; but her claim to the possession of positive genius rests upon a very shadowy foundation, while the fact remains that, although she spoke a language and acted in plays perfectly familiar to a large proportion of her hearers, she rarely reached the height of absolute illusion, or wrought the spell by which the inspired player overwhelms the intellect with the emotions. She has not, in other words, displayed that magnetic quality essential to true genius, but existing sometimes apart from it, by which public admiration and affection are aroused in spite of the obstacles opposed by foreign speech or any other difficulty whatever.

Salvini and Modjeska have both stood the test of public trial. Both of them won the most cordial critical appreciation on the occasion of their first appearance in this country, and both have grown constantly in popular favor. This, of course, is stated as a fact, not with any idea of instituting a comparison between the two. Salvini, in whom towering dramatic genius is strengthened and elevated by all the resources of the most exquisite art, stands by himself alone; but Modjeska, nevertheless,

possesses, in a modified degree, some of the qualities common to the great Italian and all actors of eminence, and it is the object of this brief sketch to consider what these qualities are.

It would be unnecessary, even if space permitted, to enter upon a minute history of the life of Madame Modjeska, or a recital of her personal characteristics. These have been treated at length in a former number of *THE CENTURY*.* All that is needful now is to refer to her work during her latest engagement in New York, and more especially to those characters in which she appeared then for the first time. These were *Rosalind*, *Viola*, and *Odette*, three parts which show with sufficient clearness the sum of her artistic attainments and the limitations of her dramatic power. Her brilliant success in the first and her comparative failure in the last of these characters once more prove that her greatest strength lies in the direction of pure comedy, and that she imposes too great a strain upon her physical strength and exceeds the limits of her inspiration in simulating the stormy passions of tragedy or even the emotional throes of the modern lachrymose drama. She can portray *hauteur*, anger, or scorn, but not the frenzy of either rage or despair; she can be infinitely tender and exquisitely pathetic, but the agony of a great nature is beyond her grasp. She can indicate the pangs of suppressed sorrow with admirable and touching truthfulness, but the full expression of tragic grief or horror is not within her range. The woes of *Camille* never found a more graceful or more pathetic interpreter; but the awful imaginings of the despairing *Juliet* at the one supreme moment in the potion scene, demand powers of a different and higher order than any which she possesses, although the impersonation, as a whole, is most poetic in ideal and brilliant and fascinating in execution, glowing, as it does, with the true southern ardor, and employing all the witchery of that personal charm which is the marked characteristic of this actress. Again, in *Odette*, a vile play upon which it is sheer waste to expend any intellectual effort, Madame Modjeska

* See this magazine for March, 1879; also see note in the May number, 1879, by her husband, C. Bozenta Chlapowski, who, it is interesting to know, recently became an American citizen, in California, the State in which Madame Modjeska's art first received recognition in America.—ED.

Wm. E. Stone
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failed at the critical point in the first act, where nothing but a whirlwind of blind passion can give even the semblance of decency to the position assumed by the erring heroine, or furnish the slightest excuse for sympathy with her in her later sufferings. In this scene, both before and after her discovery of the removal of her child, the actress failed to maintain the illusion, because her assumed passion was plainly artificial; whereas in the final act, where the anguish of a breaking heart is suggested rather than expressed, her acting was so entirely natural and affecting as to move many persons in the audience to tears. There are, perhaps, two or three actresses upon the American stage who could use this opportunity with similar effect, that is, so far as the tears are concerned, but there is not one of them capable of creating the effect by means of the few and simple devices employed by Modjeska. It is only the accomplished artist who can draw a perfect picture in a few strokes.

It was by her *Rosalind* that Madame Modjeska chiefly added to her reputation last season. This was an impersonation full of charm, lovely to the eye, and satisfying to the sense, giving life to a poetic ideal, and presenting many of the rarest beauties of prosaic flesh and blood, without resolving a fanciful creation into a being essentially earthy. There was a sustained elevation in the performance which was delightful; a refinement which was not affectation, a delicacy which was not finical. It differed widely from the *Rosalind* prescribed by the traditions of the English stage; but no less an authority than Salvini has ventured to denounce traditions as cankerous, and they most certainly should not be allowed to trammel genius. The typical English *Rosalind* is perhaps a little more robust, a little less mercurial, as if infected by the heavy insular air, a little less prodigal of gesture, slower of speech, and more restrained in manner. But it is surely hypercriticism to object to Modjeska's brilliant audacity, in which there is no trace of immodesty, or to the elaboration of her by-play, which is invariably apt and graceful. Restlessness upon the stage is a vice, but the constant gesture of Modjeska is always guided by intelligent purpose, and is illustrative both of the text and of her conception. A remarkable instance of her skill in this respect is seen in her treatment of the love scenes with *Orlando*, in which, by an infinite variety of subtle touches, she suggests to the audience the archness and coquetry of a woman, while to her lover she is nothing but a wayward and fanciful boy. This same assumption of a double identity was maintained with brilliant effect in the scene with the bloody handkerchief, where,

amid all her extreme solicitude concerning the safety of her lover, she betrayed a semi-humorous perception of the incongruity between her masculine attire and her sinking heart. All this is comedy of the finest kind, and the remembrance of it will be treasured among some of the choicest memories of the contemporary stage.

