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## THE PLAYWRIGHT





THEATRE AND STAGE SERIES

# THE PLAYWRIGHT

A STUDY OF FORM, METHOD, AND  
TRADITION IN THE THEATRE

BY

ORMEROD GREENWOOD



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## PREFACE

IT is no longer any use to discuss play-writing as something which stands still, so that permanent laws can be enacted about it.

. . . al shal passe that men prose or ryme;  
Take every man his turn, as for his tyme.<sup>1</sup>

Yet wherever we look in books on the subject, we shall find pontifical pronouncements. Gustav Freytag, for instance, assigned to each act of a five-act play a special, pre-ordained function.<sup>2</sup> Dryden declared, in a discussion of verse plays, that

the advantages which rhyme has over blank verse are so many that it were lost time to name them.<sup>3</sup>

William Archer dismissed the soliloquy and the aside in these terms—

the example of Ibsen has gone far towards expelling these slovenlinesses from the work of all self-respecting playwrights.<sup>4</sup>

Such pronouncements are only for a moment. Certainly, the aside was out of place in the theatre of Ibsen. Dryden may have been correct in thinking that, for his kind of play, rhymed couplet was preferable (though he used blank verse in *All for Love*). But we can't say that blank verse was *never* preferable to couplet; or that the soliloquy was *never* in place. We might dare to say that good five-act plays could be found in which each act did *not* fulfil its special pre-ordained function; for books on the drama ought to legislate from the practice of playwrights, and not impose rules on them.

It is essential, therefore, not to separate the discussion of craftsmanship in the theatre from wider issues. Books on play-writing cannot teach anyone to write a good play. It is doubtful even if they can teach anyone to avoid mistakes—

✓ The Genius of Poetry must work out its own salvation in a man: It cannot be matured by law and precept, but by sensation and watchfulness in itself. That which is creative must create itself.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Envoy de Chaucer a Scogan*.

<sup>2</sup> *Technique of the Drama*, translated by MacEwan (1886).

<sup>3</sup> *Epistle Dedicatory of the Rival Ladies* (1694).

<sup>4</sup> *Playmaking*, p. 305 (1912).

<sup>5</sup> John Keats, *Letters* (to J.A. Hessey, 9 Oct. 1818), ed. Buxton Forman (1935), p. 222.

✓ Each play is the product of a complex of forces; it has its own problems and its own solutions. It has as its constituents the fact that it is a drama (which gives it certain permanent characteristics); that it is a sixteenth- or twentieth-century drama (which gives it certain characteristics of the period); that it is a drama by Marlowe or Pirandello (which gives it certain personal elements, and also English or Italian characteristics); that it is Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* or Pirandello's *Naked* (as distinct from Marlowe's *Faustus* or Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*).

✓ Treatises on play-writing commonly treat the first element as the vital one: a play is a play, therefore it must be this or that, a tragedy or a farce, in three acts or in five; and they confine themselves to isolating what it is that makes a play: under what conditions it can move and have its being. But that is not enough. It is true that *Oedipus Coloneus* and *The Linden Tree* have something in common which separates them from, say, Plato's *Republic* and Landor's *Imaginary Conversations*, which are also written in dialogue. But that is not enough.

✓ A playwright has a relationship with an audience, and the audience expects certain things, rejects certain others; it understands certain things, and is blind to others. This relationship is governed by a set of rules (called convention); these rules are imperceptibly changed by time or the taste of the audience itself, or by the initiative of playwrights like Shaw, actors like Garrick, producers like Granville-Barker, scene designers like Gordon Craig, critics like Charles Lamb. The change of convention produces a different sort of play.

Yet the old conventions are not dead, because masterpieces have been written in them. These are read, studied, and produced; and we have discovered that we cannot understand Aeschylus or Shakespeare without knowing the theatre for which they wrote. In times of change we look back to them for fresh inspiration. Modern stagecraft has been vastly affected by the study of the Shakespearean stage, and its application to our problems by William Poel and Granville-Barker. The Greek chorus, remote as it seems, has inspired new playwrights to emulation. Anyone who wishes to

understand the modern theatre must understand the ancient conventions.

Above all, each play presents its own technical difficulties. In writing, as in living, general rules (however golden) will carry us only part of the way; every theme presents dilemmas, opportunities, and cruxes; and often, as in life, the playwright has to find a way round them instead of through them. His skill is slowly acquired; and when he has done one thing well he may not care to do it again. Therefore in studying the playwright's craft we must also try to see it from inside, as he sees it. Exceptions may make bad law, but they make good plays.

We must study special instances in detail. In choosing examples for this book, I have tried to choose for the most part acknowledged masterpieces of their kind, which are easily accessible, fully documented, and representative. I have tried to choose plays which I like myself enthusiastically; for I feel that examples are too often given in an attempt to be catholic in taste, although the writer has no feeling for them. The fact that the plays are chosen from all periods will not, I hope, disguise the fact that my interests are contemporary. But it would be absurd to call Shakespeare a dead dramatist, and Mr. X or Miss Y a living one. The reader may fit to the initials any names he chooses; for it is the privilege of the theatre that having paid our money we take our choice. It will be part of the fun if the reader quarrels with mine.

ORMEROD GREENWOOD

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WHEN Mr. George Bernard Shaw was approached for permission to quote extracts from his play *Caesar and Cleopatra* (in *Three Plays for Puritans*, published by Messrs. Constable & Co., Ltd.) he intimated courteously that he did not consider it necessary that he should give his authorization for the quotation of extracts used within the statutory privileges for the purpose of criticism. The author wishes to express his indebtedness however to the authors and/or publishers of the following plays, who gave specific permission for the extensive quotations made from them—

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# CONTENTS

|                                  | PAGE |
|----------------------------------|------|
| <i>Preface</i> . . . . .         | v    |
| <i>Acknowledgments</i> . . . . . | viii |

## PART I

### THE PLAYWRIGHT'S CHOICES AND LIMITS

#### CHAPTER I

|                                    |   |
|------------------------------------|---|
| THE PLAYWRIGHT'S CHOICES . . . . . | 3 |
|------------------------------------|---|

#### CHAPTER II

|                                                                                                                           |    |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| THE LIMITS . . . . .                                                                                                      | 23 |
| External Authority—The Audience—Physical Limits in the Theatre<br>—Physical Limits in Actors and Audience—Personal Limits |    |
| <i>Summary, Bibliography, and Questions</i> . . . . .                                                                     | 40 |

## PART II

### KINDS OF THEATRE

#### CHAPTER III

|                                    |    |
|------------------------------------|----|
| THE TWO KINDS OF THEATRE . . . . . | 45 |
|------------------------------------|----|

#### CHAPTER IV

|                                                                                                                                                                                                              |    |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| TRADITIONS AND CONVENTIONS OF THE THEATRE . . . . .                                                                                                                                                          | 52 |
| The Classical Convention—Medieval Miracle and Morality Plays—<br>Italian Comedy—The Neo-classical Convention—The Elizabethan<br>Tradition—Realism in the Theatre—Symbolism: Poetry Returns to<br>the Theatre |    |
| <i>Summary, Bibliography, and Questions</i> . . . . .                                                                                                                                                        | 93 |

## PART III

### COMPARISON AND CONTRAST: PLAYS FROM DIFFERENT PERIODS WITH A COMMON THEME

#### CHAPTER V

|                                                                                                                                                      |    |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| THE HOUSE OF ATREUS . . . . .                                                                                                                        | 99 |
| Aeschylus' <i>The Oresteia</i> (458 B.C.)—Eugene O'Neill's <i>Mourning Becomes<br/>Electra</i> (1931)—T. S. Eliot's <i>The Family Reunion</i> (1939) |    |



| CHAPTER VI                                                                                                                                                                                                         |  | PAGE |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--|------|
| CLEOPATRA . . . . .                                                                                                                                                                                                |  | 110  |
| Shakespeare's <i>Antony and Cleopatra</i> (1608)—Dryden's <i>All for Love, or The World Well Lost</i> (1677)—Shaw's <i>Caesar and Cleopatra</i> (1898)                                                             |  |      |
| CHAPTER VII                                                                                                                                                                                                        |  |      |
| THE DESTINY OF MANKIND . . . . .                                                                                                                                                                                   |  | 129  |
| <i>Everyman</i> (Anonymous, late fifteenth century)—Toller's <i>Masses and Man</i> (1919)—Marlowe's <i>Doctor Faustus</i> (c. 1590)                                                                                |  |      |
| PART IV                                                                                                                                                                                                            |  |      |
| IN THE WORKSHOP                                                                                                                                                                                                    |  |      |
| CHAPTER VIII                                                                                                                                                                                                       |  |      |
| BEGINNINGS, MIDDLES, AND ENDS. . . . .                                                                                                                                                                             |  | 141  |
| CHAPTER IX                                                                                                                                                                                                         |  |      |
| THE PLAYWRIGHT'S TOOLS . . . . .                                                                                                                                                                                   |  | 150  |
| CHAPTER X                                                                                                                                                                                                          |  |      |
| COMEDY AND FARCE . . . . .                                                                                                                                                                                         |  | 159  |
| The Comic Impetus—W. S. Maugham's <i>Our Betters</i> (1915) and Congreve's <i>The Way of the World</i> (1700)—W. S. Maugham's <i>Home and Beauty</i> (1918) and Douglas Jerrold's <i>Bubbles of the Day</i> (1841) |  |      |
| CHAPTER XI                                                                                                                                                                                                         |  |      |
| CUTTING AND REVISION . . . . .                                                                                                                                                                                     |  | 172  |
| Ben Jonson's <i>Every Man in His Humour</i> (The Quarto of 1601 and the Folio of 1616)—Anton Chekhov's <i>Uncle Vanya</i> ( <i>The Wood Demon</i> , 1889, and <i>Uncle Vanya</i> , 1898)                           |  |      |
| CHAPTER XII                                                                                                                                                                                                        |  |      |
| FINGERING: THE MASTERY OF STAGECRAFT . . . . .                                                                                                                                                                     |  | 186  |
| Pirandello's <i>Henry IV</i> (1922)—Synge's <i>The Playboy of the Western World</i> (1907)—Strindberg's <i>The Dream Play</i> (1902)—J. B. Priestley's <i>The Linden Tree</i> (1947)                               |  |      |
| <i>Summary, Bibliography, and Questions</i> . . . . .                                                                                                                                                              |  | 208  |
| <i>Index</i> . . . . .                                                                                                                                                                                             |  | 211  |

PART I  
THE PLAYWRIGHT'S CHOICES  
AND LIMITS



## CHAPTER I

### THE PLAYWRIGHT'S CHOICES

THE playwright to-day is faced by a series of choices. In a sense, every playwright always has been, for however much he may be a product of tradition there has always been in that tradition a place for choice. Tradition produces the playwright, but the playwright produces the masterpiece. We have only to look at two playwrights who have worked in the same tradition to see that. There is all the difference in the world between the austerity of Aeschylus and the softness of Sophocles, the universality of Shakespeare and the deep, narrow, exquisite probing art of Ben Jonson. "The unity of a good Elizabethan tragedy," says Miss Bradbrook, "cannot be imitated because it is the personal possession of the dramatist";<sup>1</sup> and this is true of all good plays.

Yet the playwright of to-day is a much more self-conscious artist than any playwright of the past. Aristophanes or Sheridan accepted in the main the way of playwriting that they inherited, whatever changes they made in detail. To-day the playwright has as part of his equipment a sense of history. He knows that there have been many ways of writing plays, and that all of them have left their mark on the theatre—they have sufficient life yet for him to be able to build on the foundation of any of them if he wishes. Terence Rattigan's *French Without Tears*, for instance, is a farce solidly based on the immemorial conventions of the medium, with type characters, men in women's clothes, fun about drunkenness, and jokes at the expense of the foreigner. Noel Coward's *Hay Fever* is a light comedy built, like a dance, on patterned situation, as are the early Elizabethan plays. Somerset Maugham's *Our Betters* traces its ancestry through Oscar Wilde and Sheridan back to the Restoration comedies, and through them to Ben Jonson. J. B. Priestley sometimes writes a realistic play in the school of Ibsen, like *Dangerous Corner*, sometimes a morality like *They*

<sup>1</sup> *Themes and Conventions of Elizabethan Tragedy*, p. 37.

*Came to a City*, sometimes a symbolist play like *Johnson over Jordan*. O'Casey began as an orthodox Irish dramatist, transferring Synge's country tinkers to the Dublin slums. Later he changed his style, sometimes drawing on the Expressionist drama, as in *The Star Turns Red*, or using a Greek chorus, as in *Within the Gates*; while *Red Roses for Me* has an Elizabethan exuberance of language and parallelism of plot.

It is by no means certain that it is an advantage for the playwright to have this wide choice of style, or this extreme self-consciousness about the manner in which he writes. In many ways it would be better if he had to take for granted the manner in which he would write; and the work of Priestley and O'Casey often shows the damaging results of a choice of style. Yet, since the playwright has it, there is no use pretending he has not; we must try, on the contrary, to use our freedom and turn it to advantage. Let us consider, then, what is the playwright's range of choice, and what follows from it. It is not suggested that anyone who sits down to write a play will, on each occasion, pass through his mind this series of choices; if he is wise, he will let the play dictate its form, for each theme has an ideally suitable form if it can be found. Yet the choice exists.

