

# And Some Have Greatness Thrust From Them

by Theodore Dalrymple (April 2015)

The past is another country where they do things differently: but how long past does the past have to be for the country to be utterly foreign? Sometimes it seems that the time that it takes is shorter and shorter, that a few years is more than sufficient. Who would have thought twenty years ago that the United States Supreme Court would be deliberating twenty years later as to whether it was actually legally *permissible* for any state of the union not to permit homosexual marriage? And this is so whether you now think that the whole idea is a good one or not.

I first realised how complete some changes in moral and social attitudes had been in my lifetime when I saw an old British black-and-white film, a comedy, about fifty years after it was made in a cinema in a provincial town. In truth the film was not very good, and there was only one reason why I should remember it. There was a scene in which an upper class young man who had made a working-class girl pregnant was accosted by the girl's father and told that he would now have to marry her. The young man, much abashed, meekly agreed, and the audience howled with laughter – though this was, perhaps, the one scene in the film that was not supposed to be funny.

What a primitive notion that the father of a child had some inescapable duty towards not only it, but to its mother! It was as preposterous and alien to the audience as penny-farthing bicycles, as hilarious as the portrayal of typing pools. And I must admit that when I see typing pools, or even just someone sitting at a typewriter in an old film, a smile comes over me. How absurd to be stuck in the past, not to have moved with the times!

The audience evidently could not imagine a social world in which an unwanted pregnancy or a child born out of wedlock was some kind of catastrophe, and yet I, who am not quite ancient, remember it well. Why, even divorce was spoken of in those days in hushed tones, as if were a hateful infectious disease (which, of course, some people might say that it proved to be, so much so that it all but emptied marriage of meaning, except for the serious matter of divorce settlements).

Does the very swiftness of change mean that the literature even of the recent past will become in short order incomprehensible to new readers? When in Ireland, for example, I try to see

plays, if any is playing, by a great modern playwright, John B Keane, who, rather unusually, was also for many years the landlord of a pub in Listowel. But his plays are about an Ireland that has disappeared almost entirely, an Ireland that I remember from my first visits there, impoverished and still largely rural, where the priest in a village or a town was morally if not economically a potentate whose word was law, and where the capital, Dublin, was a smoky, decaying place where warmth was to be found mainly in the pubs. It had a much stronger, more individual savour than it has now, but there was no denying that a grinding suffering caused by a cold poverty lay not far beneath the surface. Keane's plays depict an Ireland in which young girls could be more or less forcibly married by their parents to rich old men, wealth consisting of not much more than a few fields with pigs and cows, and perhaps a tractor. Good riddance to such a world, you might say, however propitious to the production of powerful literary artefacts such as Keane's plays (as often as not censored for a time). Ireland in a matter of a few decades has become a 'normal' modern country, and while much has been lost, more has been gained.

Keane's plays have suffered the terrible fate that awaits so much of recent literature that depicts a recently-vanished world: they have become part of the school syllabus. But how much can they really mean to children who have grown up without fear of local marriage brokers, for whom sex has lost, not its interest of course, but its fears and terrors, its associated guilt and furtiveness, and for whom the struggle over a small piece of infertile land as if it were a matter of life and death was as alien as, say, the sacrificial practices of the Aztecs, and for whom the priest has no particular authority, rather the reverse of authority? At an excellent performance of Keane's most famous play, *Sive*, which is searing in its intensity, I watched a group of schoolchildren who had come because the play was a set work for this year's public examination. They were healthy, lively children, full of gaiety (as, of course, they should have been): but what could the travelling tinker in the play, who supplies a kind of Cassandra-like chorus to the action, have signified to them? When Keane wrote the play in the 1950s there were still tinkers who travelled the byways of the country, half-entertaining and half-scaring the settled population into providing for them, their curses on those who gave them nothing being no laughing matter to those on whom they were placed. The nearest to this any of the children might have come was cyber-bullying on Facebook.

On the other hand, it is precisely ability of literature to enable us imaginatively to enter the lives of others that is its glory, or at any rate one of its glories, an ability that does not depend on whether or not we have ever experienced the outward conditions or circumstances of the characters. We need to know very little history to be moved by Richard II's speeches, for example, and though we have never been kings ourselves, or been deposed from a throne, yet

the speeches he makes as Bolingbroke overthrows him have a universal significance, or at least a significance for anyone who has known a fall. Indeed there is a profound egalitarian message in Richard II: not the type of equality struggled for by demagogic politicians, but the one that underlies all human existence. We are born, we live, we die, and that while we live we are troubled by the same concerns as everyone else. King Richard moves us (all the more so, as Shakespeare has not loaded the dice in his favour by making him a good or admirable man) when he says:

Cover your heads and mock not flesh and blood  
With solemn reverence: throw away respect,  
Tradition, form and ceremonious duty,  
For you have but mistook me all this while:  
I live with bread like you, feel want,  
Taste grief, need friends: subjected thus,  
How can you say to me, I am a king?

