1940

Catulle Mendès, a critical study

John Jex Martin

Loyola University Chicago

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by

John Jex Martin

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Loyola University

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Vita

John Jex Martin was born in Detroit, Michigan, January 28, 1913. He was graduated from Loyola Academy, Chicago, in 1931, and received the A.B. degree from Loyola University in June 1935. He was employed as a graduate assistant in the department of French in 1938 and 1939, and was appointed graduate fellow in French for the year 1939-40.
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The Problem of Mendès

Catulle Mendès died suddenly and under rather bizarre circumstances on February 9, 1909. The suddenness of his death probably accounts for the superficial éloges accorded him in the subsequent issue of the *Annales politiques et littéraires*. The *Annales* had been for some years Mendès' favorite outlet for his nouvelles and smaller poems, and the contributors to the symposium, Coppée, Courteline and Dierx, had lived and worked with him since his arrival in Paris fifty years before, but the articles of all three were pathetically shallow, when not ridiculous. The elegiac Dierx lamented "...la blonde et opulente chevelure qu'il possédait." Coppée wept for that "Chevelure blonde, démesurée, frisée naturellement—cette chevelure dorée ensoleillée et lumineuse." Courteline too had his tears for the passing of the toison d'or, but he also sought to point out the contribution of Mendès to the literary life of his time: "Si le goût de la littérature a pénétré aujourd'hui jusqu'en les classes les plus humbles, Mendès, depuis trente ans y a largement contribué en ne cessant de revendiquer, de sa plume, de son éloquence, et au besoin, de son épée, les droits sacrés et éternels de l'Art."

Since then the influence of Mendès has been given more critical, if less enthusiastic attention. The manueliste, un-

chastened by the memory of Vandérem, belittles the poetry of Mendès with small-mouthed approval. Landon ignores him. Brunetière and Herriot are bitterly brief. The majority of those critics who try to estimate intelligently the significance of Mendès tend to consider only one of his several aspects. Doumic\textsuperscript{1}, with obvious prejudice, has criticized the principal dramatic works. Miomandre\textsuperscript{2} has attempted to discuss the importance of Mendès as a critic. Thérive\textsuperscript{3} and Martino\textsuperscript{4}, while accepting the traditional definition of Mendès as a poet, are constrained to admit that he was the driving force of Parnasse, and that inevitably certain of his smaller pieces are destined to survive. It is my purpose here to compose these various aspects of the writer, and to suggest which of his works are most worthy and most likely to survive. Thirty years should easily provide that perspective which Faguet demands as essential to the cautious critic.

No attempt will be made here to resurrect Mendès as the head of a school, a jack-of-all-letters or a literary dictator, though he was, at different times, all of these. Unreasoned prejudice and enthusiasm have built a small but confusing legend around Mendès. It will be shown here how well that legend fits both the man and the writer.

\begin{itemize}
\item 1. Le Théâtre nouveau.
\item 2. Figures d'hier et d'aujourd'hui.
\item 3. Le Parnasse.
\item 4. Parnasse et symbolisme.
\end{itemize}
Abraham Catulle Mendès was born at Bordeaux on May 22, 1841. The family was almost entirely Jewish, a branch, probably of the Spanish Mendès who left Spain at the beginning of the sixteenth century to settle in France, principally in the neighborhood of Bayonne and Hendaye.

The father of Catulle, a banker, was himself only imperfectly educated, but beyond the usual talents of his race, he was endowed with notions of education and heritage which he sought to realize in the guidance of his son. He planned for him undoubtedly, a career similar to that of the most famous of bordelais, the métis Ryquem, lord of Montaigne. Catulle, in fact, never became a gentleman-dilettante, but his education in his early years was precisely accorded with the precepts given by Montaigne in his epistle to Diane de Foix.

When he was seven, the Mendès family removed to Germany, thence to Italy, Catulle's education during these years of migration being in the hands of tutors and governesses. In 1853 the family returned to France, and settled in a small château near Toulouse. Still the elder Mendès hesitated to begin his son's formal education. He provided for him a tutor who was, like that of Montaigne, a German, and a solid classical scholar, and it was under his instruction, that Mendès, in the years that followed, acquired the fabled latinity that was to become part of his legend.

Then Catulle was fourteen he offered at the local var-
eties a vaudeville entitled _les Jarrietières d'un Huissier_.
The piece, of course, has disappeared, but its success is cer-
tain. The vaudeville and the pantomime have always been the
chosen entertainment of the provincial theater, and these were
the destined genres of Mendès.

In 1856, Mendès, then fifteen years old, began publishing
a theatrical journal, and two years later his indulgent father
permitted him to go to Paris.

Arsène Houssaye began publishing his verse almost immedi-
ately, and it was through him that Mendès made the significant
acquaintance of Gautier who was at that time an editor of the
Moniteur. Catulle had now definitely decided upon a career of
literature, and he persuaded his father to advance him twenty
thousand francs with which to establish a literary magazine.
The projected review did not appear for some time. The next
year Mendès spent in forming opinions on the literary issues
of the day and in enlarging his acquaintance with the editors
and journalists of Paris.

The first issue of the Revue fantaisiste, with the young
Mendès as editor owner, was published February 15, 1861. The
editor professed to be unprejudiced with regard to realism
or romanticism. "Mes collaborateurs jouissent des plus grandes
libertés; ils ont le droit de se passer toute sorte de
fantaisies, même celle d'être réalistes--à condition ce-
pendant que cette dernière ne leur vienne pas trop souvent."
Gozlan and Champfleury appeared in the review, side by side with Gautier, Banville, Bouilhet, Glatigny and Cladel, but the realists were never in the majority. The most pronounced characteristic of the magazine was youth. Gautier and Banville were regular contributors, but most of the material was furnished by younger men.

In November of 1861 Mendès published in his *Revue* a dramatic sketch of five hundred verses called *Le Roman d'une Nuit*. At once a process was brought against him in which he was charged with "outrage aux moeurs et à la religion". He was convicted and sentenced to one month in prison and five hundred francs fine. Years later, in writing *La Légende*, he admitted that the poem was poor and frivolous, but denied that it was culpable.

After completing his sentence in the Prison de Ste. Pélagie, Mendès returned to Paris to find that his father not only refused to advance the review further, but had virtually disinherited him. He entered upon a period of bohemian poverty during which he was almost entirely supported by his friends. He lived for a short time at the *Hôtel du Brésil*, then occupied a small *rez-de-chaussée* in the rue de Douai. Coppée described the *apartment* in his obituary article.² It was an apartment of two

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1. *La Légende du Parnasse contemporain*.
rooms, a bedroom and a salon which he used as a study. There was little furniture. On the walls hung the *Bon Samaritain* of Bresdin and some aquarelles of Constantin Guys. His library consisted mainly of Hugo, Balzac, and a favorite volume, the *Gaspard de la Nuit* of Bertrand. It was here that Mendès spent the years of his bohemian captivity, and found them pleasant enough. Each morning Banville brought him four sous of tobacco to while away the empty hours of the day. In the evening he joined his friends at Mme. Ricard's, the hotel Pimodan or the salon of Mme. de Callias. On the rare occasions of his selling a story or a poem, he offered a fête to the future Parnassians in his own quarters. A young gamin whom Mendès had adopted and christened Covielle prepared tea and *babas au rhum*. The arrival of Villiers opened the evening. He was an incorrigible exhibitionist with long hair and blond mustaches, and without invitation would entertain his companions by reciting his own works in a quavering voice to an accompaniment which he picked out on Mendès' clavecin. Glatigny was an inevitable guest. The young Albert was notorious as a *maquereau-cabotin*, and was more of a *poseur* than Villiers, but he had a genuine dramatic talent, and the others found his recitals a welcome escape.

In 1863 Mendès published his first volume of verse, *Philoméla*. The poems were modeled on those of Hugo, Gautier, Banville and Leconte de Lisle, but the poet's enthusiasm
and his great technical skill gave the illusion of a striking originality.

