1 *The play and its playwright*

BY RICHARD LANGHAM SMITH

> People with strange names, living in impossible places, where there are only woods and fountains, and towers by the sea-shore, and ancient castles, where there are no towns, and where the common crowd of the world is shut out of sight and hearing, move like quiet ghosts across the stage, mysterious to us and not less mysterious to one another. They are all lamenting because they do not know, because they cannot understand, because their own souls are so strange to them and each other's souls like pitiful enemies, giving deadly wounds unwillingly. They are always in dread, because they know that nothing is certain in the world or in their own hearts, and they know that love more often does the work of hate and that hate is sometimes tenderer than love.
>
> Arthur Symons, *Annotations by the Way*

It is a minor coincidence that the births of Debussy and Maeterlinck in 1862 were separated by exactly one week. One hundred years later, their centenaries encouraged not only a spate of studies and exhibitions but also, appropriately, a revival of Debussy's setting of *Pelléas et Mélisande* at the Opéra-Comique in Paris. Among those invited to the opening night was Maeterlinck's widow, his second wife the Comtesse Renée Maeterlinck. While remembering Debussy's centenary, the directors of the Opéra-Comique had evidently ignored that of the playwright. Mme Maeterlinck was moved to retort to their invitation in a letter to *Le Figaro*:

> According to the wording of your card, you wish to invite me to be present, on the 14th December, at the revival of *Pelléas et Mélisande*, drame lyrique in five acts and thirteen *tableaux*, 'the libretto by Maurice Maeterlinck', with music by Claude Debussy. I am obliged to bring to your notice that Maurice Maeterlinck was never a librettist for operas. Claude Debussy wrote his music for the entire text of Maurice Maeterlinck's play. Do not forget that it was Claude Debussy who, bowled over and inspired by a reading of *Pelléas et Mélisande*. . . came especially to Belgium to ask for the author's permission to set the work to music.[1]

Although Mme Maeterlinck was not quite correct in her assertion that Debussy had set the entire text, she was entirely justified in her claim that Maeterlinck had never stooped to the level of being a mere librettist. Although his reputation may have declined sharply in the twentieth century (and even his most ardent champions have conceded that Debussy's opera played a considerable part in keeping him in the public eye), he had enjoyed a considerable reputation during the 1890s when he was seen not only as an innovator in Symbolist drama, but also as a widely read philosophical essayist of considerable influence.

Pelléas et Mélisande is, in fact, the fifth of Maeterlinck's first series of plays written during the 1890s. The other dramas of this period are also largely concerned with the plight of couples – *Aglavaine et Sélysette*, *Alladine et Palomides* are others – or with magic groups of three or seven – *Les Aveugles* and *Les Sept Princesses*. They are loosely legendary and mediaeval in setting, and they share common themes and preoccupations, frequently illuminating each other. Though both Wagner's *Tristan* and several plays of Shakespeare may spring to mind as forebears of *Pelléas*, Maeterlinck's pairs of lovers follow neither myth nor history, though they more than occasionally touch upon the trappings of Arthurian legend or Celtic symbolism.

The individuality and power of these plays were quickly recognised in France. In 1890, a eulogistic appraisal by the respected Octave Mirbeau of the first of the plays, *La Princesse Maleine* (also considered as a possible project by Debussy), appeared in *Le Figaro*. Overnight, it caused the breakthrough Maeterlinck needed:

> M. Maurice Maeterlinck has given us the work of this age most full of genius, and the most extraordinary and most simple as well, comparable and – shall I dare say it? – superior in beauty to what is most beautiful in Shakespeare.[2]

Further plays followed, reworking the intertwining themes of love and destiny: *Pelléas* was one, *Alladine et Palomides* another, and it was this latter play that Maeterlinck called a 'decoction of *Pelléas*'. In what is often considered the final play of the first period of his work, *Ariane et Barbe-bleue* (*Ariane and Bluebeard*), published in 1902 and set to music by Paul Dukas, Mélisande appears as one of the seven wives of Bluebeard.

During the 1890s critical response from the literary world multiplied and deepened. Mallarmé himself wrote a lengthy piece on the playwright, and many other notable figures paid him some attention.