We can best see what the choice involves by looking at two plays by the same dramatist. Ibsen wrote *Peer Gynt* in 1867, and *Hedda Gabler* in 1890. *Peer Gynt* is more than half as long again as *Hedda Gabler* (271 pages of text, in Archer's translation, against 185 pages; about four hours in performance against two hours and a half). *Peer Gynt* has five acts and thirty-eight scenes, and is set in over thirty places. *Hedda Gabler* has four acts, each of one scene; and the whole play is set in one place. Besides observing strictly the Unities of Place and Action, *Hedda Gabler* barely oversteps the Unity of Time; it deals with two days. *Peer Gynt* deals with sixty years, from the beginning of the nineteenth century up to the time of writing (1867). *Peer Gynt* has fifty speaking characters as well as crowds of supernumeraries. *Hedda Gabler* has seven characters only. *Peer Gynt* is written in verse—and not only in verse, but in many kinds of verse: lyrical, satirical, narrative, contemplative. *Hedda Gabler* is written not only in prose but in

colloquial prose, which never deserts the rhythm of speech; its two most tragic moments are faced with the words "I am burning it, curly locks" and "people don't do such things"—not in themselves, perhaps, and apart from the context, very inspiring utterances. *Peer Gynt* has much narrative, but little plot; *Hedda Gabler* little narrative but much plot. *Peer Gynt* proceeds by a series of episodes united only by the atmosphere of the play, the theme, and the central character. Its effect is cumulative, like a picaresque novel. *Hedda Gabler's* seven characters are held in an intimate and complex relationship; take one away (even the servant, Berta) and the construction of the whole play collapses.

We have said enough to indicate that these two plays are at opposite extremes of the drama. It is not necessary to decide which is "better"—there is no "better." *Peer Gynt* could no more be written in the manner of *Hedda Gabler* than an orange can be a potato. But the decision is not always so absolute. Each decision the playwright makes about form is really a series of decisions, a step in the achievement of the play he is writing, or a stage in the loss of that play until it vanishes in the mistakes the writer has made as he progresses.

We have said that *Peer Gynt* has little plot and much narrative; *Hedda Gabler* much plot and little narrative. What is the difference? Narrative is the description of a sequence of events happening in time. The completion of each incident prompts us to ask: After that, what happened? Yes, Peer stole Ingrid, Maas Moen's bride, from the wedding party. And after that? He took her away up the hillside, and then deserted her, and then was outlawed. And after that? He came back because his mother was dying. And after that? He left Norway and became a traveller and a rich man, and saw strange countries. And then . . .

But with plot, we are concerned, not primarily with the *sequence*, but with the *connexion* of events. They are related by cause and effect, not only by time. As we listen, the first question which springs to our lips is not: What next? but Why? Why did General Gabler's daughter marry the dull George Tesman? Why does his aunt still interfere in his life, and even impose her servant on the household? Why has

Eilert Lovberg written a good book, when no one ever thought he could? Why did Thea redeem him? Why does Hedda want to corrupt him? Why does Judge Brack keep hanging about? Why does Eilert accept the Judge's invitation to a drinking party; why can't he stop himself—and why can't Thea stop him? Why does Hedda burn his manuscript, and why does she kill herself?

Of course, every play has some narrative and some plot. It must have narrative, for it must be based on a sequence of events occurring in time; and it must have plot of a kind, for it must have a *plan*—a formal structure. But one or the other may be more important. In a play of adventure, a melodrama or romance, narrative is predominant; we forgive the plot for being loose or obvious if the excitement is maintained. In a tragedy or a comedy of manners, the narrative may be obvious—the story may be well known to us (as in *Othello*), or trite (as in *She Stoops to Conquer*), or preposterous (as in *The Importance of Being Earnest*), and none of these things will diminish our interest; we are interested in the plot. But besides this, it is important to notice that there are various kinds of plot.

First of all, we must notice that the thing “plot” exists, for the writer, only at certain stages in the making of a play; and, similarly, that it exists for the playgoer only at a certain stage of his analysis of what the play has meant to him. The playwright may, in the course of writing, conceive of a plot as a separate thing (though he need not do so); but when the play has been finished, the plot has disappeared—there is only the play. Similarly, the audience receives first of all the impact of the play as a whole. We may break down that impact afterwards, when we discuss the play, or think about it—we may separate the elements. We may say: “Oh, don't you know *Othello*? It's about a Moor who is a famous Venetian general; he elopes with a Senator's daughter, Desdemona. His lieutenant, Iago, out of jealousy, persuades the Moor that his wife has been unfaithful with Cassio, and at last the Moor kills Desdemona, only to find out how wrong he has been.” Someone else may say: “No, you're wrong; it's not jealousy that makes Iago torment Othello—he uses that only

as an excuse; he wants power, and the only power he can exercise is the power of evil: the power to corrupt." In this dialogue, both speakers have isolated an element in the play in order to discuss and interpret it; they are giving different answers to the "why?" of the plot. Someone else may say: "Well, anyhow, for me Iago is the most important character of the play"; they have then isolated another element—the characters. Another may pursue the point: "I never thought so until this evening; Iago has never convinced me, but the way Robert Eddison played the part held me—it was quite a new interpretation." This isolates another element—the acting; the actor has contributed his interpretation, and the audience receive and endorse it, or reject it. But these are all stages of *analysis*. When we are seeing the play, we see it all. The impression is composite—we see Othello, and note his colour and the nobility of his bearing, and the unforgettable beauty of the words—

Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them  
with the impression which they give of power mixed with irony and good humour. We see the contrast between the weathered strength of Othello, no longer young; and the youth, delicacy, and breeding of Desdemona. At the end of Act III, Scene 3, we hear Othello and Iago decide on Cassio's death; they part like this—

*Iago.* My friend is dead; 'tis done at your request;  
But let her live.

*Othello.* Damn her, lewd minx! O, damn her!  
Come, go with me apart; I will withdraw,  
To furnish me with some swift means of death  
For the fair devil. Now art thou my lieutenant.

*Iago.* I am your own for ever.

Immediately they are gone, Desdemona meets the Clown—

*Desdemona.* Do you know, sirrah, where Lieutenant Cassio lies?  
and the dramatic irony of her innocent inquiry, already nearly intolerable, is deepened by the Clown's punning reply—

*Clown.* I dare not say he lies anywhere.

We do not receive the impression of these things as separate entities; they live by their relation to each other.



If the reader is still not convinced that, in the finished play, plot has disappeared, let him write out a synopsis of some play he particularly admires, and then read it to someone who doesn't know the play. How much did Voltaire's French audience learn about the play *Hamlet* from his description of it?

It is a vulgar and barbarous drama, which would not be tolerated by the vilest populace of France or Italy. Hamlet becomes crazy in the second act, and his mistress becomes crazy in the third; the prince slays the father of his mistress under the pretence of killing a rat, and the heroine throws herself into the river; a grave is dug on the stage, and the gravediggers talk quodlibets worthy of themselves, while holding skulls in their hands; Hamlet responds to their nasty vulgarities with a silliness equally disgusting. In the meantime, another of the actors conquers Poland. Hamlet, his mother, and step-father carouse on the stage, songs are sung at table; there is quarrelling, fighting, killing—one would imagine this piece to be the work of a drunken savage.<sup>1</sup>

Yet it is impossible to say, in spite of its bias, that this is not an accurate synopsis of the plot of *Hamlet*, so far as it goes. It has arbitrarily selected certain elements, and reproaches Shakespeare for accurately recording the primitive legends about the court of Denmark which he had received from Kyd, Belleforest, and Saxo Grammaticus.

But granted that, in Shakespeare's play, the Revenge melodrama of Kyd and the myth recorded in Saxo's twelfth-century Latin chronicle have been absorbed and transmuted, it still remains true that they once existed, and that Shakespeare had, at some stage, to make decisions about them. What sort of decisions does a playwright have to make about plot?

We must realize that the story of a play has more than one significance for the playwright. The audience may be interested in the story for its own sake, but the writer need not. The plot, to the writer, is a bait with which he patiently fishes in the depths of himself to catch the big, gleaming fish of an important theme. Or, if you prefer another metaphor, it is like a simple experiment which we used to perform in chemistry. If you take a saturated solution of some salt, and lower into it on a thread a tiny crystal, the whole solution

<sup>1</sup> Voltaire, Preface to *Théâtre* in *Works*, edn. of 1763. It is only fair to add that spirited praise of Shakespeare's genius follows.

will crystallize out in precise and beautiful shape, round the suspended fragment. The process of writing a play is comparable to this. The playwright is conscious that there is a theme inside him; but he cannot know what it is, for it cannot be visible until the work is done, although he may be able to taste its presence—and even to know its taste, and when the solution is saturated. But to reveal the theme, he has to lower a crystal into the solution: that crystal is the plot.

Of course, there are other ways of getting the solution to deposit its dissolved salt—for instance, you can keep on boiling it. But you don't usually get such pure or such beautiful crystals that way. Therefore the first decision the playwright should make is not to choose his plot, but to let the plot choose him.

The playwright can either invent a plot or steal one. Actually the contrast is far less absolute in practice than it appears. The most completely original invented plot has borrowed something—an incident read in a newspaper, or seen in the street; the setting of a valley or a pub the author knows; or a resemblance more than coincidental to living people. The novelist Frances Trollope (Anthony's mother) when asked whether she put her friends into her books replied: "Oh, yes; but you don't recognize the pig in the sausage." A play can no more be invented out of air than a sausage can. Of course, you can make your sausage out of bread, soya flour, and whale-meat; but then it won't taste like pork sausage.

The invented plot has an artificial prestige to-day, which depends on the conception of literary property enshrined in the law of copyright. A literary work is conceived as something made by the writer which he has made by his own efforts and is entitled to protect; he who steals my plot shall be pursued with the utmost rigour of the law. It is hard to realize that this is a very recent attitude; that down to the nineteenth century literary work could be freely stolen, and before the eighteenth century no one even thought of protesting.

If stealing a plot destroyed originality, then Chaucer, Homer, and Shakespeare would be the least original of writers. They went farther. Shakespeare paraphrased whole passages

of North, Homer embodied in the *Iliad* chunks of more primitive lays, and Chaucer followed Boccaccio and the *Roman de la Rose* word for word for pages at a time. Yet in fact their originality is not destroyed by this process. To understand this, consider the following passage in which Gerard Manley Hopkins criticizes a narrative poem sent to him by R. W. Dixon—

You say that the plot of this piece is your own. It seems to me in general a hazardous thing, a pity, to make one's own plots: one cannot well have the independence, the spontaneousness of production which one gets from a true story or from a fiction that comes to one as a fresh whole not of one's own feigning. This piece it is plain has a *motive* and is planned to exhibit a certain situation, the situation which is darkly described in the opening. The consequence has been, as it seems to me, that you have invented *only just enough plot* to bring out the required situation. Besides a motive, a plot should have these two things, scenes and intrigue. By scenes I mean localization, with local colour and particular details and keepings. These are things in which you naturally excel . . . but here there are scarcely any. If you had been treating someone else's plot you would have said something of what Basilis' house was like and where, but now you do not even tell us how she managed to get out of Venice into the wood without, as it would seem, crossing the water. There is also no intrigue. One wants to know how Madaline happened to come up just when the two men had been fighting, and the hermit, too, how he was there. The hermit is almost as bad as "in the Queen's name I command you all to drop your swords and daggers."<sup>1</sup>

In his reply, Dixon defended himself as follows—

It was very keen-sighted of you to see that there was a lack of any reason how Maurice met Basilis for the second time in the tale; for I had an account of it, and cut it out, because in narrative poems, as now done, there is so much of what I call *wooden* work—accounts and explanations of how things came to pass, how people got there and so on, when what is wanted is what they did when they were there.

We may sympathize with both the disputants in this discussion. Hopkins is assuredly right in thinking that greater freedom and spontaneity can be gained from a borrowed plot; and that it is less tendentious, for it is not devised merely to exploit a situation. It may be added that the borrowed plot has extra richness and depth; it is more than an individual

<sup>1</sup> G. M. Hopkins, *Letters*, Vol. II, April 6, 1881, ed. C. C. Abbott (Oxford University Press, 1935).

creation. *Medea* and *Hamlet* are always capable of yielding new meanings, because they come to us with all the riches of a long history and the fulfilment of many purposes.

But Dixon's reply touches on a central problem of plot craftsmanship: the avoidance of "wooden work." One of the chief dangers at the opening of any play is that it should be merely expository—that it should not carry forward the action. One of the chief criticisms of the realistic theatre is that it makes it much harder for a playwright to avoid wooden work entirely. For there must always be a convincing explanation of why and how characters are present, and what they are doing there; time must be synchronized, and if it is broken its passage must be indicated by such clumsy devices as the lowering of the curtain in the middle of a scene. The poetic or symbolist playwright can much more easily condense; he can ask his audience to accept the presence of the characters or the passing of time; this means vitality and economy.

