

AN INTRODUCTION TO LEVON SHANT *By Dr. Anne T.*

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Levon Shant (1869 - 1951) was one of the most prolific writers of the Western Armenian Renaissance. He made his debut as a poet in 1891, when he was just twenty-one years of age and continued to write for sixty years, until shortly before he died. As a creative artist, he wrote several novels, short stories, poems and plays. As an educator, he wrote many essays and textbooks, some of which are still used today in the Armenian schools of the Middle East and other Armenian communities.

Shant's education provided him with a rich language and literary background. As a child, he studied the Western Armenian dialect of the Armenians in Istanbul, where he was born. As a young man, he studied the Eastern Armenian dialect of the Caucasus, where for seven years, he attended the Gevorgian Jemaran in Etchmiadzin, near Yerevan the capitol of Armenia. His exposure to both dialects during his youth, afforded Shant an unusual range and depth of literary expression. He absorbed both dialects and as a result, his literature is marked by a unique poetic blend which found its most beautiful expression in the dramatic literature of his creation.

During Shant's years at the Gevorgian Jemaran, he studied The Greek and Roman classics, as well as Shakespeare and other literary giants of the world. He lived in the religiously oriented world of the Jemaran for seven years. When he left the Jemaran at age twenty-one, Shant's curiosity led him to explore new vistas beyond the milieu of his Armenian heritage. He went to Germany, where he attended the Universities of Leipzig, Jena, and Munich from 1892 to 1898.

There were many cross-currents of literary trends during the late nineteenth century. The individualistic outlook of Nietzschean philosophy pervaded literary circles. The symbolists and the

expressionists had already made their impact on German dramatic styles. A strong anti-realist movement had taken hold, and Shant was exposed to the Neo-Romantic current of the day. All these influences are reflected in the dramatic style of *Ancient Gods*, which marked Levon Shant as the first dramatist to bring symbolism to the Armenian stage.

With the advent of World War I, in 1914, efforts to stage *Ancient Gods* in the state theatres of Germany and Russia did not materialize. In 1915, the Armenian Genocide by the Turks curbed all progress of Armenian life in the Ottoman Empire. Those Armenians who survived the horrible atrocities inflicted by the Turks forged their way into more hospitable lands, and Shant was among those who had survived because he did not live in Turkey at that time.

The instability caused by the warring nations of World War I, together with the painful knowledge of the events in Turkey, led Shant to probe his past and to re-examine it from the standpoint of his own existence. His literary excursions into the history of his forbears, inspired Shant to focus on the lives of the Armenian nobility and the feudal lords of a by-gone era. He chose the Armenian-Graeco (Macedonian) period of Byzantine history (869-1015 A.D.), when Armenian emperors occupied the Byzantine throne, and the Cilician period when Armenians enjoyed their last independent state. He drew from the most climactic moments of that history, interlaced fact with fiction and created characters that often achieve the "larger than life" proportions of Shakespearean drama.

The Emperor, the first of his historically based dramas, was published in Tiflis, Georgia, in 1916, two years after it was written. It chronicles the events between 963-969 A.D., when two of Byzantium's greatest Armenian generals rose to occupy the throne of the Byzantine Empire: Nicephorus Phocas and John Tzimiskes. The historical accuracy of *The Emperor* provides an abundance of information regarding the political, social and historical climate of that era. The action is based on factual events, and the major characters have their historical counterparts. Shant

reinforces John Tzmiskis' Armenian identity by changing his name to Ohan Gourgen in the drama. Shant illustrates the disaster of disunity in his characters' quest for power, as well as their glory and burdens of kingship.

The dream world of Ancient Gods is almost non-existent in *The Emperor*. The dramatization of subconscious states occurs only twice, and both times they are very brief. Instead, Shant's characters are more complex, and they function as real people as well as allegorical abstractions. This is manifested in the character of Hannah, the one major character who does not exist in the historical framework of the drama. She is the human embodiment of Shant's symbolic motifs. When Ohan Gourgen communicates with Hannah, his feelings are expressed with vivid poetic imagery, giving the scene a dream-like aura. He expresses his deepest desire and aspirations, and it is Hannah who urges him to achieve the dream of his "new" Anatolia.

The collapse of the Independent Republic of Armenia in 1920 was undoubtedly the collapse of Shant's greatest dream. For two and a half years (1918-1920), as a member of its parliament, he had helped to create a new government. In his dramatic flights of fancy, Shant had voiced this dream, specifically through Ohan Gourgen in *The Emperor*. For that brief interval of Armenia's independence, Shant had lived the reality of the dream he had earlier ascribed to Ohan Gourgen's dramatic portrayal.