Complementary to the plays were essays by Maeterlinck in various *revues*, later published as a collection under the title *Le Trésor des Humbles*, translated as *The Treasure of the Humble*. These, together with the preface to his collected early plays (*Théâtre*, 1901) distil the themes of the dramas of this period, and are a better starting point for an understanding of *Pelléas* than the prolific interpretative views of Maeterlinck's work which have been put forward to explain the symbols of the play.

After *Ariane et Barbe-bleue* Maeterlinck changed course, admitting, in the preface to *Théâtre*, that for him, Symbolism was finished. Apart from several interesting revivals of *Pelléas* at the playwright's home at the abbey of Sainte-Wandrille in Normandy, his career in the twentieth century is of little relevance to the student of Debussy, save to remark that he, like Debussy, retained a special affection for this play. Just as Debussy had an ornamental toad known as 'Arkël', in a position of honour on his desk and sometimes taken *en voyage*, so Maeterlinck had a Bulldog called Golaud, (always kept muzzled), and both his wife and his Afghan hound were affectionately known as 'Mélisande'.

Despite the enthusiastic adoption of Maeterlinck by French literary circles, *Pelléas* suffers less than one might think from an English language approach. Being Belgian and not French, Maeterlinck leaned more towards the anglophile and teutonic than his French Symbolist counterparts, since he was deeply influenced by English literature, especially Shakespeare, the Pre-Raphaelites and Poe, all of whom he read in the original language. Indeed, in the year before he wrote *Pelléas*, Maeterlinck confessed to 'having read only four French books'.[3] In the *Cahier bleu*, an important notebook from the early 1890s which contains many important ideas in embryo and gestation, he had written in a section concerned with the poet Rossetti:

> Aux allemands la musique, aux anglais la poésie, car la poésie française depuis qu'elle existe en ce siècle est née en Angleterre.
>
> (In music, the Germans [are best]; in poetry, the English; for French poetry, from the moment of its inception in this century, was born in England.)[4]

The simplicity of Maeterlinck's style made his work eminently translatable and both plays and essays ran into several editions in translation. Of *Pelléas*, for example, there were no fewer than five translations by the early 1900s (see Bibliography), and only slightly

in the wake of French critical comment on his work came a surge of critical attention in English.

Mallarmé's review of the first performance of Maeterlinck's *Pelléas* appeared in London. Writing in the *National Observer* of July 1893 he describes his reactions to the solitary matinée that took place on 17 May of that year at the Théâtre des Bouffes-Parisiens. Curiously, he already finds musical qualities in the work:

Pelléas et Mélisande sur une scène exhale, de feuillets, le délice. Préciser? Ces tableaux, brefs, suprêmes: quoi que ce soit a été rejeté de préparatoire et machinal, en vue que paraisse, extrait, ce qui chez un spectateur se dégage de la représentation, l'essentiel. Il semble que soit jouée une variation supérieure sur l'admirable vieux mélodrame. Silencieusement presque et abstraitement au point que dans cet art, où tout devient musique dans le sens propre, la partie d'un instrument même pensif, violon, nuirait par inutilité.

Pelléas et Mélisande on the stage breathes, page by page, delight. To be precise? *Tableaux*, brief and perfect: whatever there might be that was preliminary or structural has been rejected, so that there appears, extracted, its essential message that the spectator receives from the performance. It seemed that a superior variation on the admirable old melodrama was enacted. Almost silently and abstractly to the point that in this art, where everything becomes music in the real sense, even the addition of a single, pensive violin part would be unnecessary.[5]

