Arts & Humanities

Brander Matthews and Theater Studies at Columbia

Playwright, novelist, critic, and teacher, Brander Matthews was an internationally renowned literary figure who brought the study of dramatic literature to Columbia.

By
Howard Stein
|
Spring 2002

Brander Matthews 1871C ’73L was the first professor of dramatic literature in the United States, a quintessential pioneer. At the time of his death in 1929, an anonymous commentator in *Commonweal* wrote, “Today, the colleges are redolent of drama, experimental and otherwise. Not a few of the initiates forget that what they are attempting would probably never have been possible but for the witty, somewhat old-fashioned sage who really talked to the United States from his pulpit on Morningside Heights.”

Clayton Hamilton, writing in *The New York Times*, made Matthews’ contribution and legacy even more specific: “Until Matthews occupied the first chair in any American university specifically dedicated to the study of drama, drama had been regarded as a department of literature, like the essay or the novel, or the short story. He was the first to teach that drama was a separate area and could be studied not in the library but only in the theater. He was the first to teach that Shakespeare must be judged as a practical competitor with George M. Cohan for the applause and the money of the multitudes, instead of being judged as a literary competitor of such a poet as John Milton.”

Obviously, Matthews was a challenge to some of his colleagues. Recalling the voices of those detractors, George C.D. Odell, one of Matthews’ champions, stated that “when Matthews first described Shakespeare as primarily a writer of plays, certain academic critics met him with something like derisive rebuke; today [1939] no one

would dream of editing a Shakespeare play without some reference to the stage history and its dramatic quality." Odell's comments are echoed today by as eminent an academic figure as Northrop Frye, who, in *Northrop Frye on Shakespeare*, maintains, "With Shakespeare the actable and theatrical are always what come first; the poetry, however unforgettable, is functional to the play; it doesn't get away on its own." Matthews' book on Shakespeare is *Shakspere as a Playwright* (1913), a title that employs American English.

Matthews became a pioneer partly because he was also a maverick—untrained for an academic career or for university teaching. His father was among the richest men in America, a Wall Street tycoon who trained his only son "for the profession of a millionaire, with no need for business but with an eye to the possibility of a political career." But, as John Lennon reminds us, "Life is what happens while you are making other plans." In 1873, the year Brander graduated from Columbia Law School, his father lost most of his fortune. Brander was obliged to seek a second profession. He joined his father's business as a lawyer and worked there for a few years making his own living and catching material for His Father's Son, a novel he was to write many years later.

From his earliest years, Matthews was intent upon a playwriting career. Before his father's financial ruin, he had written drama reviews and play scripts, especially translations from the French. His first script was an adaptation of a French farce that played for one night only at the Indianapolis Academy of Music in 1871. Another adaptation of a French play, *Frank Wylde*, was published in 1873; though never staged professionally, it became a favorite of the Comedy Club of New York and was often performed by amateur actors. During the next twenty years, he wrote (frequently with a collaborator) six plays that were produced in New York, two of which were performed all over the country—*A Gold Mine* (1887) and *On Probation* (1889)—both co-written with collaborator George H. Jessop. Neither work established Matthews as a playwright of any significance, which was a major disappointment to him. As writer Lawrence J. Oliver has pointed out, "His playwriting legacy today seems confined to Theodore Dreiser's novel, *Sister Carrie*, in which Carrie gets turned on to the theater in a great awakening while attending a performance of *A Gold Mine*."