In the same year Mme. Ricard's son, Xavier, founded his Revue du progrès moral, littéraire, scientifique et artistique. Ricard was not concerned so much with the artistic theories of his friends, but with the political and philosophical ideas from which they derived. His burning socialistic zeal and his outspoken criticism attracted the attention of the government, and at the end of a year the Revue du progrès was seized for outrage à la morale religieuse. This was the second journal to serve as an outlet for the energies of the Parnassians. Its policy was almost exclusively political, but Ricard's membership in the group and his occasional publication of Parnassian poets served to give continuity to the movement.

Leconte de Lisle published in the Main Jaune in 1864 a series of articles in which he proposed what appeared to be a new theory of aesthetics. The young Parnassians immediately accepted him as the patron of their movement. Ricard abandoned his political ideas, and founded a review which was to be the official organ of the group. The first issue of the magazine, l'Art, appeared November 2, 1865, the last was published January 6, 1866. The review was exceptionally short-lived in a period which was characterized by ephemeral reviews. Its principal value to the movement was that it introduced M. Lemerre, the
editor of *l'Art*, who was to be the published of the *Parnasse contemporain*.

After the collapse of Ricard's review, Mendès suggested to Lemerre that the contributors to the *Revue fantaisiste*, the *Revue du progrès* and *l'Art* be represented in a new magazine which would appear less regularly, but often enough to retain the audience which had been attracted by the previous periodicals. If the continuity of *le Parnasse contemporain, recueil de vers nouveaux* (the title invented by Mendès) was due to the efforts of Lemerre, it was Mendès who was almost entirely responsible for the collecting and editing of the material in the first issue.

In the same year (1866), Mendès married Judith Gautier, the younger daughter of Gautier. She was sixteen then, a strikingly beautiful girl with advanced tastes in art and letters. Her mother had been the celebrated singer, Carlotta Grisi. From her and from the "*cher Théo*" Judith received traits of temperament which menaced a successful marriage with such a definite personality as Mendès. They had a common enthusiasm for the exotic, and they shared a genuine devotion to Wagner, but Mendès could not tolerate his wife's allegiance to Mme. Gautier. Marriage did not change her loyalties, and Mendès criticism of her mother's domination led to violent quarrels which resulted in eventual separation and divorce.
Their unhappy relations were revealed in a series of letters subsequently published.¹

In 1868 Mendès published Histoires d'Amour, nouvelles. This was to be the beginning of a long series of essays in the licentious conte, a genre which had been the toy of such illustrious predecessors as La Fontaine and Balzac, but which was, for Mendès, first a source of income, then a consuming mania. These books were first published at Paris, but new printings were quickly prepared, often in pirated editions, by Belgian houses.

The days of the Commune (18th of March to the 28th of May, 1871) were taken up with feverish editorial activity. Towards the end of the siege Mendès and Gautier tramped the city for days delivering violent harangues to the students and communards.

In 1875 Mendès married Jane Primitive Mette, a disciple of Hugo, and herself a prolific poet. She long outlived her husband, and continued publishing gentle, poignant verses in chosen tradition, her last volume, La France bien aimée (1925), being a poetic tour in the manner of Bataille's Le Beau voyage.

After 1876 Mendès' rate of production increased at an

¹ Judith resumed her maiden name and published a number of poems, plays and novels, usually of oriental inspiration. The rather ridiculous climax to her romantic career was her marriage to Viaud (P. Loti) in 1913.
incredible pace. By 1880 he had produced twenty volumes of verse and prose, beside a considerable quantity of journalistic material. He was a definite financial success, but at the expense of his artistic integrity; his productions in the conte and nouvelle were already beginning to outnumber his serious works.

His interest in journalism expanded. He founded a review of his own, La République des lettres, and later was a contributing editor of l'Écho de Paris and Les Annales. His income from his newspaper and magazine writing was small compared with that from the conte, but he appreciated journalism as a more responsive medium, one which drew him closer to his audience. L'Art pour l'Art was a fond memory.

La Légende du Parnasse contemporain (1884) and Richard Wagner (1886) revived the sympathies of the younger writers for Mendès. He was tenacious of their devotion, and by ruse, compromise and violence he managed to retain it until his death.

He slowly became more attentive to the theater. His early plays, La Part du Roi (1872), Les Frères d'armes (1873), had had only poor success, but in 1889 his Isoline, a musical drama which he wrote with Messager was well received, and from that time his principal serious works were dramatic pieces.

In 1893 Lugné-Poë began to direct l'Oeuvre, the sym-
bolist theater. In the same year Mendès was appointed dramatic critic of the Journal. His loyalties to Antoine, whose Théâtre libre had already produced several of his own plays, led him to indulge in tasteless criticism of the new theater. Their antagonism was not ended, but only punctuated, by a duel in 1897. Mendès outclassed by his opponent's skill, threw down his sword, but he received sympathetic treatment in journalistic accounts of the encounter, and his public remembered delightedly other occasions when he had substituted the sword for the pen.

His activity in the theater, his favorite genre, was greatest in the years that immediately preceded his death. Médée, Glatigny, Scarron, and his most popular operas were written when he was well past sixty. His vigorous enthusiasm and the variety of his interests seemed to increase as he grew older.

The 8th of February 1909, he assisted at a rehearsal of L'Impératrice, his last play. After dining in town with Baron von Oppenheim, he took the midnight train for his home in St. Germain. The next morning his body was discovered in the tunnel under the Terrasse, near the St. Germain station. By mistake, apparently, he had descended from his compartment while the train was still in the tunnel.

The apparent problems of Mendès, considered as a literary personality, are largely explained by the fact of his racial inheritance. His surprising vitality, his barbaric tastes,
his sentimentality, his exoticism, his adaptability to established forms, were all Jewish traits which he shared commonly with his contemporaries, Porto-Riche and Halevý.

Courteline, in an éloge of Mendès, describes a typical mood of his master: "J'en appelle à ceux de ses amis qui l'ont entendu derrière eux sangloter dans la nuit confuse d'une baignoire tandis que Silvain, sur son départ se plaint de quitter Griseldis..." It was undoubtedly such an incident which inspired the description of Mendès by La Jeunesse, a sketch which was intended as a gross caricature, but which offers, in fact, the truest and most vivid picture of his personality: "Las, triste sans doute de cette joie qu'il avait subi autour de lui et en lui, silencieux à cause de tant de paroles qu'il avait dû approuver, qu'il avait dû prononcer... il vaguait gauche, sans but, l'habit entr'ouvert, la chemise fripée, par la nuit pâlissante... Ah! le ciel, le ciel. Ah! Ces hommes qui vont, et ces narines de femmes et cette vie de plaisir qui déjà se rue sur Paris et sur le monde. Le ciel, le ciel! Et les rimes de Michel-Ange et Pétrarque et le Virgile et Eloa et Pantéleia et le regard de Jésus! Lys lointains, songes lointains, fleurs de lointain, et fleurs de lune, sourires de vierges martyres, toi, or impalpable du croissant d'Artemis, et toi, lait des vers de Théocrite, lait de la chèvre d'Amalthée, lait de la mère de Marie-Magdeleine,

lait que but Jésus et que but Sainte Cécile, et toi, sang du
cêne de Dodone, sang de Sirius et sang de Phébé, vous, raisins
de la Terre promise, toi, onde âcre du Jourdain, onde du fleuve
d'Andromaque, vous, roses d'Elizabeth d'Hongrie, vous, cheveux
de la tête décollée de Saint Jean-Baptiste et les pleurs
d'Hérodiate, je vous veux, je veux votre saveur et votre fraî-
cheur et votre pitié pour calmer et purifier ma fièvre, pour
me faire oublier ce monde, pour me rendre mon cœur et mon
âme et mes larmes. Et vous, soupirs de Bérénice, et vous, sou-
pirs de Chimène, soupirs de Cordélia, et soupirs de Portia et
soupirs de Desdémone, il vous faut autour de moi pour que
j'aie de l'innocence et de la douleur à respirer, et toi,
mouve de la robe d'Iphigénie et de la robe de Pénélope, cur-
pre du manteau de Marc-Aurèle et du manteau de Louis de
Bavière, vert de la vallée de Tempe et du Lac de Starnberg,
et toi, blancheur du cygne de Lohengrin. Ah! fremissez là,
tout près, et limitez de votre éclat lassé mon horizon, et que
des harpes me content Cybèle et me content Parsifal et me fass-
ent monter lentement, parmi des lys et des ailes d'anges, vers
les portes pâles du ciel! Ah, des lys! et du ciel! et de la
clarté, et de la canne et des Élohim et du soleil et de
l'éternité! "1 Here, more clearly than Mendès ever dared, are
expressed his lust for the ineffable, his Jewish melancholy

his hopeless romanticism. He hated details, loved the vague and the distant, nursed his melancholy and was devoted to the cult of passion. He was the first of the Parnassians and the last of the Romantics.
The Works of Mendès