We may actually watch the playwright making this choice about plot. Here, for instance, is Mr. Bernard Shaw's testimony, in a review of Allardyce Nicoll's *Late Nineteenth Century Drama*—

Because my vogue in the fashionable London theatre came after that of Pinero, Jones, Carton, Grundy, and Wilde, and supplanted it, it is assumed that I developed in their school and learnt my art from them. As a matter of fact I was furiously opposed to their method and principles . . . they were all for "constructed" plays, the technique of construction being that made fashionable by Scribe in Paris, and the sanction claimed for it no less than that of Aristotle. Plays manufactured on this plan, and called "well-made plays," I compared derisively to cats' cradles, clockwork mice, mechanical rabbits and the like. The critics retorted that my plays were not plays, whatever other entertainment value they might possess.

Thus instead of taking a step forward technically in the order of the calendar, I threw off Paris and went back to Shakespeare, to the Bible, to Bunyan, Walter Scott, Dickens, and Dumas père, Mozart and Verdi, in whom I had been soaked from my childhood. Instead of planning my plays I let them grow as they came, and hardly ever wrote a page foreknowing what the next page would be. When I tried a plot I found that this substituted the absorbing interest of putting it together like a jig-saw puzzle (the dullest of occupations for lookers-on) for communicable dramatic interest, loading the story with dead wood and

spoiling it, as in the lamentable case of Goldsmith's *Good-natured Man*, which without its plot would have been a classic.<sup>1</sup>

And, for different reasons, Terence Rattigan is equally emphatic. He has described the attitude with which he meets offers from strangers of "an idea for a play"—

A play is born—for me, at any rate—in a character, in a background or setting, in a period or in a theme, never in a plot. I believe that in the process of a play's preliminary construction, during that long and difficult period of gestation before a line is put on paper, the plot is the last of the vital organs to take shape.

If the characters are correctly fashioned—by which I do not mean accurately represented living people but correctly conceived in their relationship to each other—the play will grow out of them. A number of firmly and definitely imagined characters will act—must act—in a firm and definite way. This gives you your plot. If it does not, your characters are wrongly conceived and you must start again. A plot, in fact, should come as a gift from the gods of drama, earned by the laborious task of moulding character, background and theme, but not . . . casually picked up from the floor of memory as "an idea for a play."<sup>2</sup>

Of course, many other attitudes are possible besides these two. But let us now assume that the playwright has made his choice and taken up his attitude. He may have borrowed a theme from life (as Henry Arthur Jones did with *Mrs. Dane's Defence*, or Rattigan with *The Winslow Boy*). He may begin with history (as Shaw did with *Saint Joan*, or Shakespeare with *Henry VIII*). He may retell one of the great legends (as Obey did in *The Rape of Lucrece*, or O'Neill in *Mourning Becomes Electra*). If he is no longer allowed to steal from contemporaries (as Shakespeare stole Lodge's *Rosalind* and made it into *As You Like It*), he may follow a fashionable pattern so closely that the differences are immaterial. Or, finally, he may create a plot, or develop it, as Rattigan suggests, out of other elements (as Ibsen did in *Hedda Gabler* or Priestley in *The Linden Tree*).

But now the playwright is faced by a further series of decisions. If he has a source, the first will be—is he to follow it faithfully? The obvious answer is that he need not, but a number of factors limit the certainty of this answer. If his source is history, then clearly only a limited amount of invention

<sup>1</sup> "My Way with a Play"; article in the *Observer* (London), 20 Sept., 1946.

<sup>2</sup> "The Characters Make the Play," *Theatre Arts* (April, 1947), p. 45.

is tolerable: Shaw could not have saved Joan from the stake, assuming that he had wished to do so for dramatic reasons. The historical dramatist must accept his data, and interpret them. It might seem at first as if Shakespeare is an exception to this rule, since his plays are frequently anachronistic in detail; but actually Shakespeare is one of the most scrupulous observers of the rule. He studied his sources with care, and followed them even when he might have deviated; and in essentials his historical plays have a sense of period: *Julius Caesar* and *Coriolanus* are Roman, *Antony and Cleopatra* is oriental, *Lear* and *Macbeth* are primitive, *Hamlet* is medieval in feeling. Shakespeare treats the *Chronicles* of Hall and Holinshed, which were his chief sources for the English historical plays, with a shade less respect than he treats Plutarch, whom he follows in the Roman plays; but it would be safe to say that there is hardly an important detail for which he could not give chapter and verse.

On the other hand, the basic facts supplied by history have to be interpreted, and here the playwright (like any other historian) has a freer hand. But it is a dangerous freedom. It is absurd to treat a fourteenth-century subject merely because it offers interesting parallels with our own time, and to make the characters talk as if they were our contemporaries. But this problem is bound up with much wider issues of dramatic technique; for instance, in his dialogue the playwright must use the colloquial idiom of our age (which is dangerously anachronistic); or attempt a period dialect (which is likely to prove a strait jacket to him and his actors, or else be wildly inaccurate); or he must find a third way. This may be either a colourless language which suggests no particular period—but that is liable to be dull just because it is colourless; or he may take the poet's way of removing the language out of time, as Shakespeare did, or T. S. Eliot has done in our own day.

Besides history, a number of other sources have achieved a prestige which the playwright must respect. Such are the most famous myths—those of Orestes, Oedipus, Troy, Prometheus, and others which still tempt playwrights. Such also are the great novels which from time to time find dramatic

adaptation—*Anna Karenina*, *War and Peace*, *Crime and Punishment*, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, to name only a sample of those which have recently been seen on the English stage. Living novelists, too, if they permit adaptations of their work, are likely to insist on fidelity to the original. It may be argued that the adapting of a novel for the stage is merely a special kind of craftsmanship; but the difference is only a difference in degree and not in kind from the use of any other source material.

Oddly enough, it is when the dramatist draws on life that he feels most free—for a number of reasons. ~~Some are practical:~~ the playwright may be anxious about the law of libel, or desire not to give pain to living people; he may be forced to change the circumstances of a situation which has attracted him in life. But, more broadly, he will want to change them; for even the most literally realistic dramatist cannot simply take up a slice of life with a trowel and set it on the stage; and once he has begun to tamper, he must readjust everything.

William Archer describes a "real-life" situation—

A young lady was staying with a half-pay officer and his wife. A valuable pearl belonging to the hostess disappeared; and the hostess accused her guest of having stolen it. The young lady, who had meanwhile married, brought an action for slander against her quondam friend. For several days the case continued, and everything seemed to be going in the plaintiff's favour. Major Blank, the defendant's husband, was ruthlessly cross-examined by Sir Charles Russell, with a view to showing that he was the real thief. He made a very bad witness, and things looked black against him. The end was nearing, and every one anticipated a verdict in the plaintiff's favour, when there came a sudden change of scene. The stolen pearl had been sold to a firm of jewellers, who had recorded the numbers of the Bank of England notes with which they paid for it. One of these notes was produced in court, and lo! it was endorsed with the name of the plaintiff.<sup>1</sup>

It was this incident which suggested to Henry Arthur Jones the scene of the unmasking of Felicia Hindemarsh in *Mrs. Dane's Defence*. It is worth noting what decided the changes he made from the recorded facts in dramatizing it. First, he left the heroine unmarried, because he did not wish to complicate the issue with a tragedy that did not concern him. Second,

<sup>1</sup> William Archer, *Play-making*, pp. 203-4 (Chapman and Hall, 1912).

he wished his heroine to be capable of arousing sympathy, so he changed the fault and its circumstances: brazen theft bolstered by a slander action are hard to justify, and unless there is a way of justifying the heroine she becomes a liability to the playwright. Third, he altered the setting, to avoid all the machinery of a court of justice. When all these things have been done, it may be said that the dramatic situation arose out of the recorded facts of the law case—but it can no longer be said that they have any identity. Terence Rattigan, in rather similar circumstances, made a set of similar decisions—

A year or so ago I read an account of an Edwardian *cause célèbre* and was so fascinated by it and its present-day implications that I decided to make a play of it. So for the first time, I was faced by a ready-made plot, before I had worked out the setting in which to put it and the characters through whom to tell it. I had therefore to reverse the normal process and . . . fashion characters who could, because they actually did, only behave in a certain way. I found it a dreadful task, and after hurling my play many times into my mental waste-paper basket, I decided finally that the only way the impossible equation would work out was by dint of some judiciously concealed cheating.

I suppose many people who go to see *The Winslow Boy*—the play that resulted from my reading of the *cause célèbre*—imagine that they are seeing an exact dramatic representation of the Archer-Shee case. They are not, of course, seeing anything of the kind. The facts, as stated in the play, are wildly inaccurate and the characters bear no relationship whatever (unless by accident) to the Archer-Shee family and Lord Carson.<sup>1</sup>

Let us now press the playwright's choice a stage farther. Having found a theme, there are a number of decisions to be made about treatment. These will depend, at root, upon his attitude to dramatic form, for from this the choice of theme will have been made. Shakespeare might (if he had been Shaw) have found a theme in the ownership of the stews of Bankside, next door to the Globe Theatre. Ibsen might, if he had been Sheridan, have found a theme in the behaviour of Norwegian tourists in Rome (where he lived for many years). Clearly each dramatist has his own range; but equally, within that range, each theme dictates its own treatment.

<sup>1</sup> Terence Rattigan, "The Characters Make the Play" (*Theatre Arts*, April, 1947, p. 45).



*As You Like It* is a very different play from *A Winter's Tale*, *Candida* from *Heartbreak House*, *The Wild Duck* from *A Doll's House*. The treatment of the theme will also be affected, as we have seen, by fashion, by current theories of playwriting, by the organization and conventions of the theatre for which the writer works, by the climate of the age, and by the writer's personal style, his ingenuity and skill, his "fingering," as Archer calls it.

Let us abstract the questions which now face the playwright instead of meeting them singly and unconsciously as he does, for the most part. Is he to use many actors, or few? Many scenes, or few? Is his play to be long or short, discursive or compressed? Is it to be realistic, symbolist, or in what convention? Is he to use verse or prose, and what kind of verse or prose? Is the play to be purely tragic, comic, dramatic, farcical, or melodramatic—or does he refuse to recognize these categories? Finally, is he to treat the plot singly, or is he to weave other material into it, embodied in one or more sub-plots?

These questions are not really independent. For instance, a multiple plot is bound to be more discursive than a single one; we must see the constituent plots develop side by side if they are to have any point—and that needs time and space and involves more actors and scenes than a single fable. Nor are the questions decided on purely theoretical grounds. Every playwright wants to sell his plays, and in the theatre of our time, with its vast expenses of production, a play with a single setting or one change of scene, and requiring a small group of actors, starts with great advantages.

Nevertheless, several of the questions deserve a little more theoretical consideration before we leave them. There is the question of verse or prose, and this is far from simple. The historical fact is that the great majority of masterpieces, even down to our own time, have been written wholly or partly in verse; and that gives it tremendous prestige. It also infers that verse possesses certain intrinsic dramatic advantages. On the other side is the fact that, since the eighteenth century, only a few successful verse plays have been written; and that a verse play to-day is not merely much harder to write but

infinitely harder to sell than a play of comparable quality in prose. Practically every poet of quality—Byron, Shelley, Keats, Tennyson, Browning, to name no lesser men, tried during the nineteenth century to write plays; and they all failed. Yet, although many proclamations of the death of the poetic drama have been made, it refuses to lie down. When we consider the titles of some verse plays written in our day: *Murder in the Cathedral* and *The Family Reunion* by T. S. Eliot; *The Ascent of F6* by W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood; *Trial of a Judge* by Stephen Spender; *Winterset*, *This Way to the Tomb*, *A Phoenix Too Frequent*, and *Happy as Larry*, to name no others; we must admit that though poetic plays may be few, they still possess a special quality.

The advantages of verse in the drama are that it is concise, economical, memorable, and evocative. The conciseness is vital. A novel may have from 100,000 to 250,000 words; a play from 30,000 to 50,000; therefore a play must make careful use of its resources. A phrase like "You don't see them, but I see them" (*Family Reunion*)<sup>1</sup> or "Light thickens" (*Macbeth*) or "Go round about, Peer" (The Boyg in *Peer Gynt*) is worth pages. By its placing, it can be highly charged with significance; and it is memorable—we retain it during the play and recall it; and it haunts us afterwards. Good verse is evocative—it is an incantation; it makes us receptive; it calls up moods, atmosphere, associations, it paints scenes, it conveys feelings with intensity.

If all these enthusiastic claims are true, why is it that few plays are now written in verse? The answer is complex. It is bound up in part with the question of the *form* of verse. We shall see how the Elizabethans, under the influence of humanist theory, evolved the "blank verse" ten-syllable line; developed by Marlowe, Kyd, and Peele, it proved a perfect instrument for *Elizabethan purposes*. But a hundred years later it was no longer suitable. The writers of Dryden's time distrusted its looseness, and preferred the heroic couplet with rhyme, which is an essentially undramatic form. As time went on, blank verse became farther and farther removed from the needs of dramatic expression; yet such was its

<sup>1</sup> Recalling the *Eumenides* of Aeschylus.

prestige and the magic of Shakespeare's name, that tragedies continued to be written in it down to the twentieth century. No more good verse plays could be written until another suitable verse form could be forged, and it is with this problem that the poetic dramatists of our time have concerned themselves. What is needed is a form of great range, which can be flat at one extreme and sublime at the other, which can carry the rhythms of ordinary speech, and lift them into poetry when required without a sense of fission.