In 1921, while in Teheran, after he had fled from Soviet Armenia, Shant wrote *The Princess of the Fallen Castle*. Its powerful revenge motif pervades every aspect of the drama. Shant's ability to present a powerful clash of wills is nowhere better illustrated than in the conflict between Princess Anna and Prince Vasil. Although she possesses none of the black magic of the Greek Classic heroine, Medea, Anna's obsession to avenge the murder of her two sons, imbues her with a remarkable cunning and tenacity of purpose. The murder of her young sons, the

occupation of her fortress, and her own rape by Prince Vasil, transforms Anna into a seething volcano of revenge.

Although the *The Princess of the Fallen Castle* has a historical framework and alludes to actual events of that period (11-12th century), it differs from *The Emperor* in that it gives an account of an incident likely to have occurred. Prince Vasil did, in fact exist, and the allusion to Toros and Ruben has its historical basis, but not so with Anna. In Anna, Shant's symbolism is more skillfully operative than ever. Unlike Hannah who remains distant from the main line of action in *The Emperor*, Anna is the very core of the plot, and her vengeful course of action is the entire fabric of the plot.

In view of Shant's own life and times, which cannot be dismissed in relation to a writer's work, Anna represents Shant's own bitterness and frustration at the plight of his people. Anna is revenge personified -- she embodies a communal revenge. She is analogous to Mother Armenia whose two sons, the Eastern and Western Armenian communities, were both devastated by the blood-thirsty enemy.

In the closing scene, Vasil walks off the stage to another murderous conquest and glory, leaving behind the dead bodies of his son and Princess Anna. This is a glaring commentary on real life, illustrating how criminals, individuals and nations alike go on, unremorseful and unpunished, repeating the same villainous cycle.

Shant's plays depict the strengths and weakness of the Armenian nation, and of its people of a bygone era. Yet, at the same time, he reveals basic truths applicable to all human beings. Within the historical framework of *The Princess of the Fallen Castle* is a revealing close-up of family life in a feudal society. Prince Vasil is seen in his most human moments when he is especially attentive to the needs of the peasants and of his old caretaker.

Armenia's political involvement with the Byzantine Empire influenced

both government and domestic life as evidenced in the relationship between Prince Vasil's marriage to the Byzantine Princess Sophia. Furthermore, the Byzantine nobility looked down upon the Armenians, even though they held some of the most vital military strongholds on the mountainous path to the sea. Shant satirizes this idea using Princess Sophia and Irina as his mouthpiece.

The woman's position in Armenian society was precarious, and her survival depended solely on the success of her husband. The more powerful land barons often raided and marauded their fellow Armenians with lesser power simply to further enlarge their territories. Princess Anna's tragedy was the result of such a maneuver by Prince Vasil when he murdered her husband and two children.

It was during the Cilician period that the Crusaders established their earliest strongholds in the Middle East, with the enthusiastic support of the Armenian provinces. Their presence is evident in Shant's allusions to those "Latins" in *The Princess of the Fallen Castle*.

During the Soviet era, Shant's plays were barred from the Armenian stage. His individualistic philosophy was unacceptable, and audiences were deprived of his rich dramaturgy. However, an affirmation of Shant's rank and stature as a leading Armenian dramatist occurred in 1968 when an anthology of his work was published in Yerevan.

The Emperor and *The Princess of the Fallen Castle* serve as an artistic commentary on the chaos and conflicts of the emotional and physical endurance Shant faced. They symbolize Shant's indignation at the suppression and horrible atrocities his people suffered by the Turks and the subsequent inaction of the leading world powers. Once that turbulence subsided and its conflicts were somewhat resolved, his dramaturgy, too, subsided. Instead, his creative drive tread other paths, mainly the founding of the Beirut Jemaran and in its leadership for the

rest of his life.

In 1991, when Armenia freely abandoned its Soviet yoke and gained its independence, Shant's plays rapidly emerged on its stages. His *Ancient Gods* draws capacity audiences at the Sundukian Academic State Theatre of Armenia and has merited numerous awards with its touring productions and drama festivals. In celebration of its 80th anniversary, the company was invited to perform *Ancient Gods* in the United States. The stellar event was facilitated by Victor Mardirossian, founder and president of the Armenian American Musical and Theatrical Society in Los Angeles. It was staged at the Alex Theatre in Glendale, CA., and crowds flooded the theatre. They gave three performances of *Ancient Gods*, and standing ovations followed each show. Guests included Armenian and American theatrical and civic dignitaries whose positive responses offered laudatory commentary on the performances.

Armenian Drama continues to flourish despite its obstacles, and Levon Shant continues to be a challenge to the most talented theatrical ensemble. His plays contain all the elements that characterize fine dramatic literature: a rich gallery of characters, skilful plot manipulation, excellence of dialogue, and vivid poetic imagery. Levon Shant has created a treasure chest of dramatic gems for those who have the courage to explore it.

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