The works chosen for analysis here are not always representative. Mendès' Vedic poetry, for example, and his novels, are tangent to his literary career, but they strongly influenced his other writings, and are, besides, valuable indications of his personality and background.

Almost all of Mendès' poems are discussed here. The early volumes have been given more particular attention due to their importance in the Parnassian movement. The collected editions of 1893 and 1909 have been omitted. The only new material included in these volumes consists of fugitive verse originally published in the Journal and the Annales politiques et littéraires. The Braise du cenrier has been selected as the most representative of his later verse.

The theater is represented by La Femme de Tabarin, La Reine Fiammette, Scarron, Ariane, Glattruy, Bacchus and La Vierge d'Avila. The prose theater and the ballets have been omitted.

Among his critical works the essay on Wagner has been discussed at some length because of the importance of that composer in the romantic tradition, and because of his relations with Mendès and with Judith Gautier. Finally, the Rapport sur le mouvement poétique en France is considered for its interest as a clue to Mendès' critical opinions on the value of his own poetry.
The poems

In his *Parnasse et symbolisme* Pierre Martino gives a formula for the development of a literary school: youth; the salon or "café" which offers an occasion for meeting; an animateur or organizer who secures a public in the newspapers and reviews; a printer to publish the work of the members when the salons and reviews have given form to the ideas of the school. The most significant of the Parnassians were associated with Mendès as early as 1860. They met first in the offices of the *Revue fantaisiste*, later in the salons of the widow Ricard and Mme. de Callias. Mendès himself was the animateur of the school, its publisher for a time, and, in a practical way, its philosopher.

His first volume of verse, *Philoméla*, was published by Hetzel in 1863. It was a "slender volume" of some forty poems, and although the doctrines of the Parnassians were not yet manifested, the forms and ideas were all contained in this first book. The prologue is an echo of Leconte de Lisle:

Deux monts plus vastes que l'Hecla  
Surplombent la pâle contrée  
Où mon désespoir s'exila.

C'est ton chant qu'emporte Borée  
Ton chant ou mon cri se mêla,  
Eternelle, désespérée,  
Philoméla, Philoméla!

1. Pages 65, 66.
The body of the poems is in harmony with the tone given in the prologue, but there are some violent pastiches of Hugo and Gautier, and a Walpurgisnacht evidently inspired by Baudelaire. Included in the book are twenty-three sonnets, and it is these that effect the mood of placidity at which Mendes aimed. They seek to describe beauty in a state of rest; situations and events with a minimum of action. Where action occurs, the poet seeks to give it an illusion of simultaneity, as in Calonice:

Dans l'air à ce moment, on vit deux hirondelles
Caresser les cheveux éparés des fiancées,
Et la brise chantait: Hyménée! autour d'elles.

Mais la lune baisa les vagues balancées,
Et tu parus, le front couronné d'asphodèles,
O nuit, ô blanche nuit, ô nuit mystérieuse... 1

As a group the sonnets possess a classical perfection, but, considered individually, they exhibit imperfections, for the most part faults of taste, which justify the neglect that they have received. In Sur les collines, for example, we find:

Tes yeux brilleront comme des vers luisants.

And in Canidie he outrages the classical form with:

...... nous égarer parmi
Les poètes éparés dans les harems de blondes.

1. The rime in the last line of the sestet is evidently a gesture of revolt. It is a striking exception; ordinarily the heterodoxy of Mendes manifests itself in his imagery. The variation is the more remarkable for the fact that in other respects this is the chastest of the sonnets (with regard to both form and imagery).
The most finished of the poems in this volume, and the one in which inspiration is most sustained, is an ode, *Ariane*. Here the poet shows a respect for form and a vitality of imagery worthy of the best of the Latin elegiacs.

Azur, neige, cinabre!
Splendeur et pur dessin
Du sein
Dont la pointe se cabre!

Cabrè is forced, indeed, but the fault of image is lost in the form. This has been, with justice, the most enduring of the poems in *Philoméla*. It is perennial in the anthologies, and although some of the sonnets approach its perfection, it is unlikely that they will survive. One of the sonnets, *Fréderique*, seems to be a souvenir of Mendès' second sojourn in Germany. Some time after the Roman d'une nuit fiasco his father agreed to reinherit him on condition that he spend a period of study in Germany. Critics have found it difficult to reconcile this *wanderjahr* with the fact of Mendès' activity at that time in the Revue du progrès and in the editing of his own poems.¹

The sonnet in question is curiously sentimental in a group of poems in which Mendès apparently strives against the romanticism of his nature:

Un soir, en visitant la vieille cathédrale
Gothique dont j'aimais les clochetons sans pairs,
Au bas de l'escalier qui se tord en spirale,
Je te vis, ô ma pâle Allemande aux yeux pers.

Philoméla had a pronounced success amongst the critics, but it was, in a way, a success de réclame. Young though he was, they appreciated the verve and colour which he and his group were bringing to French letters, and Banville was undoubtedly sincere when he spoke of him as "l'artiste savant et poète de race...qui apporte des idées nouvelles."¹, but his éloges came, almost entirely, from fellow journalists, and their gesture was part of their "professional ethics".

Contes épiques

Mendès' second volume of verse was published in 1872. The Contes épiques is a group of historiettes en vers; the epic character is definitely absent. One of them, Le Lion, has unfortunately survived; the story seems to have conquered the usual antipathy of the anthologist towards Mendès. The Christian slave, thrown to the lion in the arena, awaits his attack:

.....le lion, instinctif assassin,
Entrebaillait déjà sa gueule carnassière.
"Lion," dit la chrétienne. Alors, dans la poussière
On le vit se coucher, doux et silencieux;
Et, comme elle était nue, il ferma les deux yeux.

Some of the poems, based on the story of the gospels or the hidden life of Christ are attractive, but when there is not a taint of mawkishness, there is a hint of blasphemy.

The finest of the poems in this volume seem to be Pen-

¹ L'Artiste, Feb. 1, 1864.
thésilée and l'Enfant Krichna, both of which are able imitations of Leconte de Lisle. The first poem describes the destruction of the queen of the Amazons at the hands of Achilles. It begins in a conventional classical manner:

La reine au coeur viril a quitté les cieux froids
De la Scythie.

but she dies-

En jetant au vainqueur beau comme une guerrière
Un regard moins chargé de haine que d'amour.

The Young Krishna offered less opportunity for his sentimental tendencies. The episode concerns the vision of Krishna consuming the Three Worlds. The action involved Mendès overemphasizes, but the pastoral introduction to the poem is a brilliant imitation of Leconte de Lisle.

Midi fait resplendir et fumer les rivages.
Avec les jeunes paons et les chèvres sauvages,
Se joue au bord de l'eau, Krichna, l'enfant divin.