Her *Viola*, a part to which she is yet new, promises to become a fit companion picture to her *Rosalind*. The distinction between the two characters is cleverly marked, and will, of course, grow more clear with future study and rehearsal. The sentimental side of *Viola* is projected into strong relief, and is treated with exquisite tenderness and grace. The key-note of the impersonation is given at the first entrance from the boat. At Booth's Theater, this coast scene was a marvel of shabbiness and grotesque unfitness; yet the actress, by her power of pantomime, created a vivid impression of cold and storm, of suffering, fatigue, and fear. The natural timidity of woman was substituted for the high courage of *Rosalind*, and this phase of the character was emphasized throughout the play, and was made manifest even in the love scenes with *Olivia*, which were treated most picturesquely, in varying moods of bewilderment, incredulity, and raillery, but with a constant suggestion of the pain inflicted for love's sake by a loving heart upon itself. The performance, as has been intimated, is not yet a finished work. There are rough spots in it here and there, and there are traces of labor and uncertainty which only time will remove. But these flaws are only discernible at intervals, and never at important crises. The versatility of the actress is displayed in the contrast between the delicate pathos and unsurpassable grace of the famous scene between *Viola* and *Orsino* and the admirable humor of the duel scene with *Sir Andrew*, which excites the heartiest merriment without recourse to any methods except those which belong legitimately to comedy. These scenes contain the promise of the completed work.

Madame Modjeska is undoubtedly advancing in artistic growth. She is and long has been entitled to a place in the first rank of living players, but it is not easy to determine her exact position. She has challenged comparison with Bernhardt, her chief female rival, and in comedy is at least the equal of the famous Frenchwoman; but the latter has a wider range of character in tragedy. In respect of artistic accomplishment, the mere mastery of stage device, there is little to choose between them; but Modjeska, when at her best, is far nearer to nature than Bernhardt ever is,

even if she sometimes fails to make so brilliant a theatrical effect. If Bernhardt has the brilliancy, she has also the coldness and hardness of the diamond; whereas Modjeska, in addition to the resources of her skill, possesses the sympathetic power which stirs the heart. It has been the fashion to name Bernhardt as the first of living actresses, chiefly because she has played so many parts; but in acting it is necessary to look for something more than the perfection of mechanism. This can be acquired by intellectual effort, and is no indication of genius or inspiration. It raises, indeed, something like a presumption in the opposite direction, for genius is impatient of restraint. Clara Morris has greater moments than either

Bernhardt or Modjeska; but as an artist she cannot be named in the same breath with either of them. She has genius, or something very nearly akin to it, and no training. Bernhardt has perfect training, but no genius. Whether Modjeska has genius or not is a question which the reader may decide in his own way, according to his own definition of that much abused term. She has, at least, the power of infusing life into her creations, and of exciting sympathy in their behalf, which is to create an illusion and to fulfill the principal aim of the actor. In this respect, if in no other, she is the superior of Bernhardt, and the public, which knows more about nature than art, will probably give the final verdict in her favor.

J. Ranken Towse.

IN ROME.

SOMETHING there is in Death not all unkind,
 He hath a gentler aspect, looking back;
 For flowers may grow in the dread thunder's track,
 And even the cloud that struck, with light was lined:
 Thus, when the heart is silent, speaks the mind;
 But there are moments when comes rushing, black
 And fierce upon us, the old, awful lack,
 And Death once more is cruel, senseless, blind.

So, when I saw beside a Roman portal
 "In this house died John Keats"—for tears that sprung,
 I could no further read. O bard immortal!
 Not for thy fame's sake,—but so young, so young!
 Such beauty vanished, spilled such priceless wine,
 And quenched such power of deathless song divine!

THE CELESTIAL PASSION.

O WHITE and midnight skies! O starry bath!
 Wash me in thy pure, heavenly, crystal flood;
 Cleanse me, ye stars! from earthly soil and scath,
 Let not one taint remain in spirit or blood!
 Receive my soul, ye burning, awful deeps!
 Touch and baptize me with the mighty power
 That in ye thrills, while the dark planet sleeps,—
 Make me all yours for one blest, secret hour.
 O glittering host! O high celestial choir!
 Silence each tone that with thy music jars—
 Fill me, even as an urn, with thy white fire,
 Till all I am is kindred to the stars.
 Make me thy child, thou infinite, holy night!
 So shall my days be full of heavenly light.

R. W. Gilder