The literary life

Although he would have preferred that his second profession be that of a playwright, in reality it was that of a “literary fellow.” He wrote theater and book reviews, articles on European (particularly French) and American drama, and many sketches and short stories for various magazines, including *Appleton’s Journal*, *The Atlantic*, *The Critic*, *The Galaxy*, *Harper’s Magazine*, *Lippincott’s Magazine*, *The Nation*, *Puck*, *Scribner’s Monthly*, and *Saturday Review*, all prestigious periodicals of his day. He also wrote significant literary criticism. His French Dramatists of the 19th Century (1881) was the first scholarly examination in French or English of the emergence of romantic drama in France. Very well received, the book went through five editions in Matthews’ lifetime and remains today a valuable example of that century’s scholarship. *Pen and Ink: Papers on Subjects of More or Less Importance* (1888) reflects his growing interest in fiction and poetry. Collaborating with fellow drama critic Laurence Hutton, he edited *Actors and Actresses of Great Britain and the United States, from the Days of David Garrick to the Present* (1886), a five-volume work blending biography, criticism, and anecdote, calculated to make theater more familiar and appealing to American audiences. His literary enterprise created friendships and acquaintances with some of the most distinguished writers and personalities of his time—Matthew Arnold and Rudyard Kipling in England; Constant Coquelin in France; and Bret Harte, William Dean Howells, Henry James (Sr. and Jr.), Theodore Roosevelt, and Mark Twain in America. Yet despite this literary success, he yearned to be a playwright to the very end of the century, because “what had the power to excite me was the theater; and its allurements were immediate and genuine.”

One of those immediate allurements was Ada Smith, who first appeared on an American stage in 1868, when Matthews was a sixteen-year-old sophomore in Columbia College. The daughter of a London physician, she was a dancer and an actress who performed under the name of Ada Harland in Lydia Thompson’s British burlesque troupe.

Thompson’s company comprised five performers, a troupe dubbed “British Blondes.” Since Ada was a brunette, she inspired the following comment in *Spirit of the Times* on October 3, 1868: “Ada Harland is one of the most graceful dancers we have seen in a long time, and we were several times on the verge of applause, but she has dark hair—alas! that it should be so. It obscures her merit.” The same report describes the company: “It is remarkably free from vulgarity and coarseness of mien and gesture. Thompson has captivated her audiences, men and women, by her

delightful deviltry.” Whether Matthews was in the audience at any specific time between 1868 and 1873 is not a matter of record, but that he was captivated by and then subsequently married Ada Harland is a fact recorded in his autobiography, *These Many Years*, published in 1917. Ada retired from acting altogether when they married (just before he graduated from the Law School), and her obituary makes no mention of her career with Lydia Thompson.

By the spring of 1891, at the age of 39, with degrees from Columbia College (1871) and Columbia Law School (1873), married with a daughter, financially solvent as a result of his mother’s modest legacy and a productive literary career, Matthews had recovered from his father’s bankruptcy and even had a slight commercial success with *A Gold Mine*. His reputation as a man of letters both here and abroad was considerable and positive, which filled him with pride but not wealth. That reputation encouraged a representative from the Department of English at Columbia to pay him a call, one with a mission that was to have far-reaching effects and that thrust Brander Matthews into a third profession.

The art of teaching

H.H. Boyesen startled Matthews by inviting him to take the place of Professor Thomas Price, who would be absent from Columbia the following winter. Matthews was thrown quite off balance, and even though he was aroused and flattered, he declined the invitation, admitting to Boyesen that he was totally ignorant of academia and teaching: “Not only have I had no experience in teaching, but I have never been called upon to consider its principles or to bestow on it even cursory attention. I have never even conversed about the principles and practice of education. All that I really know is that teaching is truly an art, and therefore I should have to acquire it somehow—and probably at the expense of my earliest classes.”

At the same time, his critical impulse received a severe dose of muscle memory: He recalled being a student in Professor Thomas Lounsbury’s History of English Literature class, in which they were introduced to none of the actual writings of any of the authors nor was any hint dropped that the students might benefit by reading them for themselves. Instead, the students had been required to procure a manual of English literature and to recite from its pages the names of the writers, the titles of the books, and the dates of publication. The manual illustrated admirably the

definition of history as “an arid region abounding in dates.

Boyesen was neither discouraged by Matthews’ recollection of this earlier experience nor disturbed by his confession of ignorance and incompetence. He quickly offered Matthews not only an unconventional remedy but also an unparalleled freedom in an academic community: He suggested that Matthews choose his own three courses, to be open to seniors in Columbia College and to such graduate students as might be present.

