

# PREFACE

By James Branch Cabell\*

In reply to the questions you ask me, nothing could be more valueless than my personal opinion of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice and of its attitude toward *Jurgen*. Of a proceeding by which I have been robbed and vilified I cannot be expected to speak or think without bias. The part of wisdom, therefore, is silence. Yet—since a "literary" allusion is always more or less my foible—I would temper this taciturnity by referring you to the fragmentary MS. of *The Judging of Jurgen*, which if it really dates from the fourteenth century, seems curiously prophetic.

As to censorship of our reading-matter, I concede this may, in theory, be advisable. In practice, though, I can imagine no persons or class of persons qualified to perform this censorship. *Pace* the Vice Society, there is certainly a difference between pornography and fine literature, if but the difference that everybody enjoys the first where few care one way or the other about the second; and certainly the two should be appraised by diverse and appropriate standards. A work of art should therefore, in theory, be judged entirely as a work of art, by a jury of practitioners of the art concerned.

Yet, since every self-respecting author at bottom abominates his competitors, despises his inferiors, and is frantically irritated by the work of those who differ from him in aesthetic canons, such an arrangement would, in practice, only fling open more conspicuous fields wherein to flaunt the mutual spite and miscomprehension ~~that is~~ common to us creative writers. Besides, it is not difficult to forecast what sort of writers must, and would, be chosen for the judiciary, as representing the dignity of letters by the happiest combination of mediocrity and senility. No: in the end an attempt to establish a purely "literary" tribunal would result in setting over American art a death-watch of genial clergymen and decrepit college-professors; and I despondently question if their decisions would be a whit less imbecile than the present arbitrations of the society's hired spies.

With the outcome of the *Jurgen* case I have really—now—no especial concern. To the reception accorded my books during the last fifteen years this suppression of ~~my~~ Comedy of Justice seems, indeed, the logical and exhilarating climax. At all events, the book exists in a sufficient number of copies to be beyond destruction by anything save its own inherent inadequacies. If *Jurgen* contains the right constituents it will live, and if it lacks the stuff of longevity it will in due course die; either way, the outcome is, now, to be decided neither by me nor by vice commissioners, nor even by a grand jury.

As touches my personal part in the publication, it is in the end by *Jurgen* that I must be condemned or justified, rather than by what anyone—including me—may just now elect to say about *Jurgen*. And inasmuch as the receipt of royalty statements is not generally included among the threatened torments of the next world, it seems unlikely that this final verdict—which is in the entire transaction the one feature of any conceivable importance—will ever be known by me. So I cannot regard even this final verdict with much sense of personal concern.

Against the charge of violating the current morality of 1920 I think that any serious defence would be a waste of effort, if only because the question must so soon become of purely antiquarian interest. Our children may not improve, even from the standpoint of humor, upon our moral standards, but our children will certainly not retain them. When, as must inevitably happen before very long, our present ethical criteria have come to seem as quaint as those of the Druids or the Etruscans, or even as those of 1913 appear nowadays, offences against any one of these outmoded codes will hardly be esteemed worth talking about. Should *Jurgen* be remembered ten years hence, it will, through being remembered, be amply exonerated; whereas if *Jurgen* be forgotten, the book will then of course be violating nobody's moral sensibility. Time thus lies under bond to silence, whether with praise or with oblivion, all these aspersions; and willy-nilly I must defer to time.

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None the less do I still believe that *Jurgen* is, as originally labeled, "a book wherein each man will find what his nature enables him to see"; and when anyone confesses that he finds therein only "offensiveness, and lasciviousness, and lewdness, and indecency," I must make bold to take the announcement as a less candid summary of the book's nature than of the critic's.

What can be done, you ask me, to better the present literary situation? Not much, I fear: for we contend against well-meaning and courageous persons who fight for high aims. The most fantastic feature of this droll affair is the profound sincerity of its participants upon both sides. You and I may know—and welcome, as the saying runs—that we are in the right so far as goes the un-human abstraction called rationality. But the officers and backers of the society's imbecilities, also, quite honestly believe they are engaged in praiseworthy work when, to cite a recent example, they hale *Mademoiselle de Maupin* into the police courts. Indeed, they appear to be inebriated to these antics by very much the same real love of virtue which incites some of their congeners to burn an unruly negro as a torch to illumine their reprehension of lawlessness, and yet others to express their disfavor of intemperance by decreeing that wine is too atrocious a compound to be employed for any purpose except ~~appropriately~~ to symbolize the blood of Jesus Christ. In the face of so many laudable intentions thus obscurely communicated, we can but deduce that whenever stupidity and high morals pig together they beget an offspring that is doubly cursed with zealotry and toxic aphasia. Nor, of course, does it appear quite pious to contend against these natural phenomena.

At all events, you and I are in the negligible minority. I need hardly remind you that the officers of the society have embattled back of them all the complacent muddleheadedness of the average pew-renting American, who from the first has rather fretfully resented any talk about "art." Mr. Paul E. More, in one of the letters relative to the *Jurgen* imbroglio, has nicely summed up this popular point of view: "I am not at all in sympathy with a group of writers who would take any protest against the society as a justification of what they are pleased to call art. The harm done by the society seems to me very slight, whereas the harm done by the self-styled artist may be very great."

Now that is really the popular and, therefore, the expedient moral attitude. The morality of a democracy is, after all, a matter of elementary arithmetic: one counts the ballots (sometimes, it is said, quite honestly) in order to distinguish between right and wrong, because the voice of the people is notoriously the voice of God. It is precisely this discerning voice which has proclaimed, time and again, that the sturdy American peerage of nature's nobleman does not want to be bothered with any nonsense about literature and art for the reasons, first, that such fripperies play no part in honest polltax-payers' lives; and, second, that in very much the manner of this Mr. More, our reputable citizenry—obscurely and inarticulately, but none the less genuinely—resents the impudence of "self-styled artists" who presume to know more than their betters about "what they are pleased to call art."

It seems therefore eminently appropriate that in our National Hall of Statuary, along with such world-famous statesmen and shapers of human destiny as Jacob Collamer, S. J. Kirkwood, and George L. Shoup, the sole representative of our art and letters should today be General Lew Wallace, for *Ben Hur* is really the perfected expression of American ideals in literature. It is equally appropriate—I like to think—that, when judged by these ideals, *Jurgen* should be decreed "offensive, and lascivious, and lewd, and indecent."

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\*In reply to specific questions addressed to Mr. Cabell by the Secretary of the Emergency Committee.—Letter dated May 6, 1920.