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Books Have Their Destinies

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Books Have Their Destinies

Habent Sua Fata Libelli by Maurice Baring was a fascinating work of literature from an author who specialized in Drama, and this work was no exception. Found in the London Mercury, the title can be translated from Latin as, “Books have their Destinies” which hints at the important role books will play for our main characters. Maurice Baring, who’s work saw only limited success, is far from a household name, although his contributions are still perhaps worth mentioning. His life had a rich history, as he served in the Royal Air Force during WWI. After his time as a pilot, Baring began to focus more on writing, and made a career out of being a dramatist, although he also wrote a number of short stories, novels, and more. The story is told from the perspective of an officer in the army, who is recounting the story to a fellow soldier as they sit by a fire. It revolves around the Library of Alexandria, which in this work of fiction, was secretly transported to Africa instead of being burned in Greece. After much adventure and discovery, the main character and his companion, a Russian man named Ivankoff, attempt to take evidence of their discovery back to England. Unfortunately, no one believes their claims to have made such a miraculous discovery, and instead they laugh at them. Instead of letting someone else get credit for their discovery, Ivankoff and the main character drunkenly decide to burn the entire library to ashes. After reading through the story a few times, and doing extensive research on Mr. Baring and his life, I began to hypothesize a few claims or points that he was trying to make about society when writing this book. My main argument ended up being that Maurice

Baring, a staunch anti-intellectualist, wrote *Habent Sua Fata Libelli* to prove a point about how the elites stifle the potential creativity of the lower class and can slow down or hinder the growth of society as a whole.

Maurice Baring had a history with many of the elites in Britain during his lifetime. I believe that some of these same people in his personal life even made appearances in this story in the form of the scholars that Baring takes his findings from the Library of Alexandria to (only to get laughed at and rejected, of course). I argue that this led to his becoming a part of the anti-intellectualist group or movement. To give some background context on what the anti-intellectualism movement was, we can take a look at an article published by *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, which states, “Anti-intellectualism in America represented a retrograde position that marked one as insufficiently sympathetic to the working class; it pitted workers against brainpower; it offered a poorly conceived position with immediate and devastating consequences (Lecklider).” Lecklider goes on to expound how the anti-intellectualism movement is basically a distrust of the highly educated elites who they believed ruled the country or even the world. In a way it was similar to a conspiracy theory, they believed all of the people at the top are in on it together to stifle everyone underneath them so they can continue to live like kings. Despite the fact that Baring himself was quite well-educated, this movement gained traction with him for reasons that I will discuss my opinion on further in this paper. Whether or not my opinions on this subject are correct is certainly up for speculation, however you will see there is at least some solid evidence to support my claims.

Due to his lack of personal success, especially in writing novels, it is possible that Baring is comparing himself with the character he wrote in the story, who has something remarkable to share with the world but is ultimately squandered by others and gives up on his discovery. The

unnamed character (perhaps unnamed because it is supposed to represent Baring) is the one who is put in charge of taking the writings of Alexandria back to England to present to the masses. His partner, Ivankoff, agrees to stay behind in Africa for a number of months while the unnamed character is gone. I noticed in Voyant that Ivankoff's name was one of the most frequently mentioned words in this story, and he plays a very important supporting role to the main character. If the main character had a name, I assume it would also be one of the most commonly mentioned words in the story as well. Personally I think that the fact the main character doesn't have a name in addition to the fact that he's in charge of bringing the discovery back to England is simply too much to be coincidence. Maurice Baring is obviously putting himself into this story, the only difference being that instead of offering the world hidden treasures from the Library of Alexandria, Baring was offering the treasures of his soul he had recorded in the form of his writings. Unfortunately, similar to the writings from Alexandria, many of Baring's works were not regarded as noteworthy or of much acclaim.

Thanks to Voyant Tools, I was able to see trends in Baring's writing that helped support my claim about the story. The lack of success at the end of the story, and the frustration that the reader feels is possibly the exact same frustration that Baring felt when he felt his writings weren't being given a chance. One of the trends Voyant helped me see was the trend in a more rude vocabulary as the story went on. The story started off quite jubilant and full of adventure, with diction that would lead one to believe that this was perhaps a more heroic or epic short story. However, after the main character takes the findings of the Library of Alexandria back to England with him, the tone of the whole story changes entirely, and the word choice shows us this as well. The words used begin to change somewhat drastically as the vocabulary turns sour, and the words that spike or increase after this point are more gloomy and depressing. This lead