The specific source is probably one of the Poèmes antiques, possibly the third section of the Bhagavat in which:

Le jeune Bhagavat dans la fleur de l'enfance,
... sous les açokas cherchant de frais abris,
Joüra dans la rosée avec les colibris.

Mendès, of course, needed no specific inspiration; the exotic atmosphere, the rhythm and the idea were all he needed to excel his model. Gautier, in his Histoire du romantisme, remarks Mendès' activity in the Vedic renaissance. "Il s'est calmé, et a mis, comme on dit, de l'eau dans son vin!"
mais cette eau est de l'eau du Gange. Quelques gouttes du fleuve sacré ont suffi pour éteindre dans la coupe du poète le pétillement gazeux du vin de Champagne. Pandit élevé à l'école de Leconte de Lisle, il explique maintenant les mystères du lotus, fait dialoguer Yami et Yama, célèbre l'enfant Krishna et chante Kamadeva en vers d'une rare perfection de forme, malgré la difficulté d'enchasser dans le rythme ces vastes noms indiens. 1 Even Gautier, however, who was a strong influence in the development of Mendès' natural interest in the exotic, found his Indian poems heavy and involved. "Cette étrange mythologie indienne avec ses dieux aux bras multiples, ses avatars, ses légendes cosmogoniques et ses mystères inextricables touffus comme des jungles nous semble malgré tout le talent qu'on y dépense, d'une acclimatation difficile dans notre poésie un peu étroite pour ces immenses déploiements de formes et de couleurs." 1

Hesperus

Hesperus was published by Jouaust in 1872. It was Mendès' third published volume, and the romanticism implicit in the Contes épiques appears here in its full force. The book bears the subtitle "poème swedenborgien", and, in the original edition, was preceded by a short preface explaining the fascination of the subject for the author. The tale opens with a lengthy romantic description of Frankfort-am Main. The narrator discovers in the person of an old dwarf who begs in the market place a

1 op. cit. pp313 ff.
Swedenborgian "messenger" who admits him to the Supreme Vision. The Vision consists of the spectacle of the "messengers" curious existence as a citizen of Frankfort and at the same time as the husband of "a daughter of the Tsars".

Une vierge aux grands yeux ouverts sur le mystère
Habite avec ces fleurs dans le Nord solitaire.

It would be difficult to discover whether Mendès' theology at Heidelberg included study of Swedenborg, but certainly his mystic effusions are much more convincing than those of Balzac in his Seraphita. He speaks with the greatest confidence and facility of the Septres, the Puissants, the Crosse, and includes a great deal of what is apparently Swedenborgian exegesis.¹

The idea of such a poem is Parnassian, in as much as Parnasse represented a positivism which manifested its antagonism to Christianity by its feverish interest in the study of comparative religion, but the poet's attitude here is not that of the mythologist or ethnologist but of the adept or illuminé. This fact and the Rhenish atmosphere in the poem seem to label it quite definitely. It is to be remarked, however, that Mendès' sentimentality is excluded by the nature of his theme, and that for once he is not the hero, but the spectator.

Le Soleil de Minuit

The Soleil de Minuit, finished in April, 1875, appeared in

L.S. Guaita, in his Rosa Mystica, Paris, 1885, discusses seriously the occultism of Mendès.
the third series of the *Parnasse contemporain*, a year later. It is marked by the same mood of mystery and isolation that is found in *Hesperus*. The action is a tragedy in which an adulterous woman incites her lover to the murder of her husband.

The *Soleil de Minuit* is an extreme example of the Parnassian principle of escape. The scene is a frozen island in the polar sea:

...oasis de roc dans le desert de glace.

Against this primitive background, alone except for the wolves and the sea birds, Snorro and Snorra, and Agnar, the lone hunter, play out the simple drama. There is no great effect of dramatic conflict in the conventional sense, but the poet creates a violent impression of his characters' struggle against the mood imposed upon them by their tragic environment. The symbolism of scene and character is emphasized by the color imagery; the whole drama is painted in white and red: *solitude blanche; le sol blanc; le gris horizon; blancheurs funèbres, fuites blanches*; these are the typical color words of the introductory scenes. There is more explicit symbolism in speeches of the woman, Snorra:

*Ce soir, du pis gonflé des rennes, par trois fois, Le sang, au lieu du lait, a jailli sous mes doigts.*

The murder of Snorro is avenged by a red deluge. The polar sun bursts and bleeds a flood of red upon the arctic wastes.

*Sans bornes se répand l'effusion vermeille.*
Sous la brume aux vapeurs des massacres pareille,
Les glaciers sont de grands miroirs érubescents.

In quality the verse shows no remarkable advance beyond that of
Hesperus, but the discipline of form produces a unity of impression which is commonly lacking in Mendès' long poems.

**Pantélélia, Sérénades, Pagode**

The first collected edition of Mendès' poems was issued by Sandoz and Fischbacher in 1876. This edition contained, beside the material already discussed, Pantélélia, Sérénades, and Pagode.

Pantélélia is a lyrical apostrophe in the manner of Philoméla, and like that poem is composed in terza rima. The ninety-four stanzas are divided into five sections each of which ends with a key verse which closes the rime.

In the introduction there is an extended image in which the poet compares his aspiration toward the Ideal with the frenzy of a "troupeau de cavales en rut." For an instant his élan carries him to ecstatic heights:

Le Lyrisme mugit comme un vent boréal.
Dans l'alcôve d'azur que l'étoile bigarre,
L'âme un instant s'accouple au farouche Idéal...

His soul drops back again, "Nostalgique du Beau."

In the second group of stanzas he seeks again for a personification of the Ideal. He meditates upon the goddesses of antiquity: Aphrodite, Astarte, Freya, and finds their beauty pale
before the image of Pantéléia, who, "surpassant Vénus, perle éclose de l'onde, naquit de l'écume du ciel."

The third section lists the attributes of the poet's deity; the fourth consists of the psalms of her devotees, the eagle, the lion, the swallow, the serpent.

In the fifth and concluding section the goddess, disdain­ing human adoration and a place with Sirius in the heavens, decides that the only worship worthy of her is her own contemplation of her beauty.

Mes yeux seuls, jusqu'au bout du temps illimité,
Sans que jamais leur feu ne s'apaise ou ne dort,
Possédent mon corps par mon corps convoité;

Et je m'abîmerai dans le délire énorme,
D'être tout le désir et toute la beauté
Fondus dans la splendeur unique de ma forme.

The Pagode consists of three poems, Le Mystère du Lotus, Dialogue d'Yama et d'Yami, and Hymne à Kamadeva. The last two are imitations of Leconte de Lisle, but the short line which Mendès affects makes him more readable than his master. Compare the first stanza of the Hymne à Kamadeva:

Vent, flèche, oiseau, tu passes
À travers les espaces
Ou le jour s'alluma,
Brillant Kama.

with this couplet from the Hymne Védique of Leconte de Lisle:

Mieux que l'oiseau qui tourne au fond des cieux,
Tu montes, ô guerrier, par bonds victorieux. 1

Le Mystère du Lotus is composed in chain rime. It is a

1. Poèmes antiques, 1852.
summary, or an attempt at a summary of Vedanta metaphysics. Vedanta philosophy, even in its beginnings, offered great problems to its adepts. The most difficult of these points was whether the Undeveloped (avyaktam) evolved from Pouroucha, or coexisted with him from eternity. On no apparent authority, other than his fantasy, Mendès represents Pouroucha as creating the Undeveloped through self-contemplation:

Tu médites, auguste, à travers la querelle
Des noirs remous, portant les œuvres dans ton flanc,
Tu sens frémir au loin ta forme corporelle.
Et de ton pur nombril, mystérieux étang,
Le grand Lotus, berceau des trois Mondes, s'élève,
Doux comme le soleil des jours d'automne, et blanc.

Regardless of Mendès' Brahminic speculations, the poems, in their form, represent the height of Parnassian achievement in this particular exotic genre.