Mallarmé's introduction of *Pelléas* in the English press was by no means the first part of the chain which connected Maeterlinck to England. Apart from the literary influences already hinted at, the visual art of the second generation Pre-Raphaelites Burne-Jones and Walter Crane was formative in Maeterlinck's conception of what his plays should look like and also of the all-pervading atmosphere of sadness with which they are infused. The haunting figures of Burne-Jones's pallid damsels, their dilated eyes on the verge of tears, distilling the world's sorrow, were clearly implicated in the genesis of Mélisande, and in *Pelléas*, as in many images of Burne-Jones, these frail figures exist in an atmosphere where violence is never far away. In the late 1880s Maeterlinck had announced a forthcoming book on the Pre-Raphaelite poets, and we know from several sources that his study in Ghent was hung with the recently available platinotypes of Burne-Jones. Maeterlinck's contemporary Iwan Gilkin, who also left us valuable accounts of the playwright's taste for Odilon Redon, wrote most perceptively of his relationship with the English artists:

[Maeterlinck's] characters are the brothers and sisters of the heroes of those tales resurrected in the 19th Century through the genius of Tennyson, Burne-

Jones and Richard Wagner. For Celtic legend has had the good fortune to be awakened from sleep by these great artists. . . This sympathy must have awakened in Maeterlinck's soul in his youth, no doubt after having seen the beautiful photographs which popularised the work of Burne-Jones.

His art does not in any way imitate the art of Burne-Jones, but responds to it and completes it. Or rather, there is a kind of exchange between these two artists. If Burne-Jones furnished Maeterlinck with the outward appearance of his characters and the visible atmosphere which envelopes them, Maeterlinck has interrogated these wonderful figures, unveiled their souls, fathomed their mystery. He has formulated their magic and musical language, expressed in words all the poetic passions which trouble their hearts, and the lofty and melancholy thoughts which are reflected in their beautiful faces.[6]

With Debussy, Maeterlinck shared a taste for the illustrated 'toy books' so prevalent during the 1890s. But while Debussy seems to have been inspired more by Arthur Rackham (the piano *Préludes* 'Ondine', 'Les fées sont d'exquises danseuses' and 'La danse de Puck' were based on Rackham illustrations), Maeterlinck preferred Walter Crane, who was particularly admired in Belgium. For the Paris première of Maeterlinck's *Pelléas* it was Walter Crane's illustrations which provided the basis for the set. Maeterlinck's schoolfriend Charles van Lerberghe had already jotted down his reactions to a reading of *Pelléas*, well before the play was staged: 'On découvre Mélisande au bord d'une fontaine' he noted. 'C'est un Walter Crane'.[7]

Further English connections developed as *Pelléas* was translated and performed, and it was in the 1898 London performance that Maeterlinck found the ideal exponents of his drama. Mrs Patrick Campbell played the part of Mélisande and Martin Harvey was Pelléas. Mrs Campbell's gold tunic was conceived by her friend Burne-Jones and was revived in 1904 in a curious performance where she repeated her Mélisande, but in French, to Sarah Bernhardt playing Pelléas *en travesti*. It was, however, the 1898 performance, with incidental music by Fauré, that most impressed Maeterlinck. Of Mrs Campbell he wrote eulogistically, admiring her capacity 'to make visible and real his too beautiful dreams'. 'Little Jack' Harvey, as Pelléas the 'boy-lover', he thought unsurpassed:

It was in the middle of the first act, when Harvey as Pelléas advanced slowly upon the scene, pale and marked by fate with mortal beauty, like a sort of pre-Renaissance Hamlet, that I heard in the very depths of my heart the secret but all-powerful cry of that mysterious voice which only sounds at great moments of existence. . . There could be no doubt – although at first

my eyes did not believe it – that the Pelléas of Harvey was incomparably more Pelléas than the Pelléas of my drama.[8]

So vivid were his memories of Harvey's interpretation of the role that when he revived *Pelléas* at Sainte-Wandrille, Maeterlinck sent to England for the costume which the actor himself had designed. Lugné-Poë, the producer of the original Paris performance, had given up after several attempts to fulfil Maeterlinck's own dream of 'costumes of the eleventh [and] twelfth centuries, or else like Memling'.[9] Harvey amusingly recalled his painstaking efforts with every detail of the costume:

I knew how I ought to look, and my wife, with her quick sympathy for my own thought, was able to express it perfectly in my costume. My wig gave me endless trouble. I could not get hair which would radiate, as it were, round my head, with that kind of living force which I felt would suggest the ecstatic soul of Pelléas, until I got the effect I wanted by using the hair which grows on the chest of the Tibetan Yak. His appearance, as I saw him in my mind's eye, was mingled in my imagination with the conceptions of the Pre-Raphaelites.[10]