But the seventeenth-century dislike of blank verse was only part of a wider suspicion of verse altogether. The age felt that the devices of rhetoric were cheats, attempting to work on men's passions without a basis of reason. Figures of speech, metaphors in particular, were untrue images; they identified things which were dissimilar; they were "forced conceits"; their material was often the heathen gods and goddesses who had never existed. They belonged to the childhood of mankind; poetry was "the mental rattle that awakened the attention of intellect in the infancy of civil society",<sup>1</sup> and as man was now grown up, he set himself to

separate the knowledge of Nature from the colours of Rhetorick, the devices of Fancy, or the delightful deceit of Fables.<sup>2</sup>

In such an atmosphere, it was impossible to hope for great poetic plays, especially tragedies; the mood of the time was optimistic, opposed to the very notion of tragedy.

Once the tradition of verse was broken, it was hard to recreate. For verse is hard to speak, and hard to listen to. It is hard to-day to find a company of actors capable of delivering verse, or to teach them an agreed style (as the controversy about poetry spoken over the air revealed). It is equally hard to find an audience which has had enough practice to be capable of listening intelligently through a whole evening to spoken poetry.

On the other hand, if the playwright chooses (or by Nature is gifted) to write in prose, there arises the question: What kind of prose?

<sup>1</sup> T. L. Peacock, *The Four Ages of Poetry*.

<sup>2</sup> Sprat, *History of the Royal Society* (1667), p. 62, cited in Willey, *The Seventeenth Century Background*, p. 210.

Like this—

It isn't that I haven't prayed for you, Bartley, to the Almighty God. It isn't that I haven't said prayers in the dark night till you wouldn't know what I'd be saying; but it's a great rest I'll have now, and it's time, surely. It's a great rest I'll have now, and great sleeping in the long nights after Samhain, if it's only a bit of wet flour we do have to eat, or maybe a fish that would be stinking.

Or this—

My name is Rafi. I come from the hills beyond Mosul, where the men walk free and the women go unveiled. There I was betrothed to Pervaneh, a woman beautiful and wise. But the very day before our marriage the Governor of Mosul remembered my country and invaded it with a thousand men. And little enough plunder they got from our village, but they caught Pervaneh walking alone among the pine woods and carried her away. . . .

Or this—

I dream of home. Christ, I always dream of home. I've no *home*. I've no place. But I always dream of all of us together again. We had a farm in Ohio. There was nothing good about it. It was always sad. There was always trouble. But I always dream about it as if I could go back and Papa would be there and Mamma and Louie and my little brother Stephen and my sister Mary. . . .

Or again, this—

When we were young—up to 1914—the world was sensible and safe and kind—and even if people didn't have much money, they had most of the things they wanted. They could be happy in a simple easy way—because life seemed good. Oh—the very roads and the grass and the trees and the lilac in spring were different then, and you could notice and enjoy everything, and be quiet and peaceful. And then afterwards—after those years of great black casualty lists every day—it was never the same again—never the same. . . .

The first of these passages, of course, is from Synge's *Riders to the Sea* (1905); it is the transmutation of peasant speech, already near to verse—to the "keen" of the bereaved mother. It relies on repetition, on the open vowel sounds, on the trochaic drop at the ends of the phrases: "saying . . . surely . . . stinking", on the sudden colour of Samhain, and the surprise of the wet flour and the stinking fish successfully transmuted into tragedy.

The second passage is from Flecker's *Hassan* (1922). Like the first passage, it echoes a foreign idiom—Synge's Erse, Flecker's Arabic—especially Arabic mirrored in Burton's

semi-literal translation from the Arabian Nights. It also uses words of romantic colouring: Mosul, Pervaneh; and depends partly on its inversions for its effect.

The third passage—from *The Time of Your Life* by William Saroyan (1939)—relies on not saying anything much, but trapping something between the lines. It follows an American speech pattern closely; its only conspicuous devices are repetition and separate predication of each phrase. It is romantic in feeling, anti-romantic in statement ("There was nothing good about it . . . there was always trouble").

Last comes a passage from *The Linden Tree* by J. B. Priestley (1947). Here the words are quite undistinguished, except for the slight touch of idiosyncrasy in "the great black casualty lists." The playwright relies for their effect on their placing in the play and the emphasis he has been able to build round them by implication; they must be endowed with meaning by the actress's utterance.

Of course, it is clear that a neutral style like this last example is the safest for a playwright. The pursuit of "style" as an end in itself is dangerous for any writer, but particularly so for a playwright, since any personal style perpetually reminds us of the author and distracts us from the play. What Flaubert said of the writer is specially true of the playwright—that in his work he ought to be like God in his universe: present everywhere but visible nowhere. In a tragedy of John Webster's, or a comedy of Oscar Wilde's, it would be extremely difficult to assign the lines to the various characters: something remarkable has been attained, but a great deal has been sacrificed.

On the other hand, a style like Priestley's or O'Neill's has so little that is memorable or distinguished that it falls from time to time into flatness—it has no poetry; it states without illuminating. The safest thing for a playwright who uses this method is to avoid long speeches. In the cut and thrust of interrupted dialogue he may carry us through by speed and implication—but a long speech must have something of the quality of an aria in Grand Opera, demanding a lift, an element of virtuosity from writer and actor. It is no accident that in many plays of our time, we may turn page after page

without finding a speech that runs for more than three or four lines. Nor is it an accident that a dramatist like Shaw, who has often boasted of having brought back long speeches into the theatre, makes use of all the devices of rhetoric. Think of the Inquisitor in *Saint Joan* or Don Juan in Hell in *Man and Superman*.

Finally, dialogue in comedy has its own special problems. Dialogue may be comic in its own right—because it is epigrammatic, queer, or fantastic: as fantastic as Danny Kaye or Ancient Pistol, or as full of verbal fireworks as *The Importance of Being Earnest*. It may become comic because of the situation, like Malvolio's musings in *Twelfth Night*; or because it is idiosyncratic, because it is specially characteristic of the person who speaks it. The last two kinds are often built into comedy by repetition, by distorting a phrase, or giving it an ironical intonation, or by developing a slogan which echoes through the play: "What will Mrs. Grundy say?" in Morton's *Speed the Plough*; George Tesman's "Fancy that!" in *Hedda Gabler*, or Joxer Daly's "It's a darlin' . . ." in *Juno and the Paycock*.

Last of all, a word about the playwright's choice over characters. It is an axiom of playwriting that no character should be introduced unless he or she is indispensable. Playwrights to-day practise the most rigorous economy in selecting characters. Yet this process may be pushed too far—in the theatre extravagance is sometimes wise; and since the greatness of a playwright may be shown in his readiness to squander his wealth at the right moment, we ought to ask from time to time whether economy is slipping into parsimony. After all, as Archer said, it would be possible to play *Hamlet* with six characters, or even five: Hamlet, his confidant (say Horatio); Ophelia, her confidante; and the King and Queen as confidants to each other; or the Queen might naturally play the part of confidante to Ophelia as well.<sup>1</sup> When Archer made this suggestion, I don't think he had in mind that the French eighteenth-century actor Ducis, who admired Shakespeare, did actually adapt *Hamlet* for the classic stage along these very lines.<sup>2</sup> Modern cut versions of the play for the English stage go part of the way in eliminating Voltimand,

<sup>1</sup> *Play-making*, p. 59.

<sup>2</sup> *The Theatre*, by Sheldon Cheney, p. 382 (Longmans, Green, 1929).

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Cornelius, and other players: even Fortinbras. To take another example, a broadcast of T. S. Eliot's *The Family Reunion* omitted entirely the character of Downing, Harry's manservant. No doubt Downing or Fortinbras, from one point of view, are not essential characters: yet without them the plays in which they appear lose one dimension, a richness which is needed. Who would dispense with the Porter in *Macbeth*, the old Clown who brings the asp in *Antony and Cleopatra*, or that waterfowl, Osric, who so strangely and appropriately brings the challenge to Hamlet?

## CHAPTER II

### THE LIMITS

ALL art exists within certain boundaries; each art has its own—they constitute the nature of the medium, and it is essential for the artist and his public to understand something of them. Some of them are physical, depending upon the actual structure of the material. Some are personal, depending upon the artist's nature. Some are social, depending upon his audience.

Comparisons between the arts are always being made. Werenskiold once said to Ibsen: "You are interested in architecture?" "Yes," said Ibsen, "it is, as you know, my own trade." Walter Pater, in a famous dictum, said that "all art constantly aspires to the condition of music"; and many artists since his time have pursued the analogy. The plays of Chekhov, for instance, have often been described as musical in structure. Yet play-writing is not literally comparable to architecture or music. The architect's material is static; it will stand still to be looked at, even for thousands of years. It is part of a landscape of either town or country. The architect's material will, to a great degree, obey his wishes; the dimensions set out on his plan will be followed, the proportions will be identical, the stone, wood, or concrete will resemble the samples. But none of these things is true of the play. The playwright's blue-print cannot be carried out; there are too many imponderables. He may conceive a tall red-headed heroine, and the only actress available who is capable of the part may be small and dark. A different balance between the members of the company, variations in timing, a fresh response from the audience, a producer with more or less understanding of the work, different combinations of colours in the costumes—these and many other factors cannot be foretold, and they will radically affect the play. A bad play may become profound through the interpretation of an Irving or a Duse, or a good play may be ruined by being played in



too large or too small a theatre; too fast or too slow, too subtly or too obviously.

Nor is drama like music. Chekhov's plays, it is true, suggest musical structure by the way they neglect the obvious plot structure and state, restate, and vary set themes. But the musician's notes and timing have a theoretical and abstract value. Words have not. Because words are used, not only for art, but for the purposes of daily life, they are blurred. We have to order the groceries with them, complain to the gas company, scold the children, make love, give lectures. They are not pure, as notes are. Nor is a play as economical as a piece of music—it is clumsier, more dispersed. A play cannot be a piece of music or a building. Let us examine one by one some of the limits of the dramatist's world: and first, the social ones.

### External Authority

Social authority over the playwright is exercised in two ways: positively through custom, and negatively, through law. Custom often compels a dramatist to do something, or at least exercises strong pressure, which he resists at his peril. Law generally compels him *to refrain from* doing something.

Thus custom obliged the Greek tragedian to choose his theme from the myths of the race. Only one exception to this is known—the *Persae* of Aeschylus, on the theme of the battle of Salamis (fought in 480 B.C., the play produced in 473). Every other play has a mythical theme; and custom enjoined the conditions of representation. It enjoined prayers to the Gods; surrounded the drama with the ceremony of worship; decreed the form of competition under which the work was shown; laid down the conditions by which it was chosen and presented; decreed masks and appropriate costumes, differing for comedy and tragedy.

In the same way, custom in the Middle Ages enjoined on the dramatist the choice of a theme from the Bible or sacred legend, or one embodying moral purpose in the contest between virtue and vice. Custom, in Victorian melodrama, decreed that the heroine should be fair, the villain dark; that virtue should end triumphantly and vice unhappily.

Custom obliges the playwright in Russia to choose a theme which has "social realism," and to depict without bourgeois aberrations the triumphs of socialist enterprise.

Custom is embodied in a code of conventions, of which we will not speak in detail here, because they must be separately studied. Custom shades off into fashion, which is a temporary expression of prevailing opinion. Thus, fashion obliged the Elizabethan dramatist to write Revenge plays, as it obliges the twentieth-century American dramatist to write gangster plays. It obliged Restoration dramatists to write tragedy in verse, and comedy in prose. It obliged Romantic dramatists to choose Satanic heroes burdened with secret guilt, or defiant of society. Custom and fashion are not commonly felt by the dramatist as limitations imposed from outside, but as the natural way of doing things. Nevertheless, the genius of a great playwright modifies custom and fashion, or may even alter them radically.

Law, on the other hand, is felt by the playwright as a restrictive process, and one which he cannot directly affect. Society has always had its doubts about the theatre, and has exercised in all periods and countries a close supervision over it. This is, in part, a tribute to the power of the theatre as an instrument of opinion; in part, a criticism of it as anarchic.

Sometimes the effects of legal intervention are merely felt as vexatious, affecting a particular play or scene in a play, but their sum is considerable, and sometimes of general importance. Thus, a decree of the Parlement of Paris helped to bring the medieval French theatre to an end by forbidding the Confrerie de la Passion to play mysteries on sacred themes.<sup>1</sup>

In England, the Elizabethan theatre was closely controlled by the Privy Council and its officer, the Master of the Revels. Several dramatists at various times (including Ben Jonson) found themselves in gaol, and companies were suspended for disobeying instructions. In 1608 the Children of Blackfriars (the company of Boy Players whom Shakespeare's company found such hard rivals) were dissolved for acting a banned play, George Chapman's *Conspiracy of Byron* which defied the strict rule that plays must not describe or comment on

<sup>1</sup> See below, page 60

contemporary politics (one scene showed the Queen of France boxing the ears of Henry IV's mistress).