The Sérénades are the most interesting of the poems in this collected edition of 1876. The group comprises seventeen poems, including a Prélude and a Finale. The forms are, for the most part, short and uncomplicated, and each poem is preceded by a motif from the works of such varied writers as Heine, Lope de Vega, and Swinburne. The quotations are not always apt, and appear to be an early example of that romantic trickery which is to be noted later in Les Braises du cendrier.

The mood of these verses is pastoral, sentimental and romantic. The tenth poem of the group, which I cite here, is characteristic:

Ço dit Isolt: "Jo l'ai pur veir, Sachez que le sigle est tut veir."

Thomas

Le ciel est très bas; rien ne bouge
Sur la noire mer; l'horizon
Se rapproche, obscure cloison
Que defonce une lune rouge.

Où sont les joyeux promontoires
Dorés par le soleil levant?
Mon vaisseau qui n'a plus le vent
Laisse pendre ses voiles noires.

Les Braises du cendrier

The dispersion of the Parnassians, together with years devoted to journalism at the expense of more serious writing, had obscured Mendès' literary concepts and confused his loyalties, but he continued to enjoy the esteem of a large number of the younger writers, who recalled his association with the brilliant legends of Gautier and Banville, and did not question his creed. The growth of Symbolisme, however, threatened to disturb his tranquillity. The young poets issued Symbolist manifestos, Symbolist dictionaries, and clamored for the emancipation of the verb. He was painfully disappointed by their "youthful but culpable temerity". He granted them all the poetic liberties they might require, but he insisted that the apparently novel effects of recent poetry might as well have been obtained by the use of
traditional techniques. He admired the "splendeur blanche comme des palais d'argent qu'évase, vers des horizons où chantent des flûtes lointaines, la rêverie de M. Henri de Régnier." Vielé-Griffin charmed him with "des trouvailles d'images où l'ingénuité est subtile." He was struck by the art of Kahn, his "extraordinaire sensibilité devant la nature, devant l'amour, devant la mer." These were all accepted in the spirit in which they were written, as conventional critical evasions. Mendès hesitated to offer more substantial sympathy; he wanted his "cercle de jeunes gens," but he was approaching his sixtieth year, and the prospect of serving as champion to a revolutionary doctrine, which he probably only imperfectly understood, was hardly attractive. At a banquet offered in honor of the young Symbolist leader Gustave Kahn, he pleaded for tolerance of a prosody which had survived the enthusiasms and reforms of seven centuries:

Une forme qui a suffi à ce que s'y exprimassent librement et totalement les plus divers génies de nos âges successifs, une forme qui de la chanson de Téroulde aux poèmes posthumes de Leconte de Lisle, toujours pareille, malgré la diversité de ses apparences, permet la parfaite manifestation de Jean de Meung, de Ruteboeuf, de Villon, de Marot, de Ronsard, de Régnier de Corneille, de Saint-Amand,... et de tant d'autres, jusqu'à

notre cher et grand Verlaine ....peut-elle être considérée uniquement comme un legs d'école à école et n'étais-je pas autorisé à penser qu'elle était plutôt l'instinctive nécessité de notre race, et l'immémoriale, l'immortelle volonté de notre langue?" The litany was forceful and eloquent enough, but the Symbolists were not impressed. Mockel, the critic, followed Mendès in the order of speakers, and the violent applause which greeted his plea for a definite break with tradition, clearly reproved Mendès' attempts at compromise.

The effect of this episode upon Mendès' work was most evident in Les Braises du cendrier. He had always been an agile and sympathetic imitator of his contemporaries, and here, while he still refused to employ the looser rhythms of the Symbolists, he accepted the forced image, ellipsis and parenthesis as masks for his thought.

Years later the most eloquent evangelist of Mallarmé expressed without detours his masters doctrines on the arcane in poetry: "La pensée doit être cachée dans les vers comme la vertu nutritive dans un fruit—L'enchantement voile cette nourriture insensible qu'il conduit." The concealment of Mendès was, as a matter of fact, not so much in his verses, but in the "commentaires" which preceded them. It was a variety of

1. Maurras, op. cit.
allocrypsis; the four commentaries have an obvious relation to each other, but, with the exception of an identity of mood, seem to have little to do with the poems themselves. This discrepancy seems to justify Maurras' charge that the commentaries were a literary trick used to give some kind of unity to a packet of unrelated poems. "Avant des poèmes écrits à tout propos, en avant fait quatre paquets plus ou moins homogènes. M. Mendès a cherché un passe-partout, je veux dire une métaphore capable de relier n'importe quoi à n'importe qui: de là, les braises, le cendrier et tout ce qui s'ensuit."¹

The complete image of the Braises is rather lengthy, but it is readily summarized: "Comme il fait clair, on ne les voit pas dans le cendrier. Le soir si on éteint la lampe, elles reluisent encore. Je ne les regarde pas longtemps, de peur de les éteindre avec des larmes. Mais il semble que les larmes les avivent. Elles se sont alenties. C'était fini. Non. On a ouvert la fenêtre, et le vent de la vie a soufflé sur elles. Elles s'émeuvent, elles s'enflamment presque. Mais le vent s'en retourne en emportant avec les étincelles les braises et les cendres aussi." The main body of the poems consists of evocations of Glatigny, Coppée, Mallarmé, Villiers, Silvestre, Dierx, Banville, Verlaine, and so seems to justify at least a portion of the imagery of the commentaires.

Maurras, op. cit.
The prosody is generally conventional. There are some suspensions which seem to brutalize the form:

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Elle fut haute et méritoire,
La tâche des Parnassiens!
Nous sommes tranquilles. La gloire
Reconnaîtra les siens.
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The images are bolder than in his earlier works. In his poem on Banville he interrupts a series of placid éloges to create a mood of baroque fury:

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Dans les Edens où tu renaîs,
Tes rimes, baisers et querelles,
Se posent anges-tourterelles,
Au laurier-rose des sonnets.

Croisant sous les flamboyantes zones
Les éclairs, les éclairs encor
La nuée aux armures d'or
Rue un duel pompeux d'azamzones.

Et, fougueuses, tes passions
Vers tous les augustes mystères
Bouillonnent en lave aux cratères
Des rouges constellations.
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There are several poems included which are certainly misplaced in this collection. One, a sonnet on the Rheingold, is evidently a relic of Mendès' enthusiasms of twenty years ago. The poem is dated not only by its subject, but by the graceless exoticism which characterized his early poems.

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Les fluides enfants du fleuve qui ruisselle,
Chair à peine déjà femmes, ondes encor,
Welgunde avec Woglinde et Flosshilde vers l'Or
Levent leurs yeux d'eau verte où le rire étincelle.
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Of the Braises du cendrier the poems most worthy and most likely to survive are the elegies on Leconte d'e Lisle and Léon Dierx. The former is a lengthy essay in alexandrines,
a line which was unusual for Mendès, but which he handles here with fluency, and to a grave effect without becoming ponderous.

The poem on Dierx is an annotated litany of the Parnassians. It is graceful and sincere, and yet avoids the aimless pathos, which Mendès so often affects in his souvenirs. There is no blatant pastichage, but there are some Banvillians rimes which mar the unity of effect:

Villiers, volcan d'ombres, émeute
De rouges laves dans l'éther,
Soumet à la raison de Goethe
Les rêves de Richter.

Se rue et rue à hue à dia,
Ce Persée, Hérédia.

The work of Mendès, enormous, colossal as it is, gives the impression, not of a monument, but of an amorphous pile. The only part of it which seems to have form and meaning is the poetry, and the poems almost always lack the originality which would guarantee their life. In his imitations of Hugo, Musset, Leconte de Lisle, Banville, he has often surpassed his models, but it is this same terrible facility which prevented his development as a poet. As something else than a Parnassian, he might have acquired the originality and continuity of purpose which insure him a permanent place in French letters. As a forthright disciple of Hugo or Gautier, for example, unhampere by the pseudo-classicism of the Parnassians
he might have become as important as either of these.