me to start thinking about the argument I wanted to make about the story, and it started to make sense why the author would start to change the dynamic of the story so much at this point when I realized that he might be trying to mirror events that actually happened in his own life. The chart from Voyant helped me to be able to map out which words were most popular during which parts of the story and I definitely noticed a big shift in the vocabulary during the climax and resolution of this short story. It was also helpful to see in Voyant a breakdown of the sentence length and structure. Baring was a wordy writer who had average sentence lengths quite a bit above the average margin. You can tell he definitely writes like someone who has been highly educated, and uses a lofty vocabulary that can be a bit dense on your first read through. I think that this can say a lot about an author, and it would not surprise me at all to learn that Maurice Baring had a lot of pride both in himself and in his work, which would make all the more sense why he felt so strongly that the lack of success his work saw was simply his own fault or lack of talent or creativity. Many critics in the literary world had a lot of good things to say about Maurice Baring, so not all of the news was bad. It seems like the opinions of critics on his work during the time were fairly mixed. An example of a more positive quote about Baring's novels can be seen here, quoted from P.M. Irvine, who said that Baring's novels are like "minor masterpieces in character study and social depiction. Limited as they are in subject and theme ... they can be appreciated for the accuracy with which they reproduce the world of the late Victorian elite, for the purity and simplicity of their style, and for the sensitivity and erudition which they display (Simkin)." Here we see some supporting evidence of Baring's obsession with the Victorian elites, which finds its way into this short story as well. It is the Victorian elites who eventually reject the unnamed character's findings about the Library of Alexandria. The same ones who Baring felt had stifled his career as a writer, and the reason he identified with other

anti-intellectualists despite the fact he was also educated. P.M Irvine also mentioned a lot of redeeming qualities about Baring's novels, despite the fact that a lot of people didn't seem to like them. He mentioned that Baring was a master at creating characters, which makes sense considering he was approaching storytelling from the perspective of a dramatist, someone who really knew how to make characters that could jump off of a page. Where Irvine says his stories might lack is when it comes to subject and theme. It seems that Baring was lacking in some elements of longer storytelling, it seems like this was something that he struggled with despite how many novels he wrote. Irvine calls his style "pure" and "simple" which might not sit well with Baring if he were to hear this criticism. Baring wrote in a way that Voyant can verify was a little over-the-top and wordy. However despite his vocabulary, it seems that one of Baring's weak points as a writer was connecting longer and more complicated plot structures to create a story that surprised its reader and was continuously entertaining.

To get an idea of what modern literary critics have to say about Baring's work, we can take a look at a quote from a short book about Baring's life titled: "Maurice Baring: Letters selected and edited by Jocelyn Hillgarth and Julian Jeffs Letters." This work gives us a great idea of the kind of criticism Baring faced and what the prevailing view on most of his works was by scholars both of his time period until now. They say,

Baring produced a groaning shelf's worth of books but not one standout. Where, say, an Edmund Gosse will be sheltered from oblivion by means of a single masterpiece—*Father and Son*, in his instance—Baring would seem to be doomed. And yet, for all that, I do think the man worthy of consideration. Not necessarily as a writer per se; though I confess to having sampled only a handful of his fifty-odd books, I'm prepared to assert

that you can consider yourself a well-read person without having cracked the spine of a Baring volume (Downing).

While it's possible that Baring actually just wasn't skilled enough to be considered an all-time great writer, he was clearly under the impression that his lack of success was a lack of connections among the political elites. Apparently, there is an old rumor that Maurice Baring gave a copy of one of his novels to Virginia Woolf, who decided that it was awful and discarded it. Trying to judge from a non-biased perspective, it would seem possible that Maurice Baring had more talent as a dramatist that did not entirely transfer over to his novels. Instead of drawing this connection, Baring did what many of us would probably do as well, and looked for other people to blame for his lack of large success. Baring was by no means a hack, or devoid of any natural talent, he is still regarded as a great writer. However, it seems that his aspirations were even higher than what he was actually able to reach, although he will still go down as a successful dramatist who makes a strong case for study in some aspects.

Thanks to Voyant tools, I felt better prepared to break this text down into digestible pieces of evidence I was able to use to make and substantiate my claim. I was able to make some pretty deep connections that I don't think I would have thought of on my own had I not taken the time to explore the tools and data provided by Voyant. While some of my claims and ideas did not come exclusively from Voyant, I was still able to tweak it and help use it to support my arguments. I saw the author in a new light as I dove deeper into the text and used the analysis tools to try to dig the deeper meaning out of what he was trying to say and the points he was trying to make. I feel quite confident in the claims I found and made, and truly think that Maurice Baring was trying to convey an important message about society and the hidden treasures and talents that are buried everyday just because they aren't given the proper chance to

shine. I hope that history smiles a little more brightly on Baring in the future, despite his struggles and shortcomings he had a lot of great redeeming qualities as a writer, and I saw many of those in this piece.

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