Even indirect political comment might cause trouble. Shakespeare's company was under suspicion at the time of the Earl of Essex's fall because of a revival of *Richard II*. A little earlier, the company had submitted to the Master of the Revels a Chronicle Play about Sir Thomas More. They got it back with this comment—

Leave out the insurrection wholly and the cause thereof, and begin with Sir Tho. More at the mayor's sessions, with a report afterwards of his good service done, being sheriff of London, upon a mutiny against the Lombards, only by a short report, and not otherwise, at your own perils.

E. Tyllney.<sup>1</sup>

The company were never able to produce the play, although they got their top dramatist, William Shakespeare, to write in for More a long and brilliant speech in defence of law and order.<sup>2</sup>

But we must not imagine that this kind of surveillance ended with Queen Elizabeth. The authority of the Lord Chamberlain (who corresponds to the Elizabethan Master of the Revels) has been constantly exerted during the past half-century, and it is notable that his authority has been exercised in interpreting custom as well as law. It is custom that decrees that sacred figures shall not be represented on the stage, and custom that declares certain ways of treating sex as permissible, while it bans others. When custom changes, the Lord Chamberlain's decision may be revoked: *Ghosts* and *Mrs. Warren's Profession* are now accepted without cavil, and a play about juvenile delinquency called *Pick-up Girl* was licensed after the presence of Queen Mary at a private performance showed that custom would sanction the discussion of this subject in the theatre.

Many important playwrights besides Ibsen and Shaw have felt the restraining influence of authority, which is exerted to procure the alteration of scripts more frequently than forbidding them entirely. In the twenties and thirties of this

<sup>1</sup> Quoted Tucker Brooke, *Shakespeare Apocrypha*, p. xlvi.

<sup>2</sup> *Sir Thomas More*, II, 4, ll. 64 ff.

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century the censorship was active enough to form one of the principal justifications of a number of small experimental "club" theatres; the present writer can remember performances at the Cambridge Festival Theatre about 1930 when a microphone bawled at intervals from the side of the stage "deleted by order of the Lord Chamberlain's department" as a protest against cuts in the text. From the nineties there have also existed a number of Sunday play-producing societies on the model of the Incorporated Stage Society, whose activities being "private" were not amenable to the Lord Chamberlain's jurisdiction.

It is relevant to consider how the Lord Chamberlain's authority was established, and how it has persisted so long in the face of frequent and powerful protests. The question is bound up with another. In the control of the theatre, use was made for a long time of the power of granting monopolies—the sole right to give performances.

When Charles II re-opened the theatres in 1660 after the fall of the Republican government, he granted patents to two managers: Killigrew and Davenant. These patents were handed down until 1843, when an Act of Parliament was passed permitting other theatres to open. But from the first the two patent theatres had to struggle to maintain their position. Under various pretexts, rival managers built theatres and opened them. The legal position was not at all clear. It was not certain that the Crown Prerogative could silence those managers who did not hold privileges from the King.

The patentees failed several times in legal actions against the "illegitimate" theatres, but in 1735 the audacity of Henry Fielding compelled Walpole to take action. Fielding organized his Great Mogul Company of players, and took possession of the Little Haymarket Theatre, where he proceeded to lampoon, in a series of burlesques and satires, not only the rival theatre managers, but the Prime Minister himself. Walpole could bear (and had borne) a great deal, but at last he lost his temper. The outcome was the Licensing Act of 1737, with all its momentous consequences. From that day to this, the theatres have been subject to the jurisdiction of the Lord Chamberlain and his Examiner of Plays.

The immediate results were also important. Fielding left the stage, and turned to the new form of the novel. The minor theatres were suppressed; and, prevented from producing straight plays, they had to turn to concerts, circuses, and spectacular entertainments, and later to the "burletta"—the musical extravaganza which had such important effects on later dramatic form.

The "freedom of the stage"—the constitutional right of any management complying with the law to open a theatre—was deferred until 1843, and was achieved only after a long campaign aided by the new tide of *laissez-faire* philosophy. The right of any management to present any play it chooses, subject to the common law of libel and obscenity, has still not been achieved, in spite of the vehement and devastating attacks made upon the Lord Chamberlain's censorship by the greatest dramatists of our time.

"No doubt there is a staggering absurdity," said Bernard Shaw, "in appointing an ordinary clerk to see that the leaders of European literature do not corrupt the morals of the nation, and to restrain Sir Henry Irving from presuming to impersonate Samson or David on the stage, though any other sort of artists may daub these scriptural figures on a signboard or carve them on a tombstone without hindrance . . . though neither medicine nor painting nor law nor the Church moulds the character of the nation as potently as the theatre does, nothing can come on the stage unless its dimensions admit of its first passing through the Examiner's mind!"<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps Shaw was too pessimistic in saying that "as far as its principle is concerned, the Censorship is the most popular institution in England; and the playwright who criticizes it is slighted as a blackguard agitating for impunity." Yet in spite of his own attacks, and countless others; in spite of the accepted mistakes made again and again in discriminating against good plays, the Censorship continues. We may take it that, in some form or other, the playwright will always be subject to some form of social authority; and that society (that is, the playwright's audience) stands behind it. No doubt Dr. Nicholson was right, in his account of the passing of the Licensing Act,<sup>2</sup> in insisting that the vendetta between

<sup>1</sup> Preface to *Mrs. Warren's Profession* (Constable, 1902).

<sup>2</sup> *The Struggle for a Free Stage in London*, pp. 46 ff. (Constable, 1906).

Fielding and Walpole was only a prominent incident in it. Society at large accepted and approved of the Act.

### The Audience

We must, therefore, consider the relationship of the playwright to the authority which stands behind Authority—to society at large: his potential audience. The playwright must either inherit an audience, or he must create one. He may inherit an audience if he is able to work in an accepted convention which is already familiar, and if his standards are, in general, representative of those shared by the audience. Noel Coward in the nineteen-twenties, Terence Rattigan at the end of the nineteen-thirties, were in this lucky position; and the stature of their work does not suffer by this. The same is true of Somerset Maugham at the beginning of the century, of Wilde in the eighteen-nineties, of Sheridan in the seventeen-seventies, of Congreve in the sixteen-nineties. *Hamlet* is only the most magnificent of the “Revenge” plays which Kyd had made popular in the fifteen-eighties.

But not all playwrights are so lucky; nor could these playwrights always maintain a satisfactory relationship with their audience. Congreve and Maugham both left the stage because they could not carry their audience with them in what they attempted. Marlowe had to vanquish the “rhyming mother-wits”;<sup>1</sup> Ibsen’s plays were received with riot and contumely all over Europe in the eighteen-eighties and nineties; Hugo’s actors vainly demanded a hearing from Paris in 1830, as Synge’s actors did of Dublin in 1907; Shaw starved and flaunted before the back door of the theatre was opened to him, while the front door remained obstinately shut.

The playwright’s task is easiest when his audience is unified, and already understands the conventions which he is to use. Such was the Elizabethan audience, newly conscious of national unity, and rejoicing in a new pride of language; and trained by the work of Kyd, Greene, and Marlowe to listen to verse. Such, in a smaller way, was the Restoration audience, in its reaction against the rule of the Saints, its aristocratic leadership and standards, and its pride in wit and conversation.

<sup>1</sup> Prologue to *Tamburlaine*.

Congreve was not merely flattering when he said to the Earl of Montague in the preface to *The Way of the World*—

If it has happened in any part of this comedy, that I have gained a turn of style or expression more correct, or at least, more corrigible, than those in which I have formerly written, I must . . . ascribe it to honour of your Lordship's admitting me into your conversation, and that of a society where everybody else was so well worthy of you, in your retirement last summer from the town.

But the playwright cannot always find his audience unified and ready trained, sharing the same convictions and responding to the same conventions. In times of social change, or when a particular way of writing has exhausted its possibilities, or in the face of a novel talent, the public loses its way. These factors complicate the tasks of the writer, and remind him constantly of the limits within which his work is done.

We need not discuss the much-debated metaphysical speculation, whether any work of art can exist without an audience. It is certain that the drama cannot. For originally the audience created the play. The earliest form of drama is that in which the whole audience forms the chorus. Aristotle is undoubtedly correct in deriving Greek tragedy from the dithyramb, and comedy from the phallic songs "which are still in use in many of our cities."<sup>1</sup> In Greece and elsewhere, in the forms of ritual which precede and give birth to art as we know it, everyone participated. The form used was much like that still common in folk-song—the sea shanty, for instance, where a leader sings the story, often improvising in detail, and the rest join in "the chorus"—a formula of praise or appeal to the God. The next stage in dramatic development is to separate chorus from audience, and to divide the leader's part among "actors." This becomes possible when the urgent needs of ritual diminish or change their form—when people are willing to sit and *watch*, instead of finding an urgent need to *join in*. This change occurred in Athens about the end of the sixth century B.C.<sup>2</sup> Rapid development was then possible—

<sup>1</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, IV, translated by S. H. Butcher, p. 19 (Macmillan).

<sup>2</sup> For a very clear account of the development from ritual to art, see Jane Harrison, *Ancient Art and Ritual* (Home University Library, Oxford University Press).

Aeschylus first introduced a second actor; he diminished the importance of the Chorus, and assigned the leading part to the dialogue. Sophocles raised the number of actors to three, and added scene-painting.<sup>1</sup>

But in spite of these developments, which might be paralleled in other times (for instance at the end of the Middle Ages, in the drama developed out of the Roman liturgy) the audience is still part of the play; the play is made out of it and for it. It does not abdicate, any more than a king who gives over some of the functions of government to ministers and public servants. It is the custodian of tradition and convention, the dramatist's code of rules.

### Physical Limits in the Theatre

Besides the social limits set by society, expressed in the authority of law and custom, and the rules of tradition and convention, there is also a series of physical limits to the exercise of the playwright's art.

There are, first, the physical conditions of the theatre—the building in which the play is to be performed.

Of course, there need not be a building. Many plays have been, and are, performed under the simplest conditions—in the open air, on a few planks set up on barrels or boxes, or a cart, or even on the ground: in a garden, a dell, a natural amphitheatre; or, in ancient times, on the threshing floor of a village (from whose circular shape, set in the side of a hill, developed the shape of the classical Greek and Roman theatre). But these conditions (or any other) will produce certain factors within which the playwright must exercise his skill. If his play is given in a fair-booth or on planks in a market place, he must expect that he will have to compete for his audience's attention, and that he will not hold it for a great length of time. It will be hard for people to hear words well, or to pay close attention to them. The text will be repetitive and discursive; the play full of action and episode; its duration short. Illusion is impossible, except so far as the skill of the actors and the imagination of the audience can create it. There can be only a few properties, and practically no scenery.

From such primitive conditions, various developments are

<sup>1</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, p. 19.



possible, and as the building develops, the form of the play must follow suit. The Greeks developed huge open-air amphitheatres, capable of holding fifteen or twenty thousand spectators. Performances were given in full daylight, in the splendour of the Mediterranean sun. Tradition as well as the conditions of the theatre demanded a large "orchestra"—a space in which the chorus could dance and sing. The mask, statuesque drapery, and special footwear needed for the ritual became also of practical importance; in such a large space the characters needed to be larger than life; the masks were equipped with a primitive appliance for amplifying the voice. Words could be clearly heard without strain in the magnificent acoustic properties of the theatres;<sup>1</sup> it was possible to rely a great deal on words—magnificent poetry was not lost. The theatre had a permanent "built set"—a palace front, of which the dramatist must make use; and certain machines and technical devices were developed. With these as his tools, great drama was possible.

An entirely different set of conditions produced a different kind of play. When James Burbage, the father of Shakespeare's leading actor, Richard, opened the first building erected in England for theatrical purposes in 1576, and called it *THE THEATRE*, he combined features of the two kinds of building that the strolling companies had been used to: the inn yard and the nobleman's hall. The kind of inn yard, with its balconies surrounding an oblong space, can still be seen, for instance at the George Inn in Southwark, or the New Inn at Gloucester. The kind of Hall, with its raised dais at one end for the "quality," and the minstrels' gallery at the other, is still common in the colleges of Oxford and Cambridge, in old manor houses, and in school assembly halls built on the old pattern. From these, taken together, came the pattern of the Elizabethan playhouse, with its surrounding balconies resembling those of the Inn, its pit, its stage extending into the pit, and the balcony behind used both by actors and by musicians. It is only within the last half-century, following the discoveries of William Poel and the productions of Granville-Barker, that we have come to realize how much all

<sup>1</sup> Some of the old theatres can still be used for performances; they sometimes are.

Elizabethan plays depend upon this setting: they are created for it. The Elizabethan stage, so far from being "primitive," as it used to be described, was one of the most perfect instruments for theatrical performance yet evolved. It was a multiple stage, for the playwright could use, together or separately, the main platform stage extending into the auditorium; the "inner stage" behind, which could be closed with a "traverse" or curtains when not required; the balcony above the inner stage, and the balconies on each side if required. He could present a large number of short scenes in rapid succession without waits or loss of continuity.