His genre was the smaller form, and with a typical perversity he continued to attempt the larger. His longer poems have already been forgotten, but some two score of his essays in the rondeau, the madrigal and the ballade should endure. In them he has achieved, not great poetry, but a small perfection, a delicacy or "prettiness", which, considering its beginnings, was the only logical end of Mendès' verse.
Theater

La Femme de Tabarin

The Femme de Tabarin, Mendès' most successful comedy, was presented for the first time at the Théâtre Libre of Antoine in November 1887. The play had been published in 1874, and it was probably written at an even earlier date. It was subtitled tragi-parade, and Mendès was reluctant to permit its performance, fearing that the brutal levity of the piece might offend the critics and Antoine's desperately small "audience" of thirty-seven subscribers. The program also included Belle-Petite of Corneau and Hennique's Esther Brandes, but the startling success of the evening was La Femme de Tabarin.

The curtain rises to discover Francisquine, the wife of Tabarin, sitting ironing in the players' dressing room. A musketeer accosts her, and they arrange a rendezvous galant. Tabarin, drunk, enters and addresses a long rhapsody to his wife. Meanwhile the crowd has gathered before the booth to see the clown's parade. Tabarin enters upon the tréteaux, and informs the audience of his jealousy. He calls for his wife to come forth. When she does not answer, he tears open the curtain, and finds her in the arms of the musketeer. Stabbing his wife, he returns to the stage, and passionately harangues the spectators. Francisquine, with a dying effort, drags herself along the platform. In desperation Tabarin offers her his knife and begs her to kill him. She grasps the weapon, but is unable to strike, and
gasping out "Canaille!" she falls dead.

In 1892, on hearing that the Pagliacci of Leoncavallo was to be produced in French at Brussels, Mendès began a suit for plagiarism against him. Signor Leoncavallo, before preparing a legal defense, sent an open letter to his publisher in which he represented that the theme had been used many times before, and was, in fact, founded on a historical incident. The plea of Mendès had been the same when critics had noted the similarity of his play to the Tabarin of Ferrier, published in 1874. On the advice of his friends, Mendès withdrew his suit and made a public apology to Leoncavallo.

Mendès' play is decidedly lacking in literary quality, but the fascinating theme of murder within a play, and the incidental music of Chabrier made for the success of the piece. It was immediately adopted by the Comédie Française, and is regularly included in that theater's repertoire.

**La Reina Fiammette**

La Reina Fiammette was not published until 1898, but was played as early as 1889, in the third season of the Théâtre Libre. It is a play in six acts in verse, with music by Paul Vidal. The scene is the kingdom of Bologna in the sixteenth century. The queen chooses a young adventurer as her consort. The latter is persuaded by Cardinal Sforza to murder the queen, with the promise of an office under the new regime which the cardinal projects. The consort commissions, for the actual deed,
a young monk, Danielo, telling him that the queen has contrived the murder of his brother. The queen and Danielo, while visiting a small convent, meet and fall in love. The monk discovers the identity of the queen and her innocence. He renounces his vengeance, but Sforza, having learned of Danielo's relations with the queen, has them both killed.

The setting and the action are pure Dumas; the verses are Hugolian; the ensemble is definitely Mendès. His dramatic talent was not rare; several of his contemporaries might have attempted a similar synthesis—Bergerat, in fact, often did, but he lacked the daring of Mendès. Some of the scenes in La Reine Fiammette approach the lascivious, a fact which was gleefully remarked by the critics of Antoine. They pointed out that irrespective of author, setting or school, the plays of the Théâtre Libre were inevitably a menace to public morals. The play was arranged for operatic performance by Xavier Leroux who used the original text as his libretto. Leroux's music masks the obscenities, and the opera has become quite popular both in France and the United States. It was first presented here in 1919, at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York.

Glatigny.

In 1905 Mendès presented his Scarron, a tragedy or tragi-comedy, which, in spite of the interest of the subject and Mendès' virtuosity in blending the elements of comedy, tragedy, elegy and burlesque, had but poor success. The year following, in May 1906,
he offered at the Odéon a somewhat similar work, his Glatigny. Albert Glatigny had been the bohemian mascot of the young Parnassians. Like Mendès he was precocious, and had published his first volume of poems at the age of eighteen. After some years spent with a troop of traveling players in the capacity of prompter, he settled in Paris, and earned his living by improvising at the café concerts and at the Alcazar. Hardship and excess accounted for his early death. Mendès' Glatigny, drame funambulesque was intended as a belated elegy and as a monument to the legend of the young Parnasse. Glatigny's colorful background, his recklessness and verve, had made him the idol of the other members. Mendès had already celebrated his memory in verses included in the third issue of the Parnasse contemporain:

O vagabond, frère des dieux,
Qui pour l'amour de la chimère
Grimp'a vingt ans la côte amère,
Les pieds sanglants, l'œil radieux.

The drama was based not on his part in the Parnassian movement, but on his adventures in the theater. He is seen as the son of a provincial postman. By a display of gallantry and rodomontade he wins the affections of a village matron whom he at once deserts to pursue a young comédienne, Lizane, who passes through the village. Lizane and Glatigny arrive at Paris where he secures work as the secretary of M. Girardin, a journalist. His poetic talent is discovered when he turns into fluent
verse an article dictated by his employer. His ability to improvise gives him access to the literary brasseries where Lizane accompanies him. She finds the literary atmosphere and the aesthetic jargon intolerable, and elopes with a fellow player. Glatigny, after a scene of tragic despair, returns to his native village where he dies of tuberculosis.

Glatigny, like Scarron, was unsuccessful. Mendès had expected the enthusiasm awakened by the success of Cyrano to be more enduring, but undiscouraged, he continued to devote himself to the romantic drama in verse.

La Vierge d’Avila

It was eight months after the fiasco of Glatigny, that Mendès produced his most ambitious essay in the romantic theater. The first draught of La Vierge d’Avila was extremely long, containing 4,500 verses. It was afterwards condensed. The action is as follows: The priest, Ervann, is seen in his hermitage where he is tempted by the blandishments of the witch, Ximeira. Teresa, on the way to her convent, appears and reclaims the priest. As she rises from her prayers, she finds that the features of Ervann resemble those of the Christhead, and that they blend with the vision that fills her soul. Ervann, upon his return from a pilgrimage of penance, becomes the leader of a group of monks who preach the abolition of cloisters and celibacy. He calls himself "l’Arrivé", but is regarded by the peasants as the Antichrist. Teresa is not aware of his identity as Ervann. The
second scene shows the public square of Avila. The Grand Inquisitor, Farges, and Don Luis, the confessor of Phillip II, discuss the Inquisition. Teresa takes the place of a condemned Jewess, and when the deception is discovered, she receives an order from the king, making her abbess of Toledo and requesting her presence at court. On her way to the palace Teresa is attacked by Ximeira and her minions, but her virtue triumphs over the witch's wiles. The fourth scene is the Escorial. Fra Quiroga and Father Andrea, heads of opposing factions, meet at dawn outside the royal chapel. King Phillip ascends from a visit to the tombs. He narrates a vision of Hell which has appeared to him during the preceding night. Don Luis, a Jesuit, seeks to interpret the dream as a reproach of the Inquisition. He asks for permission to have Farges imprisoned. Farges demands the arrest of Don Luis. Phillip suggests that they arrest each other. Teresa and her nuns enter. Phillip asks for her assistance in a war against the English. She refuses and asks for the pardon of Ervann who has been seized as a heretic. The king grants her request. Ximeira appears to Teresa, and reveals to her that Ervann loves her, not with mystical, but with carnal passion. The saint is revolted. She burns the pardon. The last scene takes place twenty-five years later, around the death bed of Teresa. In the nave of the church of the Carmelites at Alba de Tormes, the nuns lie prone around the high couch, covered with a bridal veil. The veil is drawn back, and Teresa is seen on a bed of
lilies, her long hair hanging loose. Ximeira, now an aged beggar, crawls into the church to die in the same instant as Teresa, but only after having received the saint's forgiveness.

