

The STRANGE POPULARITY of the DEVIL



George Arliss as 'The Devil' in the Play of that Name



Edouard de Reszke's Mephistopheles in 'Faust'

Conceptions of Embodied Evil in Drama, Literature, Art and Poetry

ONE can scarcely have failed to notice, of recent years, the remarkable popularity of the devil.

Of course, the evil one has figured in "Faust" and other masterpieces of the stage for years, and, as such, has become a fairly familiar character. But recently his satanic majesty has broken out in literature and drama more prominently than ever.

Plays based upon his supposed personality and depicting his genius for evil as exerted in a human way are all the rage; novelists are turning their attention to him as a picturesque and striking accessory of dramatic literature—in other words, the prince of darkness is enjoying a most remarkable vogue.

For that matter, the story of his presentation to the human imagination, in the past as well as now—pictures drawn of him by literary, dramatic and artistic genius—forms a most interesting study of the embodiment of the spirit of evil.

"You have the Devil underrated. I cannot yet persuade him. A fellow who is all beheld. Must something be?"—Goethe.

LUCIFER has undergone remarkable transformation at the hands of poets and writers; the notable Evil One of Milton's "Paradise Lost" has become a prince of the world, a favorite of society in one popular novel, while in the modern play of Molnar, about which there has been waged a theatrical war, he is represented as the embodiment of the "spirit which maketh for unrighteousness," a sort of philosophical conception, aptly designated when he places his finger on the forehead of a charming woman and mutters, "I am there."

The arch enemy of mankind has been a popular figure in poetry and the drama, in opera and art. He appears in Goethe's "Faust" as a most insidious and subtle seducer to ruin and evil; in Dante's "Inferno" he looms stupendously in hell, a creature of horror, at whose breathing storms shake the worlds.

In the old medieval miracle plays he delighted and thrilled audiences. He was presented to them as a creature with hooved feet, a tail and horns. He was wickedness and ugliness personified. In more modern plays and

books, however, he becomes the polished gentleman, a wit, a person of irresistible fascination and charm. He is an epigrammatist, a philosopher, a lover if need be—a very fine devil of a fellow.

But wherever he has appeared he has—unfortunately, perhaps—been very popular. Whether it was in a miracle play or in a novel, he has proven a big popular hit; whether it is as Mephistopheles in "Faust," or the philosophical devil of the Austrian playwright, he seems certain to win.

REGARDED AS A PERSON

Until comparatively modern times his satanic majesty was regarded as a personal, walking-around-on-two-legs evil. He was an individual spirit, ruler of the world of darkness; a Pluto to the Romans, an Ahriman to the Persians and a fire-breathing Satan to the people of the Middle Ages, when he was wont to tempt poor monks in their cells, visit astrologers and alchemists and lead them to destruction in the late hours of the night, and go around seeking whomsoever he might lead to ways of pleasure and temptation.

But in the modern play he is merely symbolic—a representation of the principles of wrongdoing. In "The Devil," by Molnar, he represents the evil side of man's nature. He moves among normal and healthy people, fascinates them by his wit, tempts them merely by subtle suggestions.

He is clever. He is insidious and artful. He gets people agreeing with him and lets them on, talking brilliant nothings, interspersing comments on failing to pluck the fruits of pleasure and wheedling and cozening them into wrongdoing. He is cynical—a man with an infinite knowledge of the world, who casually remarks that "The best wives are other men's wives."



Illustrating Dante's Inferno.



A Goethe Devil—Mephistopheles and the Heavenly Hosts.

In "Faust" he appears as a philosopher, too; a poet, with a sense of beauty; a man of learning, abstruse, keen. He describes himself thus:

I am the spirit that denies
And justly so: for all things, from the void
Called forth deserves to be destroyed.
I was, better than, were might created.
Thus, all which you as sin have rated—
Destruction—ought with evil blend—
That is my proper element.