These advantages were lost in the next kind of theatre that was evolved, though it had some different advantages. The English summer is not always so kind as the Greek; there are days when the sun does not shine, and the entrance to a suburban theatre placed, for instance in the low-lying land of Bankside (like Shakespeare's "Globe") is churned to mud, particularly if there is no made road. It is an advantage to have a theatre which is not open to the sky, but can be roofed; it can then be used in winter as well as in summer; artificial lighting becomes possible, and performances can be given in the evening; scenery can be installed. The "Blackfriars"—the winter theatre of Burbage's company, the Lord Chamberlain's men—is the prototype of the later theatre. Under the influence of Court Masques, and the Italian cult of scenery and spectacle, the public theatre introduced painted "perspectives," built scenery, learned tricks with trapdoors and pulleys. A "proscenium" arch was introduced to frame the picture thus created; the actors retreated behind it, and cut themselves off from the public; they had to fit themselves into the picture, and this involved changing their style of acting. The play changed too. Playwrights had to devise plays which gave an opportunity for scenic display; they had to use few scenes instead of many; and they came to look on the play as something seen through a "fourth wall." From these things developed the creed of naturalism, or "theatrical realism." But these processes all took a very long time—hundreds of years—for tradition fought with innovation, and slowed down the pace of change. In pictures of the early

nineteenth-century theatre, you can still see the side doors which, in Shakespeare's time, had led to the actors' "tiring room" adjoining the "inner stage." All through the eighteenth century, the actors on the stage were still surrounded by the "side boxes"—the survival of the Elizabethan galleries—and the ladies and gentlemen in the side boxes sometimes competed with the stage picture instead of completing it; or added their own action to the action of the play. Nor did the actors completely retreat into their proscenium frame—they had their "apron stage," the truncated form of the old Elizabethan main stage. In the style of the play and the acting there were also archaic survivals. Playwrights still wrote soliloquies and asides, and actors delighted in them, though they were no longer natural, as they had been when the Elizabethan actor delivered them from the middle of the audience.

Then came the development of artificial light. Until Garrick's time, the auditorium and stage were lit with candles and chandeliers, and the primitive footlights, the "floats," consisting of wicks floating in shallow troughs of oil: their name still survives in the jargon of the theatre.

Under Garrick's management of Drury Lane, about 1770, the Alsatian artist de Louthembourg experimented for the first time with coloured lights and greater illumination, but not much could be done until a safer and more easily controlled means of lighting was available. In the first decade of the nineteenth century gas lighting was introduced, and applied very soon to the theatre, though at first with indifferent success. It was installed at Covent Garden between 1815 and 1817; but in 1828 the theatre reverted to oil because the gas was so offensive. Ten years later technical improvements had made it invaluable. Limelight was first used in 1838, by Macready: he had gauze screens for the gas flares, and contrived a vast range of effects—from moonlight to fireworks—with intelligence and imagination. Here is a contemporary description of the storm in his revival of *King Lear* at Drury Lane in 1838—

Forked lightnings now vividly illumine the broad horizon, now, faintly corruscating in small and serpent folds, play in the distance; the sheeted

element sweeps over the foreground and leaves it in pitchy darkness, and wind and rain howl and rush in tyranny of the open night.<sup>1</sup>

He would be a dull playwright indeed who did not respond to the excitement of this new addition to his resources.

Artificial light brought many changes in the theatre—in the auditorium as well as on the stage. In the time of the chandelier, the house remained fully illuminated throughout the evening; when gas came, it could be darkened at will. Instead of a social gathering of fine ladies and gentlemen greeting friends and admiring each other's clothes, there was a hushed assembly of dimly-glimpsed heads, concentrated on the stage. Theatres could be larger, for the actor's expression could be seen at a distance in the stronger light. A subtler, more restrained method of playing was possible, if desired. Mood was easily created, and as easily changed.

But the new instrument of lighting could be used—like any other instrument—for opposite effects. On the one hand it made "realism" possible. There could be no "realism," in the sense of illusion, until the auditorium could be darkened: how could you imagine yourself to be looking through a "fourth wall" if the house lights were on and you were in a large hall full of people—a hall into which an old man with a taper came to light and snuff the candles? When only the stage was lighted you could forget the rest, and every detail of the illusion became possible. Even in outdoor scenes, Clarkson Stanfield could persuade you that you were seeing the actual sun go down over the darkening Rhine.

On the other hand, at the end of the nineteenth century lighting made an attack on painted scenery possible. The great Swiss artist, Adolphe Appia, whose work was little known directly, but was publicized by others such as Gordon Craig, conceived a new approach to stage design which has had repercussions far beyond the theatre. He declared that "painting and lighting are two elements which exclude each other."<sup>2</sup> Ever since the Renaissance, the actor's stature had been diminished by surrounding him with architectural two-dimensional painted scenery, whose convention conflicted

<sup>1</sup> John Bull, 28 Jan., 1838, cited Reynolds, *Early Victorian Drama*, 1936 (Heffer).

<sup>2</sup> Quoted by T. Komisarjevsky, *The Theatre*, John Lane, 1936.

with the actor's real presence. To give full value to the actor (whose body must be the centre of the stage) flat coloured scenery must be replaced by constructed settings—rostra, pillars, tiers of steps—whose geometrical forms will set off the human body. Appia painted his masses in neutral tones, and coloured them with lights placed at different angles; he only occasionally used simplified life-like details to give special emphasis. Appia's influence may be seen to-day on any stage or in any fashionable shop-window. But Appia and Craig also affected the playwright by precept and example. A play conceived in terms of an Appia setting must be a very different thing from one intended for a lounge-hall box setting with stairs to the first floor and french windows opening on to the garden. Both Craig and Appia were much more than designers; and in a sense Craig is the main theorist of the modern stage. Perhaps the most important advantage of artificial lighting, however, has been that the illuminated stage restores, if required, the liberty to use only part of the stage area, or to change the scene rapidly if desired. The fact that this liberty has been abused by playwrights and producers who have left the stage in semi-darkness and presented scenes in little pools of light does not prevent its being a real liberty.

### **Physical Limits in Actors and Audience**

We have sketched some of the factors which limit the playwright in the building which he uses. But the building is not the only physical limitation which is involved. One of the most important things about drama is that it is made out of human beings. The actor uses his voice and body as his instruments; and he plays for an audience specially assembled for the performance. These are equally vital.

Some theorists of the theatre have deplored that the playwright should have to use actors at all. Craig dreamed of an "über-marionette" possessing the advantages of the actor without any of his limitations. There are certainly advantages about the puppet; the puppet-theatre has a grave grace and a plasticity which the live theatre cannot know. And the cinema, by using photographs of living people, and putting the actors into the hands of a director, can make big handsome

men seem to act, or improve a pretty girl into beauty. Yet at times this kind of perfection seems artificial. Who has not watched a film full of beautiful women, and rejoiced at the plain humanity of a charwoman who appears for a moment? The joy of a living actor is just the variation of his performance. We don't know until we have seen it whether it will be less than his best, or something more. If it is less, it may be because we in the audience did not respond: we failed to see the jokes quickly, or coughed at the tensest moments. If it is more, it may be because we "gave him something," as he would say. "How are they to-night?" are always the first words of the actor just going on the stage to the actor who has just come off.

The playwright is affected by the humanity of his actors and audience. Because of the limits of human endurance, the limits in length of his play are set. He may challenge his audience to show their powers of endurance, as Shakespeare did in *Hamlet*, as the Passion Plays do (for instance, at Oberammergau), as O'Neill does in *Mourning Becomes Electra*, as Wagner did in *The Ring*, or as Shaw does in *Back to Methuselah*, or *Man and Superman*. In such plays, an extra quality belongs to their length and their importance; only the greatest dare attempt it, and when it succeeds it is a moving experience. But for the most part, no dramatist dare call us together for less than an hour and a half, or keep us together for more than three hours. And in those three hours he will have to allow us breathing space—he will have to divide his play into acts. Those acts will then control the shape of the play, and will themselves demand a shape. They will have to have, in Aristotle's words, "a beginning, a middle, and an end."

As for the actors, the playwright is preoccupied with their physical quality. He must know how to rest them; he must not keep them on the stage unoccupied. He must give them things possible to say, and lines which they can remember. It is no accident that the many playwrights who have written for a company (Shakespeare at the Globe, Molière and his *comédiens*, Chekhov and the Moscow Art Theatre, Obey and the Compagnie des Quinze) have been both stimulated and obsessed with the physical qualities of their people. All over

the First Folio of Shakespeare's plays you will find signs of Shakespeare's preoccupation: "Enter Will (Kemp)" instead of "Enter Falstaff" or "Kemp" and "Cowley" instead of "Dogberry" and "Verges"; Shakespeare's heroines would have been different if they had not been played by young boys; and as Richard Burbage gets older we can see the Romeos and Richards giving place to Othello, Lear, and Prospero. More than once<sup>1</sup> we catch a glimpse of John Sinkler, or Sincklo, the tall thin man with the lantern jaw whom the Hostess and Doll Tearsheet trounced as he carried Doll off to gaol in the part of a beadle—

*Hostess.* Yes, come, you starved bloodhound—

*Doll.* Goodman death, Goodman Bones—

*Hostess.* Thou Anatomy, thou.

*Doll.* Come, you thin thing, come you rascal.

*Officer.* Very well.

(*Henry IV*, Part II. v. 4.)

Moreover, the playwright depends not only on the appearance of the actors, but on their resources. If they are trained singers and dancers, or acrobats (as some companies have been), the playwright can call on their talents. If the actors are used to naturalism and "type-casting," which restricts them to a narrow range of parts, the playwright who wishes to experiment will find that the actors cannot follow him. He will have to abandon his methods, or train a special company, as Stanislavski, Meyerhold, and Tairov did in Russia, or Copeau and St. Denis in France.

### Personal Limits

We have now considered the physical limits under which a play comes into existence, as well as the social boundaries which control it. There are, however, also personal limits in the playwright himself. Although more obvious, they are worth a little consideration.

We decided at the outset of this book that a playwright must be a craftsman of the theatre, though he might find it dangerous to be entirely a man of the theatre. In the theatre,

<sup>1</sup> *Taming of the Shrew*, *Henry VI*, Part III, *Henry IV*, Part II, Induction to *The Malcontent*.

the playwright has to learn a thousand things: how long an actor must be allowed for a quick change; how dangerous it is to trust to mechanical contrivances; how a device which sounds great fun doesn't work out on the stage, how much you may tease the audience, and when you must stop; how easily they are fuddled (about relationships, for example); how much they can stand before their attention is lost or distracted; what appears ridiculous and raises unexpected laughs; what a disaster it is to suggest that the curtain is about to come down when it's not; how to choose a title which won't hold the wrong implications for the audience; and so on, and so on. But, as the theatre is a co-operative art, the playwright must also deal with people. Politics and diplomacy, discretion and tact, play a large part in the running of a show. Not all playwrights have been easy to deal with or good at getting on with people—Jonson and Ibsen were not, though Shakespeare and Sheridan were. Outside the theatre, the playwright must keep contact with people. Love or hatred will do, introspection or extroversion—anything but indifference. The dramatist's personal qualities: the venom he feels (like Jonson), the fun he gets (like Aristophanes), the love he has (like Chekhov), his power to suffer fools gladly (like Shakespeare), his enthusiasm for ideas (like Shaw), subtlety of his feelings (like Racine)—these are the boundaries of his talent, and mark out the sphere within which his art will establish itself. It takes years to learn the craft—Betterton told Malone (before he died) that though he had been on the stage for fifty years he was "still learning to be an actor."<sup>1</sup> It also takes years to find out what you are really good at, and what interests you most profoundly. It is therefore not surprising that first plays are rarely best plays: and that many playwrights (like Ben Jonson, or O'Neill in our own time) are not consistent in their achievement.

<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Dorothy Senior, *Life of Colley Cibber* (1928)



## SUMMARY, BIBLIOGRAPHY, AND QUESTIONS

### Summary

Older playwrights wrote in a settled tradition with conventional rules. The modern playwright must make a series of choices. This freedom is an embarrassment as well as an opportunity: he doesn't know what the audience will like, and the audience don't know what to expect. The structure of a play may rely on narrative (a series of incidents linked by suspense and surprise) or plot (an elaborate structure in which the parts are in some special relationship to each other). Themes may be stolen from other writers, adapted from history or actual life, or invented; but the boundaries between these kinds are arbitrary, for something is always borrowed and something invented. The theme may be treated in various ways: singly, or combined with a similar or contrasting theme; tragically or comically or with a mixed approach; using many actors or few, many scenes or few, a compact or discursive treatment; in verse or prose, of which there are many sorts.

The writer is, however, still bound to work within limits: the *external authority of law and custom*, which for religious, political, moral, or other reasons prevent him from using certain themes and ordain how he shall treat others; the *audience* which expects certain things and refuses to accept others; the *building* whose shape, size, comfort, and illumination affect the play; the *physical capacity* of the actors and the audience; and his own *personality, temperament, and experience* which fit him to treat certain themes and not others.