La Reine Fiammette had demanded some ability in the creation of character, a gift which Mendes, in common with almost all other romantics definitely lacked. His characters were ready-made, taken from history or legend, and the Gallery of Tabarin, Medea, Scarron, Glatigny and Napoleon (L'Impératrice) was given life only through the imaginative efforts of the audience. In Teresa of Avila, Mendès found an especially suitable subject for his talent since any apparent contradictions could be explained as the eccentricities of a mystic.

The brilliance of the settings gained a passing success for the play. At the premiere the curtain rose eight times on the fourth scene (the Escorial), but the audience was confused by the daedalus of romanesque inventions and mystic subtleties, and the piece was dropped after a half dozen performances. Mendès returned to his librettos.

Ariane

In 1906, beside his other activity in the theater, Mendès composed a book of five acts for an opera, Ariane. The work was written at the request of Massenet. Mendès depended largely upon the classical legend, but also included some material of his own invention. The plot is as follows: Ariadne arrives at the harbor of Crete to meet Theseus, leader of the band of youths
and virgins to be sacrificed to the Minotaur. Theseus learns from Ariadne the secret of the labyrinth, and slays the monster. He invites Ariadne to accompany him to Athens to become his queen. With her sister, Phaedra, she sails with Theseus. A violent storm forces the ship to land at Naxos. During their stay there, Theseus falls in love with Phaedra, and Ariadne, discovering their love, sends her sister away. Phaedra is killed when she profanes the statue of Adonis, and Ariadne, forgiving all, implores the goddess of Love to restore her sister. Under the guidance of the Three Graces, Ariadne descends to the lower world to present her plea to Persephone. Her request is granted, but, upon their return to Naxos, Theseus elopes with Phaedra, and abandons Ariadne. She follows the call of the sirens, and casts herself into the sea.

**Bacchus**

Elated by the success of Ariadne, Mendès and Massenet, collaborated on the opera, *Bacchus*, a sequel to that work. Bacchus is introduced by a prologue in which Persephone is seen in her court. She summons the Fate, Clotho, and asks for news of Ariadne. She is told that Bacchus is sailing with her to the Orient. Bacchus has assumed the shape of Theseus to win the maiden's love. Bacchus and Ariadne arrive in the land of Sakias, which is ruled by the Amazon, Amahelli. The latter, with her ally, Ramavacou, defeats the forces of Bacchus with the aid of apes which she summons from the jungles. Amahelli becomes enamored
of her captive, and in order to dispose of Ariadne tells her that she must die if she wishes Bacchus to live. Ariadne is executed on a gigantic funeral pile. Bacchus arrives at the scene too late to arrest the deed, and the final curtain falls as he calls upon Zeus to destroy Amahelli with a thunderbolt.

The opera, of all literary fields, offered the most liberty to the romantic writer, and Bacchus was the culmination of Mendès romanticism. The battle between apes and men is probably the most fantastic invention ever used in the opera.

Extravagance of form is constantly present. Symbolist alliteration and dadaist diction are decidedly apparent in such stanzas as the thirty-ninth:

Et folle, vole, vole,
Et vole, folle, folle,
Du l'ys frais aux jolis
Volubilis.

Festerling believes that the theme of redemption as used by Wagner is evident in Ariane and Bacchus, but he contends that the symbolism is never more than superficial in Mendès' work.¹ The motif of Mendès' librettos, a kind of pan-eroticism, is expressed in the eighth strophe of Bacchus:

Il n'est destin, ni volonté de l'homme,
Ni vouloir surhumain,
Puisque tout n'a qu'un but: l'universel hymne
Où l'instinct d'être se consomme.
Seul vaut le fort Désir qui dévança le jour.

¹ Catulle Mendès beziehungen zu R. Wagner, p.125.
Et dans tout ce qui naît, meure, ressuscite, dure,
Joint par les voluptés fatales de l'amour
Les deux sexes de la nature.1

1. "Diese Verherrlichung der frei sich auslebenden Naturtriebe
in Menschen erklärt warum Mendès den Erlößungsgedanken nur
ausserlich übernehmen konnte, erklärt aber auch seinen
Mangel an ethischem Persönlichkeitsgehalt, der sich in seinem
Lebenswerk fühlbar macht und der ihn verurteilte, dem Tiefsten
in Wagner immer fremd gegenüberstehen zu müssen." Festerling,
op. cit., page 139.
Criticism

Richard Wagner

Mendès' Richard Wagner was published in 1886. His relations with the composer dated from 1861 when Wagner was rehearsing Tannhaeuser for its Parisian premiere. Mendès recalls meeting him in his hotel in the rue d'Aumale, but a letter from Wagner published in a small theatrical journal indicates that he knew him only by name.¹ It is a fact, however, that he secured an article for the Revue fantaisiste from Wagner, probably through Baudelaire who was a regular attendant at the master's "mercredis". He was not, as he sometimes represented himself, the first of Wagner's disciples in France; Champfleury, Ollivier, Villot and Gustave Doré, the painter, were all ardent wagnerites long before Mendès, but his devotion survived when their interest languished after the tragic failure of Tannhaeuser. With his wife, Judith, and Villiers de l'Isle Adam, he visited Wagner in his home at Triebchen, near Lucerne, and later, in 1867, attended the Bayreuth festival.

With the rest of France he was revolted by Wagner's vi-

¹ "On m'a montré quelques petites pièces qu'il a écrites, et elles sont dédiées à un M. Glatigny ou Glatignau qui m'a écrit aussi, mais je crois que M. Mendès n'est pas un bon poète et qu'il ne le sera jamais. Car, il manque de versification; il sera sans doute un meilleur critique. Du reste, vu que c'est un enfant précoce, il est bien possible qu'il meure trop tôt." Causerie, Journal des cafés, Mar. 1861.
cious lampoon on the evasion of Gambetta, and although his interest quickly revived, he was forced by the antipathy of the French public to remain silent until after Wagner's death.

His book on Wagner consists of Souvenirs personnels and analyses of the various operas, together with an essay on the wagnerian theory. The souvenirs are vague and fragmentary, resembling, in their apologetic weakness, Beyle's napoleonic memoirs. They shed no new light on the life or personality of the composer, and Mendès' concern with the topography of Lucerne and Bayreuth and with the appointments of Wagner's home seems to indicate that he was less interested in the man as an artist than as a romantic symbol.

The analyses are no more than impressionistic synopses of the action in the music dramas, though the chapter on the Goetterdaemmerung includes some dull discussion on the symbolism of the Niebelungen Ring.

Mendès' notes on the Théorie wagnerienne are no more daring than his analyses. His exposition depends upon an extended figure in which Harmony, "violée par la parole", gives birth to the musical drama. The whole system of Wagner, he says, and

1. Une Capitulation, vaudeville burlesca.
"V. Hugo, Gambetta, Nadar, Gambetta, Nadar, gesegnetes Paar,
In lustiger Equipage
Wir wünschen euch bon voyage,
Ehabenes gouvernement,
Fahr wohl und vol-au-vent."
the work which issued from it are expressed in this allegory. The end for the poet-musician is not poetry, and is not music. The sole end is the drama itself; action, passion, life. Mendès shows no interest in the music apart from the drama, but this was the attitude of the majority of lay critics in his time, and, for that matter, of Wagner himself.

**Rapport sur le mouvement poétique**

Mendès' *Rapport sur le mouvement poétique en France de 1867 à 1900* was a commission of the Ministry of Education. The book is made up of a long essay on the characteristics of French poetry, a sketchy, anecdotal history of the Romantic, Parnassian and Symbolist schools, and a bibliographical dictionary of poems published since 1800.