Harvey's costume (see plate 1) was remarkable for the wings on Pelléas's head, and it seems to have been this which so impressed Maeterlinck, despite Mrs Campbell's backstage jibe that he looked like a 'moth'. Harvey and Maeterlinck became friends and the playwright wrote subsequent parts for him. At their meeting at the rehearsals for the London performance, Harvey had asked Maeterlinck whether the character of Pelléas was in any way autobiographical. Maeterlinck's reply was that it was indeed himself, at the age of eighteen.

In the later memoirs of his youth, the *Bulles bleues*, Maeterlinck confirms this. In a piece entitled 'La première maîtresse', Maeterlinck recalls having discovered his first mistress in the arms of another man:

I surveyed the scene with a painful stupefaction, but there was nothing I could do. Already Golaud, who was not yet born, was whispering inside me:

Je n'attache aucune importance à ces choses, voyez-vous, vous ferez comme il vous plaira.

In silence, I wandered off into the lonely night believing myself the most miserable of men.[11]

It was not merely this above isolated confession which Maeterlinck connected with his early plays. His upbringing in a repressively

1 Martin Harvey as Pelléas, showing the wings on the headpiece. Maeterlinck considered Harvey his ideal Pelléas and requested the costume for subsequent performances.

Catholic atmosphere in the misty flatlands around Ghent also contributed much to the atmosphere of these dramas, *Pelléas* being no exception.

His parents were bourgeois French-speaking *Gantois* who had been landowners for some 600 years. The critic Franz Hellens later evoked the milieu of the *bourgeoisie Gantoise*: 'there is no city where the bourgeoisie are more manifestly proud of their culture, closer to the noble aristocracy'.[12] His father's passions were bee-keeping and horticulture, both of which exerted a lasting influence on Maeterlinck himself, emerging in 'La vie des abeilles' and 'L'intelligence des fleurs'. The early poems, the *Serres Chaudes*, also recall the vast greenhouses that surrounded Maeterlinck at the family summer house at Oostacke, outside Ghent.

Installed in his bedroom in the slated tower at Oostacke, Maeterlinck spent several months of each year in the eerie tranquillity of estuary-lands and salt-marshes, frequently hung with a gauze curtain of mist, but where an unchecked wind could suddenly rise to rattle the foundations of the castle-like domain. It was an isolated world of interminable flatness whose *ennui* was broken only by the vast canals. One such canal was so close that, Maeterlinck remarked, the vast and mysterious boats (often from England) seemed to be 'sliding through the garden', just as in *Pelléas* the mysterious galleon which brought Mélisande glides past in Act I scene 3, with the *Hisse-hoé*s reinforcing the sense of unexplained and disquieting forces.[13]

The feeling of stagnation and isolation of these flatlands, which Maeterlinck later identified with Edgar Allan Poe, was by no means alleviated by his years at school. After early years in a convent, he was enrolled at the Jesuit college of Sainte-Barbe, on the outskirts of Ghent. Before Maeterlinck, it had educated Georges Rodenbach and Emile Verhaeren, important figures in turn-of-the-century Belgian literature. Contemporary with the playwright were two other figures who were to follow similar paths: Charles van Lerberghe and Grégoire Le Roy. With these two Maeterlinck developed close friendships in his late teens, and found some refuge from the narrow-minded dogma of the Jesuits who ran the somewhat squalid school. No music was taught, and modern French literature was forbidden. Moral training was of the 'fire and brimstone' kind: van Lerberghe recounted how 'each year. . . a special sermon on death would be delivered, putting the fear of God into us all. We would be told of

cases of sudden death, of young men struck down without warning while in a state of mortal sin, falling into the flames of hell.'[14] Rodenbach spoke of the school in similar terms: 'Death was always present in our youth. Oh, those years when we should have been taught to love life, and when they busied themselves only with making us familiar with death. . . Changeless and bleak existence in that courtyard that blotted out the sun.'[15] With these recollections in mind, it is by no means far-fetched to suggest that the contrasts of the sunless school in Ghent with the plains of Oostacke, where all was mist and sky, may well have precipitated the setting of *Pelléas*, with its forests 'where the sun is never seen' and the sea-mists of Act I scene 3.