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*Notes*

*Section* (i) contains general theoretical books to stimulate the reader. Elizabeth Drew's book is the best general discussion of the writer's attitude to his material and the audience's way to study a play. Una Ellis-Fermor's book is a number of valuable essays on specific points. Gordon Craig's *On the Art of the Theatre* is the primary source of modern speculation and experiment in the theatre.

*Section* (ii) contains a group of Russian books which will infect the reader with the excitement of the theatre and show him how the producer and actor work.

*Section* (iii) contains the only books ostensibly dealing with dramatic technique which I have found of any value in English. No doubt there are others which I have not read.

*Section* (iv) contains similar books on the novel for comparison; and in particular these are included because they discuss plot and character in such a fruitful way.

*Section* (v) is a book on the history of censorship.

*Section* (vi) are historical books on the theatre; to be used also for Part II. There are many others, equally valuable, which might be mentioned. I name those I have actually used.

**Questions**

(For discussion or for written work)

(1) What are the important differences between the plot of a play and the plot of a novel?

What are the important requirements for (a) a National Theatre; and (b) a University Theatre for the University of Oxford? If you were an architect, or had a seat on the Committee planning either of them, what would you insist on?

(2) Is the censorship of plays still justified? Would you abolish or modify it?

(3) Choose an incident from life or history, and sketch a stage treatment for it. If you modify or add certain elements, explain why you do so.

(4) What kinds of verse are suitable for modern plays in verse?

(5) What themes in modern life have been most neglected by living dramatists? Suggest some unusual settings which seem to you to provide a *milieu* for dramatic treatment; such as the interior of a submarine, the headquarters of a Polar expedition in a hut in the Antarctic, a newly-created village in the desert which houses workers on atomic research.

(6) Do you consider that it is possible or desirable to "educate" an audience? If so, how would you set about it?

(7) Few modern playwrights write tragi-comedies on the Shakespearian model. Suggest reasons for this.

(8) Elizabethan playwrights often used prose and verse in the same play. Do you consider that modern playwrights should do the same? Examine the purposes for which the Elizabethans used both, and apply what you discover to modern conditions.

(9) The Greek and Italian theatres used masks for the actors; some modern dramatists (Yeats, Copeau, Priestley, etc.) have imitated this. Do you consider that the mask has a place in the modern theatre? What effect does it have on the play and the audience?

(10) Wagner dreamed of "music-drama." Do you like plays in which music, painting, dancing, play an integral part? Or do you think they should remain "incidental" aids?

(11) Would the modern playwright gain by writing for a company, with specific actors in mind?

PART II

KINDS OF THEATRE



### CHAPTER III

## THE TWO KINDS OF THEATRE

THERE are two kinds of theatre: one literary and the other independent of literature. The second, which for convenience we may call *popular*, flourishes at most times and in most places; the literary theatre has produced great masterpieces in a few periods of history—remarkably few, when we consider it: the Athens of Pericles, Western Europe during the Renaissance, and at the end of the nineteenth century.

From Asia, we have a few classical Indian and Chinese plays, and some of the Japanese Nō. From Greece in the fifth century, a little group of about forty plays—the surviving tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, and the comedies of Aristophanes. Three hundred years later, from Rome, the comedies of Plautus and Terence, developing from the lost plays of the Greek Menander. Two hundred years later, again, about the time of Christ, the tragedies of Seneca. Then the biggest gap of all—during the Roman Empire, the Dark and the Middle Ages, there are hardly any plays remembered for literary quality. There are the Miracle Plays, which can still move and charm us by their direct sincerity. There are a few Morality Plays, like the fifteenth-century *Everyman*, and John Skelton's *Magnificence*, which have power and beauty. We have to wait for the Spanish Renaissance, for Lope de Vega in the sixteenth century, and his successor Calderón de la Barca in the seventeenth, before we look again for great literary plays. In England, although we speak of the *Elizabethan* drama, it is almost a misnomer, for most of its masterpieces belong to the time of the Stuarts. As late as 1590, the theatre was only beginning to produce literature, and to be taken seriously: Kyd and Marlowe, writing in the fifteen-eighties, made its development possible. In France, the literary theatre comes later still. Its first monument is *Le Cid* of Pierre Corneille, written in 1636. There is a whole generation between Corneille and Racine, whose

*Andromaque* appeared in 1667. Just a little earlier, at the end of the sixteen-fifties, the touring actor who called himself Molière had come to Paris and made a hit with *Les Précieuses Ridicules* (1659).

Then, after the brilliance of the seventeenth century, the ground gets thinner again, in every country of Europe. The eighteenth century has few masterpieces, and even those look backwards. Goldsmith and Sheridan survive alone in England with half a dozen plays. Voltaire was the greatest name in European literature, and playwriting was one of his main preoccupations, but his plays have vanished into dust; it is Marivaux whose sentimental comedies can still be played. While England, France, and Spain are barren, other countries whose theatrical development had been retarded achieve pre-eminence; Italy in the mid-eighteenth century with Gozzi and Carlo Goldoni (1707-1792); Germany at the end of the century with Goethe, Schiller, and Lessing; Russia in the early nineteenth century with Gogol (1809-1852), Turgenev (1813-1883), and Ostrovsky (1823-1886).

The other great age of the European theatre begins about 1870. We no longer have to search for names; they come from every country—the small as well as the great. From Norway, Ibsen and Bjørnsen; Sweden, Strindberg; Holland, Heijermans; Belgium, Maeterlinck; France, Rostand, Claudel, Obey; Ireland, Synge, Yeats, Shaw, O'Casey; Spain, Sierra, the Quintero brothers, and greatest of all, Benavente; Italy, Pirandello; Czechoslovakia, Capek; Russia, Andreyev and Chekhov. Not all of these will survive, but some will; and if posterity seeks other names to set above them, it will not have far to seek. We can make no final judgments, for we stand at the end of this age.

Such is the history of the theatre, as it is summarized in most textbooks. But the drama—even the literary drama—is only in part a branch of literature; and it is a mistake to judge it purely by literary standards. There are kinds of théâtre which exist to-day, and have always existed, with few literary records or none. The music-hall, musical comedy, the concert-party, farce, revue, pantomime, and light opera have an ancestry more venerable than the literary theatre.

The popular theatre goes on when the literary theatre stops. It has had its great men, but it does not depend upon them. It is anonymous.

It is the theatre of the "troupers"—the wandering companies of players. We hear of them in Greece before classical tragedy developed. Legends are preserved of Susarion and his Icarian comedians in the eighth century, of Thespis in the sixth.<sup>1</sup> There were the *cordaces*, who gave performances with burlesque dancing and pantomime, and the *phallophori*, daubed with soot and wearing the phallus, and occupying themselves with eating and drinking, excretion and sex.

These troupes have always been international, like the circus clowns of our own time: like Grock, for example. Without music, pantomime, and the dance they could not make themselves understood, or amuse their polyglot audiences. The Greek popular comedians were found not only on the Greek mainland, but in Asia Minor and Magna Graecia—the Greek colonies in Sicily and Southern Italy. The Romans learnt from the Greeks and from the Etruscans; in fact, in Rome these performances were known as *Atellanae*—Atellane farces, from the Etruscan city of Atella (the modern Averna), which had a stone theatre while those in Rome were still made of wood.

Like their modern counterparts, these ancient forms of popular theatre had no literature. Their plays were improvised—made up for the occasion, or compounded from traditional scraps strung together round a scenario; if they were ever written down, they were the property of the company that played them, and perished with it. We know about them from references in ancient writers—Livy, Cicero, Apuleius refer to them; and we can see the actors in vase and wall paintings and statuettes from Greece, Rome, Pompeii, and Herculaneum. They have had their historians, but the students of the literary theatre tend to despise them. But this is a mistake, for two reasons. The first is the clear evidence that the drama is barren unless it grows in the theatre. There have been many plays written in the study from ancient times

<sup>1</sup> See Duchertre, *The Italian Comedy*, Chap. II, and Allardyce Nicoll, *Masks, Mimes and Miracles* (both published by Harrap).



down to the present. One of the Fathers of the Church, Gregory Nazianzen, wrote a tragedy called *Christ Suffering* on the model of Sophocles; there is Milton's *Samson Agonistes*; there are the plays of Byron and Shelley, of Beddoes; of Tennyson and Browning, of Robert Bridges; there is *The Dynasts* of Thomas Hardy. Sometimes such plays succeed in being great poems, but this is in spite of not being good plays.

On the second point, the popular theatre as the custodian of tradition: when the literary theatre declined or perished the popular theatre continued without a break. The real way to think of the literary theatre is as a series of islands—sometimes an archipelago—rising out of the sea of “show-business.” The theatre is nothing without craftsmanship; and craftsmanship is the prerogative of the professional. A playwright is a maker of plays, as a cartwright is of carts, a wheelwright of wheels; and many things go to the making of a play which can be learnt only by apprenticeship. Therefore the playwright must be bred in the theatre, or find his way into it somehow.

Yet we may notice a curious ambivalence (to use the current phrase) in the playwright's attitude to the theatre, which is worth considering. On the one hand, as we have seen, he needs the theatre. But it is dangerous for him to be *completely* in the theatre; if he is, he begins to draw from the theatre instead of from life. The theatre is a little world of its own. Even now that the social stigma which drew them together is largely removed, theatrical people still live apart. They work while others rest; they travel a great deal; their life depends on chance, for success is unpredictable; they use their bodies and personalities as their tools; they work in companies, with an extraordinary degree of intimacy which perhaps only sailors and monks can understand; they work sometimes under great physical and nervous strain, and at other times are idle. All these things produce the spell of the theatre, and it is powerful enough sometimes to compel the playwright to break it forcibly. Shakespeare, Congreve, Racine, and Sheridan all retired from the theatre in mid-career, as Maugham and Granville-Barker have done in our own time. We cannot explain this entirely by Shakespeare's

longing for Stratford, or (as some say) his failing health; by Congreve's disgust at the reception of *The Way of the World* or Maugham's at the reception of *Sheppey*; by Racine's religious scruples, or Granville-Barker's marriage to a rich wife. These may be the occasions of the breach; they are not the causes of it. The theatre demands all or nothing; and sometimes the point comes when the playwright can only say: "Very well, then nothing."

Yet if there is something in human nature which distrusts the theatre, there is also something in the theatre which has prevailed against Church and State, against bankruptcy and penal laws, prudery and ostracism; something which has attracted great minds, and charming, heroic, devoted souls.

Many of these people have belonged to the popular theatre, though nothing but their names remain. Some had courage like that of Andronicus who in Roman times, having lost his voice, gave his act in pantomime with a slave to recite the lines; or like Grimaldi, greatest of nineteenth-century clowns, who continued to perform after paralysis had robbed him of his prodigious leap, until at last he had to give his act seated in a chair. Some have had genius, like Edmund Kean, who left the inn and the fair-booth to delight the patrician audiences of Regency London. Some have had learning, like Flaminio Scala, the nobly born director of the Gelosi (the most famous popular Italian troupe of the Renaissance) or his leading lady, the beautiful Isabella Andreini whom Tasso delighted to honour. Most of them, of course, had none of these things; yet they were custodians of the most important traditions of the theatre.

Let us take an example. Shakespeare's fools are among the greatest of his creations; yet what is the fool but the incarnation of the popular theatre, enthroned even in the heart of the tragedy of *King Lear*; or in *Henry IV* shown as the boon companion of the hero of Agincourt, the pattern of English kingship? For the fool is the "common player of interludes," descended from the medieval mimes. "The occasional and extemporary jesting of these men passed by degrees into settled types of presentation . . . when formal plays came into fashion by the labour of the learned, these professional

comedians struck the keynote of character.”<sup>1</sup> If there is a family resemblance between Shakespeare’s Falstaff, Jonson’s Bobadill, the Spanish Captain of the *commedia dell’arte* and the *miles gloriosus* of Plautus, the explanation lies in the nature of the popular theatre.

In this discussion of playwriting, let us, therefore, keep in mind the paramount facts—that a “play” is not, strictly speaking, a written document at all, and the playwright is only one of the team who make a play. The persistent tradition of the theatre has been one in which literature did not count; it is possible to have performances of the highest class—like those of the Italian Comedy—with no written play at all. That is not to say that the playwright has no importance, or that *Hamlet* and the *Oresteia* are not (among other things) great literature. But we must redress a balance which has never been fairly stated or properly understood among literary theorists.

Because they have constantly thought of plays as literature, textbooks are never reliable in their judgment on particular plays. When these lines were being written, Vanbrugh’s play *The Relapse*, which is condemned by handbooks on Restoration Drama, was being beautifully and successfully played on the London stage. Or to take another example, here is the verdict of the *Concise Cambridge History of English Literature* on Oscar Wilde—

Oscar Wilde . . . in *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, *A Woman of No Importance*, and *An Ideal Husband* showed that he could write better bad plays than the regular purveyors of dramatic fare could produce with their most laboured efforts. None of these plays survive as acted plays, but they can still be read for their sallies of wit.<sup>2</sup>

This verdict was published in 1941. Within the next five years, two of these plays (*Lady Windermere’s Fan* and *An Ideal Husband*) had been produced with outstanding success in England and America; they had also been broadcast and televised, and the latter had been made into a conspicuously successful film. It would be in vain to explain away this success by the skill of the actors, producers, or the costume

<sup>1</sup> Symonds, quoted Busby, *The Fool in Elizabethan Drama*.