Surely this is a call to modesty to all those who imagine themselves placed either by circumstance or by their own efforts above others? That, no matter how high we rise, we are all Richard II? That, in effect, no man can be a king, if by king we mean someone who is absolved of all human cares?

On a shelf in a dusty antique centre, where kitsch is mixed promiscuously with elegant eighteenth century furniture, I found a small volume by an author, Stanley Houghton, of whom I had not previously heard. What induced me to pick it up I cannot say, except that these days I am much in favour of short books. It was a play titled *Hindle Wakes*, and as soon as I started to read I was as if captured. I wanted to hurry home and finish it, as well as find out about the author in that great library, the internet.

The play takes place in Edwardian Lancashire. The son of the rich local cotton mill owner, an amiable but shallow semi-ne'er-do-well, has gone on a weekend to the seaside with the daughter of a mill worker. According to the standards of the time, he has 'ruined' her and is morally obliged to marry her, though at the time of his seaside jaunt he was engaged to be married to the daughter of another rich mill owner. The young man's father has risen from the bottom, having gone to work in a factory at the age of eight, before rising to his present wealth and eminence; and the the mill worker whose daughter his son has 'ruined,' who has remained a simple worker in his own mill, was a childhood friend of his.

The characters are extremely well-delineated. The mill-owner is a man of superior intelligence

with a forceful and determined, not to say domineering, personality, so that his social ascent is fully plausible; but he also has a kind of unbending moral probity that impels him to do what is right even if it is against his own interests to do so, the kind of probity that was a part of the culture of non-conformist (that is to say, non-Anglican) protestant religion – a culture that, to all intents and purposes, is now extinct. The subtlety of Houghton's delineation lies in the combination of the mill-owner's probity and his determination never to be thwarted once he has set his mind on something, in this case the marriage of his son to the woman whom he has dishonoured. Inflexible probity becomes a form of spiritual pride; by contrast, the father of the dishonoured girl, by no means unintelligent, is flexible (or is it weak?) and understanding. His wife, the mother of the girl, after initially having been appalled by her 'dishonour,' sees in it a splendid chance for her to marry into money.

Throughout the twists and turns of the plot, or rather of the relations between the characters and their psychological plausibility, one remains eager to know the denouement, and even after it has taken place there is just enough ambiguity to keep you wondering. It is a most impressive play, entertaining, not in the least didactic, but not trivial either.

But of course its emotional impact depends entirely upon the playgoers' ability to understand and even empathise with the assumption that for an unmarried girl to spend a weekend with a man is a terrible scandal that will permanently damage or ruin her reputation. Without this premise, all the agonising will seem pointless, rather as arcane theological disputes of the fourth century AD seem to unbelievers. Suffice it to say that the prevailing sexual mores of 1912, when *Hindle Wakes* was written and first performed, were not those of a century later, to put it mildly; and though, allegedly, we live in a multicultural age, which in practice means that we like lots of different kinds of food, I am not sure that an age of Facebook and Twitter is one that is propitious to the grasping of outlooks other than one's own. So absorbed are we in the vast continent of the present moment that we are increasingly unable to travel imaginatively to the foreign land of the past.

I might be wrong, and hope that I am. I would like to give *Hindle Wakes* to adolescents to read to discover whether they would be puzzled by it, find it ridiculous, or understand the drama contained in it.

No such experiment would be conclusive, of course. If the young people did not find the play compelling in any way, this might be attributed to the dramatist's failure to communicate well enough. There is, presumably, a reason why Stanley Houghton is not a household name, even among ardent theatre-goers.

He was an interesting and tragic figure, though. Born in 1881, he worked in his father's business as a cloth merchant in Manchester practically all his short adult life. But he was a keen amateur actor and was much influenced in his writing by Ibsen, as of course was Bernard Shaw (but Houghton's characters speak like men, unlike Shaw's, who speak like abstractions made vaguely humanoid). He wrote several plays that are apparently of considerable quality, and with the commercial success of *Hindle Wakes* threw up his job in his father's firm and went to live in Paris, where he wrote six chapters of a novel before falling fatally ill of pneumonia and meningitis and dying at the age of 32. Of course, had he survived, he might have been killed in the First World War instead; but had he survived it, he would have written a truly great work. Chance plays its part even in the achievement of greatness.

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