Matthews eventually agreed and gravitated immediately to those subjects he knew best: American literature, modern fiction, and English versification. None of these courses had been taught before at Columbia; indeed it is unlikely that any of the three was offered in any college catalogue at the time. Boyesen was, nevertheless, happy with the arrangement, and Matthews was free to learn the art of teaching.

He approached his new task as a serious scholar might. “The art of teaching,” he maintained, “requires the instructor to guide his student to work independently to discover principles for himself, and in time to acquire the power of principles to the manifold situations which may confront him.” His course in English versification, for example, was not intended to create verse makers but to tempt the students into various kinds of verse making, “not with any absurd hope of developing them into poets but mainly because metrical composition is an excellent discipline for prose writing.” Thus began his academic journey.

As Oscar J. Campbell noted in his chapter on the English department in *A History of the Faculty of Philosophy: Columbia University*, a volume edited by Jacques Barzun ’27c ’32gsas, “The addition of Matthews’ three courses to the English curriculum greatly expanded its scope for all time, and marked the initiation of the department’s tending to deal as much with the immediate as with the remote in literature.” (Matthews was always a little suspicious of the term *contemporary*, for he claimed that the word was three-fourths *temporary*.) His first year was so successful that President Seth Low and the Trustees established a new professorship in literature especially for him. Matthews responded by adding to his schedule a course on nineteenth-century French playwrights, a course that absolutely did not exist on any campus in the United States. That developed into one entitled Modern Drama, which has had a long and distinguished history at the University.

For the next six years, Matthews devoted himself to refining his four courses, and in 1899, President Nicolas Murray Butler and the administration advanced the 1892 professorship in literature to the unique chair: Professor of Dramatic Literature. Matthews continued his academic role until 1924, when he retired. He died five years later, having already buried his wife and daughter.

A leading force in criticism

A special legacy of Matthews' teaching was the prolific progress in the areas of literary and theatrical reviewing and criticism. One of his students, Stark Young '02GSAS, became the regular reviewer for *The New Republic*, a post he maintained until he retired in 1947 (with one year out in the mid-twenties to write for The New York Times). Another student, Ludwig Lewisohn '03GSAS, started a tradition of consequence by becoming the theater reviewer/critic for *The Nation* in 1919 and continuing until 1924. John Gassner '05C upon leaving Columbia College reviewed for a variety of publications and then became the "play reader" for the Theater Guild Productions. From 1925 until he died in 1967, Gassner was a distinguished theater historian, critic, and scholar (he joined the Columbia faculty in the 1940s). Joseph Wood Krutch '24GSAS '54HON, a graduate student in the Department of English and Comparative Literature during Matthews' tenure, began writing theater reviews for The Nation in 1924 and continued in that position until 1951. Krutch joined the Columbia faculty in 1937 and assumed the Brander Matthews Chair in 1939, the year that Odell retired (after having occupied the chair since 1924). When Krutch left Columbia and New York for the Arizona desert in 1952, Eric Bentley accepted the chair and at the same time began his career of reviewing for *The New Republic* .Thereafter Robert Brustein '57GSAS joined the faculty in 1957, and in 1959 began writing for The New Republic himself; he has been writing the theatrical reviews for that magazine ever since. Continuing that tradition is one of Brustein's students, Michael Feingold '66C, who first studied with Brustein as an undergraduate and then followed him to Yale School of Drama, when Brustein became its dean in 1966. Feingold began his reviewing by writing for the Columbia Daily Spectator in 1964 and has been a major drama critic for *The Village Voice* for the last thirty years. Such was the legacy of Matthews as teacher.The distinguished array of professors who have taught courses or proseminars in modern drama at Columbia reads like a Who's Who in Dramatic Literature: Brander Matthews, George Odell, Joseph Wood

Krutch, Eric Bentley, Maurice Valency ’27L ’39GSAS, Robert Brustein, Bernard Beckerman, Martin Meisel, the current Brander Matthews Professor of Dramatic Literature; and the present dean of Columbia College, Austin Quigley. When in 1947, 23 years after Matthews’ retirement, the rating of English departments by the Association of American Colleges and Universities was announced, the unanimous choice for first place went to the Department of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University—a decision that reflected in no small part the offerings in dramatic literature and the faculty:

Greek Drama: Moses Hadas ’30GSAS
Roman Drama: Gilbert Highet
Medieval Drama: Roger S. Loomis ’57HON
Shakespeare: Oscar Campbell and Mark Van Doren ’21GSAS ’60HON
Elizabethan/Jacobean Drama: Alfred Harbage
Restoration/18th Century Drama: Joseph Wood Krutch
History and Criticism: Kurt Pinthus
Modern Drama: Maurice Valency and Joseph Wood Krutch

This all started with the imaginative appointment of Brander Matthews in 1891.

Another spectacular legacy that Matthews left to Columbia is the Brander Matthews Collection. It was originally named the Brander Matthews Museum, a term Matthews appropriated from a nineteenth-century contribution to art—Museum: a home for the Muses.The museum was to be a teaching tool because he believed that the great dramatic poets prepared their plays to be performed by actors in a theater and before an audience. They had to take into account the method of the actor, the size and circumstances of the theater, and the feelings and prejudices of the audience. Matthews stated his own position clearly: “One cannot rightly estimate the dramas of Sophocles, Shakespeare, and of Molière unless we inform ourselves as fully as may be in regard to all the conditions they accepted freely, and in accordance with which they wrought out their masterpieces. For its proper understanding, it needs a gallery and a museum. Such a museum . . . would stand in the same relation to the arts of drama as the Avery Library of Columbia University stands to the arts of the architect, the decorator, and the landscape artist.” Matthews, an obsessive theatergoer andcollector, began collecting in 1865 at age thirteen and apparently never threw anything away. He tirelessly and compulsively collected theatrical artifacts, which he then willed to Columbia with a modest maintenance stipend. That collection consists of ten models of theaters, 29 stage sets from various periods of

theater history ancient to modern, photographs, manuscripts, posters, 300 tribal and theatrical masks from all over the world, more than 400 puppets—ranging from shadow puppets from Thailand and South India to Japanese puppets, Sicilian marionettes, and French Punch and Judy figures to oversize puppets of Oedipus and Jocasta, created by puppet maker Remo Bufano for the stage designer Robert Edmund Jones. The museum resided first on the sixth floor of Philosophy Hall and later on the fourth floor of Low Library; the bulk of the collection is now housed in the Rare Book and Manuscript Library on the sixth floor of Butler Library.

In addition to creating the museum as a repository for physical artifacts about the theater, Matthews published under the museum's name 22 small books on the theater between 1914 and 1922, two of which were reissued in 1956—*Papers on Acting* and *Papers on Playmaking*.

An American spirit

Matthews' passion for the theater and Columbia was matched by his passion for New York City and America. Although born in New Orleans, he was moved to New York at the age of eight, and thereafter his love for the city never wavered. George Odell accounts for Matthews' passion: "The most devoted New Yorkers hail from other parts of the country. Matthews' father was from New Orleans, his mother from Virginia. The passionate lovers of the city, Matthews held, are seldom native sons." He wrote three books of sketches and short stories, all concentrating on the workings of New York: *Vignettes of Manhattan, Studies in Local Color*, and *Vistas of New York*; his three novels are all set in New York, and the city is the ground on which the characters play out their destinies: *His Father's Son*, *A Confident Tomorrow*, and *The Action and the Word*. He worked, spoke, and wrote with a desire to establish New York City as the hub of literary America. Indeed, he convinced William Dean Howells to move from Boston to New York; he organized and supported all sorts of organizations that would help nurture New York's role inAmerica's literary development. He was a founder of the Authors' Club, which he claimed offered "the opportunity to rub elbows and to develop a solidarity among the men of letters in New York"; he helped found the American Copyright League, which enhanced the solidarity of American writers and especially those in New York. He was an original member of the National Institute of Arts and Letters (1898), an organization based in New York City; and in 1904, a central group from that

organization formed the AmericanAcademy of Arts and Letters, also based in New York. Matthews was elected and acted as its chancellor from 1922 to 1924.