Added to this were the obligatory visits to nuns and madonnas. Not far from Oostacke a healing-virgin had become something of a place of pilgrimage and at the age of seventeen Maeterlinck wrote an *eclogue* to her with a fellow pupil. Visits to the nunnery (*béguinage*) were also required, and the atmosphere of silent procession has an echo in several of the early plays, including *Pelléas*, where the 'knowing' servants silently bear witness to the death of Mélisande. Maeterlinck's catholicism at this time he describes as 'provisional' and he became the writer prescribed for 'those who had lost their religion but not the religious spirit'.[16] With his friends van Lerberghe and Le Roy, Maeterlinck began to stand aloof; they considered themselves 'distinguished amateurs' with regard to their religious education.

Together they began to turn towards other things. Van Lerberghe's predilection was for virgins and fairy-princesses, fantasies discussed *à cœur ouvert* with Maeterlinck. Le Roy was more down-to-earth, conquering a pair of sister school teachers. Maeterlinck, at eighteen, took the first of many mistresses, a milliner's daughter. It seemed that his father's more sybaritic nature had got the better of any of the Jesuits' moralistic homilies. The Maeterlinck household was by no means a cosy *ménage à deux*: in common with many Ghent landowners, his father openly kept mistresses, and on one occasion Maeterlinck found himself sharing the favours of a younger woman with his father. Familial dramas of rivalry and jealousy were as much a part of his own life as misty flatlands. Verhaeren summed up Maeterlinck (who insisted on the Flemish pronunciation of his surname, with a long 'a' and a hard 'k' at the end) as 'the most eminent of those modern authors who feel in Flemish and write in French'.

The 'Flemish feeling' of *Pelléas* thus derives from Maeterlinck's transformation of the landscapes of his own experience into the settings of his early plays. In *Pelléas* this *paysage* is of pri· e importance. Indeed, when the characters are at their most passive, there are scenes where the only changes are in the weather and the effects of light. *Pelléas* is scarcely different from the other early plays in the elements comprising this landscape: an old castle surrounded by dark forests save for the sea on one side. There is also a vertical arrangement of higher and lower levels on stage clearly related to Maeterlinck's play of symbols. Stairs lead downwards into the castle vaults and to sombre caverns with bottomless lakes (associated with death), or aspire upward to the tower, and to Mélisande's bedroom where she both loves and dies, but where her daughter symbolises a promise of renewal, as Arkël observes. Most notable, however, is the use of different types of water mirroring different stages in the psychological development of the drama. This aspect of the symbolism of the play may well derive from the tales of Edgar Allan Poe where various types of water are used in a similar way. Whatever its origins, it is an aspect of *Pelléas* to which Debussy's reaction was strong. In the changing moods of the sea in Act I; in the love scenes by the well; in the stagnant tarns and the bright sea-air with which they contrast; even in the clouds passing over the entrance to the sea-cave – here are the sources of the water-imagery which was to preoccupy Debussy throughout his life.

Maeterlinck leaves us in no doubt about the connections between the landscape and the meaning of the play, whether it is Golaud and Mélisande lost in the dark forest, Golaud and Pelléas smelling the 'stench of death' in the castle vaults, or the lovers in the flower-garden. The landscape is always symbolic rather than decorative. Baudelaire had presaged the Symbolist attitude to landscape some years earlier:

> If some assembly of trees, mountains, water and houses that we call landscape is beautiful, it is not so in itself, but only through my bestowal of beauty upon it, by the idea or feeling I attach to it. Landscape is born of the imagination.[17]

It is this view of landscape which Maeterlinck develops and which he shares not only with the English Pre-Raphaelites but also with Debussy. For it is the composer's Symbolist attitude to landscape as a reflection of a human state which allies him to the poets of his day, and invalidates any connection with pure Impressionism.