Dante, whose "Divine Comedy" ranks among the masterpieces of the world, finds in

the arch fiend a being of appalling terror. He describes him thus:

Oh, what a sight!
How passing strange it seemed when I did spy
Upon his head three faces: one in front,
Of hue vermilion, the other two were this
Midway each other shoulder joined and at
The crest;
The right 'twixt wan and yellow seemed; the
left
To look on, such as come from whence old Nile
Stoops to the lowlands, Under each shot forth
Two mighty wings, enormous as became
A bird so vast. No plumes had they.
But were in texture like a bat, and these
He flapped in the air that from him issued still
Three winds wherewith Cocytus to its depth



The Mephistopheles of Chaliapine—a Recent Sensation.

Was frozen. At six eyes he wept; the tears
Adown three chins distilled with bloody foam.
At every mouth his teeth, a sinner champed,
Bruised as with ponderous onyx; so that three
Were in this guise tormented.

Milton's conception of Satan is regarded as one of the most splendid. In this great epic, Milton depicted the fall of the great angel from heaven and the fall of man. His description of the mighty spirit ranks among the most powerful written:

Is this the region, this the soil, the clime,
Said then the lost archangel, this the seat
That we must change for Heaven; this
Mourful gloom
For that celestial light? Be it so! since he
Who now is sovereign can dispose and bid
What shall be right: farthest from him is
best,
Whom reason hath equalled, force hath made
supreme
Above his equal! Farewell, happy fields,
Where joy forever dwells. Hail horrors! Hail
Infernal world! And thou profoundest hell,
Rejoice thy new possessor; one who brings
A mind not to be changed by place or time.
The mind is its own place, and in itself
Can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven.

In a recent popular novel the evil one appears as a prince of a little-known principality who visits London, where he makes the acquaintance of a young writer who has just inherited five million pounds. The motive of the story is based on an old belief that Satan, with other lost angels, will finally be saved. In it the description of the evil one is striking:

"As I looked straightly at him I thought I had never seen so much beauty and intellectuality combined in the outward personality of any human being. The finely-shaped head denoted both power and wisdom, and was nobly poised on such shoulders as might have befitting a Hercules; the countenance was a pure oval, and singularly pale, this complexion intensifying the almost fiery brilliancy of the full dark eyes, which had in them a curious and wonderfully attractive look of mingled mirth and misery."

MOUTH THE TELLING FEATURE

"The mouth was perhaps the most telling feature in this remarkable face. Set in the perfect curve of beauty, it was yet firm, determined, and not too small, thus escaping effeminacy—and I noted that in repose it expressed bitterness, disdain and even cruelty. But with the light of a smile upon it, it signified, or seemed to signify, something more subtle than any passion to which we can give a name, and already, with the rapidity of a lightning flash, I caught myself wondering what that mystic undeclared something might be."

Prince Lucio tempts, but he rejoices when men resist his temptation, for that increases his hope of salvation. The choice falls to Geoffrey Tempest—and he rejects Satan, when Lucio is granted a brief glimpse of heaven.

During the Middle Ages the devil was treated with fear and awe. But he began to lose his terrible personality and was often treated humorously. Dionysius Kline, in 1622, published a humorous work on Satan. In one of his powerful political satires Victor Hugo presents him as playing with the Lord for human souls. In one of his poems Heine describes him in these words:

He is not ugly, he is not lame.
He is a delightful, charming man;
A man in the prime of life, in fact,
Courteous, engaging and full of tact.

George Arliss, who appears in Molnar's play, and who has been highly commended for his impersonation of the evil one, says of the character:

"The devil pictured as a human being can be as varied in his aspect, his methods, his allurements, as is the temptation of sin. The author of this play has pictured him as cynical and insinuating because these attributes were liable to be most useful in the circle in which we find him.

"The devil must have charm," he concludes, "and he must compel admiration in a normal, human way by natural means. Emphasize his traditional supernatural traits and you at once sacrifice the most valuable means of producing the diabolic illusion in a straight-up-to-date society comedy."