Many university people to this day think of George Pierce Baker at Harvard as the force within the university that brought drama from the page to the stage. The fact is that Baker started his good work many years after Matthews had begun his on Morningside Heights, while Baker in the Boston area was at a distance from the center of the theater's glamour, energy, and enterprise. Baker, for his part, was interested in training playwrights, while Matthews made his position clear with respect to that activity by quoting Dumas *fils*: "A man or a woman may become a painter, a sculptor, even a musician, by study—but not a playwright. . . . It is a freak of nature, which has constructed the vision such as to enable him or her to see things in a certain way." Matthews' mission was thus different from Baker's, and his New York was the one place whereby he could expose his students to the dynamics of the drama and thereby help them fulfill themselves with their own talent and craft.

Matthews' devotion to America was every bit as great as his devotion to New York City. From his early writings about James Fenimore Cooper, Mark Twain, and William Dean Howells, his work continued to reflect the sterling virtues that he identified with the American character: ethical standards, honesty and integrity, a fierce democratic spirit, a deep sense of humanity and compassion, and an equally fierce patriotism. In 1906 he gave the Phi Beta Kappa address, a speech entitled "American Character," a response to those European detractors of Americans—their provincialism, their preoccupation with money, and their cultural poverty. His American Literature course, first offered in 1891, culminated in Matthews' publishing in 1896 *An Introduction to the Study of American Literature*, a volume that sold over 250,000 copies in the 25 years following its initial publication. His colleague William P. Trent organized and edited *The Cambridge History of American Literature*, a multivolume project that required decades to complete and used Matthews' *Introduction* as its basis. Subsequently, Matthews' contribution to American studies was summed up in a book by Lawrence J. Oliver, published in 1992, entitled *Brander Matthews, Theodore Roosevelt, and the Politics of American Literature, 1880–1920*. Oliver describes an article in *American Quarterly* by Eric Cheyfitz in which Cheyfitz argues that F.O. Matthiessen's book *American Renaissance,* frequently looked upon as single-handedly establishing American literature in the academy, was really not the origin but a culmination of a movement initiated in the nineteenth century to

nationalize and professionalize American literature. *American Renaissance*, as Cheyfitz puts it, was thus a “classically corporate project.” Oliver goes on to make his point:

“If we accept Cheyfitz’ metaphor, ‘classically corporate project,’ then the Columbia professor [Matthews] who in the 1890s authored such essays as ‘American Literature’ and ‘The Literary Independence of the United States,’ lobbied for American spelling and the Copyright Act of 1891, developed one of the first college courses on American writers, and produced a textbook on American literature that eventually sold over a quarter of a million copies, deserves recognition as a leading member of the board during the ‘corporation’s’ formative years.”

During the last decade, scholars have found renewed interest in Matthews. Besides the volume mentioned above, Lawrence J. Oliver has also published *The Letters of Theodore Roosevelt and Brander Matthews* (1995). Joseph Kissane ’56 ’68GSAS, while working on the plays of George Kelly, published an article in *Theater History Studies*, “Brandered by Matthews: The 1924 Pulitzer Prize” (1999). And Susanna Ashton, a professor of English at Clemson University, features a chapter on Matthews in her upcoming book *In Partnership—Literary Collaborators in America*, 1870–1920.

Although the bust of Brander Matthews was an appropriate likeness, and the portrait that hangs in the seminar room of the Department of English presents him as the maverick that he was, the most accurate description of the man that we have was made by Lloyd Morris ’14C many years ago. According to Oscar J. Campbell, Morris gave the following account of Matthews’ periodic entrances on the stage of the Columbia campus to join his departmental colleagues at Morningside Heights: “Twice each week a burnished coupe, drawn by fat old horses and piloted by a fat old coachman, set down in their midst an aging Cyrenaic, urbane, dryly malicious, often mocking figure, who was—like the gilded statue of Alma Mater—a distinctive campus landmark.”

Read more from
Howard Stein

Guide to school abbreviations

All categories >
Read more from
Howard Stein