In his analysis of the poetic movement, Mendès considers the poets individually, and avoids discussion of poetical progress or decadence. His comments are often bromidic or insipid: Verlaine is "joli"; Victor Hugo is "cet homme universel". At times he attempts to dispose of his subject with an epigram: "Rimbaud, un exaspéré romantique attardé", but for the most part, he is satisfied with repeating conventional judgements, echoing the Normaliens, or, in the case of such intimates as Glatigny and Mallarmé, dispensing altogether with criticism, and recounting his beaux jours.

The bibliography contained in the second section is unique. Omissions in the listing of the works of Gautier and of Mendès himself suggest the faultiness of the work, but to date, it is
the only adequate bibliography of nineteenth century French poetry.

Appended to each bibliography are excerpts from critical articles on the specific works. To the chapter on his own work Mendès felt compelled to give more space than to any of his contemporaries, regardless of the quantity or importance of the their production. It must be admitted that some of the comments he has included are bitterly adverse. Lazare calls him a "pitre"; Fouquier probably intended to be complimentary in defining Mendès as "un grand classique de la décadence". The majority of the criticism, however, is more than favorable. Bourget speaks of his "verve charmante, son lumineux bon sens". Guy de Maupassant was enchanted by "cette plume qui est souple et changeante à l'infini". The most striking of these panegyrics is that offered by Léon Daudet: "Le style de M. Mendès est d'une prodigieuse adresse. Il a toutes les audaces et tous les détour; sa rapidité est frénétique. Honneur à ceux dont l'oeuvre nous accable...laisse notre mémoire bouillante et fatiguée. C'est une magie de cette ordre qui met hors de pair la plume de Mendès.

These comments are, generally speaking, inaccurate, and sometimes insincere, but it is interesting to note that Mendès has

1. L'auteur du rapport, ayant cru devoir, au cours de son travail s'abonner à de rares mentions de ses propres ouvrages, il a paru nécessaire de réproduire ici un assez grand nombre d'appréciations." p.189, footnote.
selected as his élogistes, critics who recognized the romantic character of his work, rather than such writers as Brisson and Clarétie who considered him a classic and above criticism.
The Tales and Novels

The illusion of bulk in the literary production of Mendès is produced by his two score volumes of contes and nouvelles. The majority of the tales are obscene, and unliterary by reason of their obscenity, but their importance as a clue to Mendès' personality warrants their mention. The "contes libertins" were originally a source of income for Mendès. Later they became a diversion, then an essential means of expression for the fantasy that was precluded by the form of more serious work.

The licentious tales were interspersed with devotional fables. These parables exhibit a hypocritical mawkishness which is still more revolting. Mendès probably wrote them to increase the legend of his versatility. In 1894, that same year that saw the publication of L'Art d'aimer and Verger fleuri, Mendès produced a typical pious invention, L'Evangile de l'Enfance de N.S.J.C., translated by him (according to the réclames) from a venerable manuscript in the Abbey of Saint Wolfgang, in the Salzkammergut. A work of the same type was sandwiched in between Lesbia and Toutes les amoureuses.

Perhaps, as Miomandre suggests, these contes érotiques will be forgiven and forgotten, but it must be regretted that such a quantity of the author's talent should be shelved with the "livres du second rayon". 1

1. Figures d'hier et d'aujourd'hui, p. 82.
Mendès' novels were particularly successful, not that he had great talent in that genre, but because the novelty of his subjects appealed to the public taste. He was not very discriminating in the use of the word "roman", and half of his novels are no more than elaborations of his contes libertins. It is doubtful, indeed, if any of his novels can be called serious, but on several occasions he produced volumes which, although lacking any striking literary quality, are still readable.

The first of his novels, Les Mères ennemies, published in 1880, is reminiscent of Turgueniev, whose influence upon French writers at that time was considerable, and whose acquaintance encouraged Mendès' already lively interest in Slavic literature. The scene of the action is Poland during the Second Partition, and the struggle between the nationalists and the Russianized nobility offers ample opportunity for Mendès' republican rhetoric. The plot is not more complicated than one might expect in a romantic novel, but the number of characters and the author's rather futile attempts to give each of them a significant place makes the book tedious for a reader today.

The other novels are mostly "special studies", or "études de mœurs", and do not warrant serious attention. A possible exception is La Maison de la Vieille, published in 1894, which is based on the activities of the salon of Nina de Villard. The material is entirely factual and is a good source of information on the manners of the Parnassians.
Mendès as a Literary Influence

The part that Mendès played in the development of the Parnassian movement is relatively well known. He organized and kept organized, over a period of ten years, a group of literary personalities as varied as can be imagined. The members of Parnasse had nothing in common but their youth and a spirit of rebellion against conventional forms in literature. The esthetic of Leconte de Lisle was the gospel of the school, but it was Mendès who first showed how practical the precepts were. His imitations of de Lisle and Banville were, perhaps, no more creative than his chairmanship at the salons of Mme. de Ricard and Nina de Callias and at the Brasserie des Martyrs, but it is doubtful that the movement could have found anyone more able than Mendès for these mechanical efforts. Actually he did have a direct influence on his younger contemporaries. He monopolized the three issues of the Parnasse contemporain, and the grandeur of his form and the charm of his pastiches inevitably attracted disciples. Verlaine was one of the first of these. Later, and unfortunately, more faithful students of that style mélange were Silvestre and Coppée.

1. A. France, La Vie littéraire, ser. 4, p. 298: "Nous n'aimions que la gloire... nous avions, je ne sais pas pourquoi, la prétention d'être impasibles... c'était le bon temps, le temps où nous n'avions pas le sens commun."
In the field of criticism Mendès was "irréductible". The word is Miomandre's, who had in mind the ebullience, the crass independance of Mendès; the expression is more apt if taken to mean that he could not be classed in the ranks of orthodox critics. His critical judgements were rarely based on measurement of his subject against any esthetic norm. His intuition or "feeling for art" substituted for critical faculty, and as far as the majority of his contemporaries were concerned, substituted very well. His taste was baroque, oriental or rococo, but haply it coincided with that of Gautier, the Goncourts, and with that of his own public. Were his judgements criticized beyond redress with the pen, he hastened to the field of honor.

His three volumes of theatrical criticism should endure as source book on the French theater in the nineties, and the Rapport, in lack of a better one, is essential to the student of nineteenth century poetry.

In the theater, Mendès must be considered at least as much of an influence as Bernier in the revival of the romantic drama in verse. The success of Cyrano was as much his as Rostand's, and he seemed to relish it more.

1. Mendès literary sword play began as early as 1866. In that year Arene and Daudet published le Parnassiculet, in which the literary and personal peculiarities of the Parnassians were vividly described. The satire particularly piqued Mendès, who challenged Arene to an encounter. The affair is reported by Daudet in Trente ans de Paris.
Mendès shares with Zola the honor of publicist of Antoine's Théâtre Libre. In the most trying days of the movement, his friendly criticism and the generous offer of his own plays gave Antoine the courage to persevere. After the great period of the Théâtre Libre, he consistently criticized the lack of lyrical quality in Antoine's productions. Mendès was not alone in taking this attitude, the majority of French critics having condemned the comédie rosse, the genre which public persistance had forced Antoine to adopt, but that passionate amateur of the theater considered Mendès' criticism as an indication of treasonable déflection, and was much puzzled by the occasionally favorable comment he received from him.

In his Nouvelles prétexites, Gide denies that Mendès had any literary influence at all: "L'influence de Mendès put s'exercer sur le journalisme dit littéraire, mais sur la poésie contemporaine elle reste nulle." As like the rest of Mendès' enemies from the classical camp, Gide does not distinguish between the influence of Mendès as a literary animator and the influence of his work. In the large literary scene, he is less a figure than a figurant, but as director of Parnasse and as evangelist of the Romantic theater, regardless of the value of these movements in themselves, his importance cannot be denied.

1. Mercure de France, 1921, p. 103.
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Helen Langer May, Ph.D.             March 26, 1940