<sup>2</sup> George Sampson, *Concise Cambridge History of English Literature*, p. 758.

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designer; for even if this were true, it would only emphasize the co-operative nature of theatrical art. The reader who cares to search the textbooks will find innumerable examples of such confident and indefensible judgments. Our objective is to find wider and safer criteria to give background to the estimates of dramatic worth which we make.

## CHAPTER IV

# TRADITIONS AND CONVENTIONS OF THE THEATRE

*Every man who possesses real vitality can be seen as the resultant of two forces. He is first the child of a particular age, society, convention; of what we may call in one word a tradition. He is secondly, in one degree or another, a rebel against that tradition.*

(Gilbert Murray, *Euripides and his Age*, p. 6.)

*A convention is an agreement between writers and readers whereby the artist is allowed to limit and simplify his material in order to secure concentration through a control of the distribution of emphasis.*

(M. C. Bradbrook, *Themes and Conventions of Elizabethan Tragedy*.)

IT is to be hoped that the reader will not pass by these two quotations without really thinking about them, for they contain the kernel of the argument of this section of the book.

We have seen that the playwright works within certain boundaries and under certain limitations, decreed by his own personality, the nature of his medium, the conditions of the theatre, and the decrees of custom and law. It must not be supposed that these limits are necessarily irksome; on the contrary, they are usually valuable. They form a scaffolding; they give a shape and an objective; they challenge the playwright's ingenuity—so that he makes of these limits an opportunity. Elizabethan playwrights, having no scenery, used words to paint scenes, with magnificent success. Beaumarchais, forbidden to criticize directly the political structure of France before the Revolution, found an indirect way of saying what he wanted through Figaro. Or at the worst, if the playwright chooses to be a rebel (like Ibsen), the prevailing conventions give him a point of departure—something to react against.

The conventions have often been compared to the rules of a game. You can play football in the oldest way, where all the men of one village face all the men of another, and fight their way past each other through the streets to a given point.

Or you can choose teams, select a ground and mark its limits, and work out a code of rules. There can be more than one code—you can play football according to Rugby or Association rules, or Irish or American rules; but you can't mix them up. You can't, in the middle of an Association game, pick up the ball and run with it. That applies equally in the arts. But we have only just come to realize in the arts that there are different codes of rules: people still sometimes think, in art, that there is no code but Association, and shout when a man begins to run with the ball.

Historically, there are in the theatre seven codes of rules of primary importance: the Classical (Greek, with its Roman offshoot); the Medieval (liturgical drama, developing into the Miracle and Morality Plays); the Italian Comedy (the culmination of the secular medieval theatre); the Elizabethan; the Neo-classical (developed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries from a study of Greek and Roman models); the Realist; and the Symbolist.

### **The Classical Convention**

The interpreter of the classical convention to posterity is the Greek philosopher, Aristotle. His chief treatise on this subject, the *Poetics*, dates from about 330 B.C. He codified the practice of the great playwrights of the previous century. Aristotle writes about them, therefore, as we might write about the great Victorians; his verdict is sometimes a personal one, and sometimes prejudiced: he writes about something which was already over. But posterity has accepted his verdict as embodying the generally accepted views of the Greeks, and no doubt in the main it does so. At any rate, it is on Aristotle's treatise that dramatic theory has been built.

One thing we owe to him which has permanently influenced theatrical thought is the classification of kinds. After all, there is (in the abstract) no reason why this segregation should have been made. If Aristotle had codified the plays of the Elizabethan theatre instead of the Greek, he might have set up an historical-tragi-comedy like *Henry IV*, or a farce-idyll like *A Winter's Tale*, or a tragi-comic melodrama like *Hamlet*, as models to be followed. Certainly, if the Elizabethans had

not known and respected classic tradition, they would have classified their own plays very differently.

The segregation of the kinds in Greek thought was due to their origin in religious festivals, and especially the nature of the fertility ritual on which tragedy was modelled. This set the pattern which the hero must follow—an *agon*, a contest; the hero's *hubris*, his overweening pride, leading to the *pathos*, his suffering, downfall, and defeat; with a *peripeteia*, a quick turn round, a change of fortune, from good to ill, or sometimes at the end of the play (or the *trilogy*—a sequence of three plays) a change from ill to good, ending in *anagnorisis*, recognition, and often in an *epiphany*, a manifestation of the God.

The *chorus* must be there, representing all of us, society, public opinion. Because it is every *one*, it speaks in the first person singular ("I" not "we"), and because it is a link between the audience and the play it comments, sorrows, protests, or utters prayer (*euche*, the presentation of inner desire)—but it does not intervene in the action; it cannot do so, any more than we can in the auditorium. It cannot prevent Clytemnestra killing Agamemnon, it cannot resist Aegisthus, it cannot stop Creon carrying off Antigone. It can only cry out.

Ritual is very conservative in every society. The playwright must obey it, but he is not entirely without freedom. In Greece, although his subject must be chosen from myth, he could interpret it in his own way; even if there were not various versions of the legend to choose from; emphasis and the presentation of the characters could give an entirely different impression. We have only to listen to two people who have quarrelled giving separate accounts of the same incident to know that! As the Greek playwright could not surprise his audience with the outline of the story, he had rarely a place for *coups de théâtre*. A modern playwright may try to conceal the outline of his plot; the Greek wanted to remind people of the story, so he outlined it in a *prologue*. His play was shorter than one of ours, for the plays were presented in sequence on the same day; therefore his play was not divided into acts, with all that the act-division implies in the rhythm and structure of a play. It had *episodes* ("an episode," says Aristotle, "is that entire part of a tragedy which is between complete

choric songs") and ended in an *exode* (the part which has no choric song after it).

Custom also controlled to a great extent the rhythms of the verse. Part of the chorus, the *parode*, must be written in metres for dancing; part, the *stasimon*, was delivered standing. At certain points the chorus and actors exchanged *stichomythia*, an alternation of single line dialogue. All these things challenged the ingenuity of the playwright. Having a chorus he was able to use it for writing of such lyric beauty that the starkness of the events was relieved; he could also use the chorus for some of the purposes for which the Elizabethans used soliloquy. Miss Una Ellis-Fermor <sup>1</sup> has pointed out that

. . . one of the gravest responsibilities laid upon the earlier chorus (i.e. of Aeschylus) was that of communicating to us a body of common thought and feeling without which the dialogue would be bleak and limited, yet which the main actors in the circumstances would never utter themselves.

but in the choruses of Sophocles and Euripides she sees a more precise function—

In the *Oedipus Coloneus* the words spoken during the approach of Polyneices seem not only to express sympathy with Oedipus but to reveal also a part of his thought that he himself has not expressed. . . . A similar use of the chorus may be traced more frequently in Euripides. In *Medea*, *Ion*, *Hippolytus*, and *Bacchae*, to instance a few only, we meet choric speeches which, though they might be interpreted as commentary, deduction, or reflection arising from the passions or events, seem rather an amplification or extension of the thought of the main agents and to belong more properly to them than to the speakers.

As Miss Ellis-Fermor says, recent writers who have attempted to use the chorus have rarely used this method of revealing the areas of thought most nearly intractable to dramatic form. But her analysis also reveals the personal element in Greek tragedy—the way in which the writers, while accepting the form, moulded it to their own purposes and gave it new significance. Change was always going on. The Greek dramatist could sometimes disobey as well as obey; the furious criticisms of Euripides by his contemporaries show us

<sup>1</sup> *The Frontiers of Drama*, 1945 (Methuen), esp. pp. 102–3; but the whole chapter (VI: "A Technical Problem, the Revelation of Unspoken Thought in Drama") is important.



that if the forms were cherished, it was possible to defy them—and still be produced. In fact, the stricter the form, the more telling is an alteration; and in all periods a technical change may affect the audience emotionally as a revolution.

From this conception of unity and the shape of the Greek drama springs the notion of “crisis,”—the Greek word for decision. A play must not sprawl, but must concern itself with the moment when everything is resolved. Many later dramatists (notably Ibsen in his prose plays) have accepted this Greek theory of concentration. However altered or misunderstood, the Greek conceptions, and especially Aristotle’s formulation of them, have been the most fruitful in dramatic theory and in their influence on practising playwrights.

No doubt Aristotle followed general practice in classifying Tragedy and Comedy; yet we may suspect a personal prejudice in the vastly greater importance he gives to Tragedy, which he makes the pre-eminent literary form, setting it even above Epic. His analysis of Comedy is extremely summary when we set it beside what he has to say of Tragedy; he neither describes the details of its form nor estimates its purpose and significance except in a bald way.

Since Aristotle, tragedy has always had the greatest prestige; yet comedy can be just as important, just as serious, if less earnest. Later theorists, deserting Aristotle, have been deeply divided on the function of comedy. Some of them, and notably Ben Jonson, have denied that the purpose of comedy is to provoke laughter—

The parts of a Comedie are the same with a Tragedie, and the end is partly the same. For, they both delight, and teach. . . .

Nor is the moving of laughter alwaies the end of Comedy, that is rather a fowling for the people’s delight, or their fooling. For, as Aristotle saies rightly, the moving of laughter is a fault in Comedie, a kind of turpitude, that depraves some part of a mans nature without a disease . . . wee dislike, and scorne such representations; which made the ancient Philosophers ever thinke laughter unfitting in a wise man <sup>1</sup>

What did Shakespeare have to say about this at “The Mermaid,” we may wonder? But to this subject we must recur later.

<sup>1</sup> B. Jonson, *Discoveries*, Works, Vol. VIII, ed. Herford and Simpson, p. 643.

### Medieval Miracle and Morality Plays

The Miracles began before the year 1000 with the *tropes*<sup>1</sup>—dramatized additions to the Church service at certain High Festivals, notably Christmas and Easter. They were at first very simple and fragmentary, and in Latin, the language of the Mass. In the course of three hundred years they developed;<sup>2</sup> the vernacular was introduced, scenery and costumes were added, and the laity began to take part as well as the clergy: the shepherds came to the manger with their lambs, tarbox, and scrip; the Angels sat in the empty tomb at Easter to reassure the sorrowing Maries. But this growing elaboration was frightening to the Church—it would not do to have the Mass become an introduction or appendage to the drama. A comic element began to show itself—a recrudescence of the old Feast of Fools which the Church had with such difficulty dismissed from the sacred precincts. The old fear and hatred of the theatre was renewed; but wise heads preferred to retain in some form this powerful instrument of piety and instruction. It was dismissed to the churchyard and given over to the laity.<sup>3</sup>

Then an occasion for the sacred plays was found in the new Corpus Christi festival of 1311, which was especially dedicated to the use of the new rising towns; and Guilds of craftsmen and merchants undertook to present short plays in sequence as part of the Festival. The long summer day (the Thursday after Trinity Sunday) was admirably chosen; and the festivities went on all day in the streets and squares of the towns. The arrangements were not always the same. In most English towns the plays were performed on “pageants”—movable scaffolds dragged on wheels.

In some towns in England, and more elaborately on the Continent, stages were set up along the processional route for the various incidents. But the most influential and practical plan, from the point of view of future stage developments,

<sup>1</sup> See Sir E. K. Chambers, *The Medieval Stage* (Oxford University Press, 1903).

<sup>2</sup> Please remember (here and elsewhere) how long this is—and how little we know, even now, about it.

<sup>3</sup> Christ was often played by a priest, even to the end—e.g. the Curé Nicole at Metz in 1437 (Lanson: *Histoire de la Littérature Française*, p. 206).

was to have one large elaborate stage for the whole cycle of plays. From this developed an important set of conventions which are the basis of Elizabethan stage-craft.

The usual course of the cycle was to treat the history of mankind from Adam and the Fall to Christ and the redemption, each incident being portrayed by one craft guild. As many as forty-eight episodes <sup>1</sup> were included in the hey-day of the Miracles. In the simultaneous form of staging, a number of booths were erected at the back of a long platform, to be used for each episode in turn—in this way economy and speed were possible. Besides using their own booth, the players in an episode could use the whole of the platform as well—it attached itself imaginatively to the particular scene: at one moment it was part of the Garden of Eden; later it became the courtyard of Herod's Palace, or Pilate's House, or the Hill of Calvary, or the mouth of Hell.

Along with this convention went a strong realistic strain. Adam and Eve were naked in the Garden—for the Bible said so; considerable sums were paid for oranges, dates, and exotic fruits for the trees; fire, smoke, and sulphurous fumes issued from the mouth of Hell; and the actor who played Christ suffered so severely on the Cross as sometimes narrowly to escape death. Out of this realism sprang also scenery. Heaven lay always, by convention, at the extreme right of the stage, with a balcony above on which appeared God, the Virgin, and the Saints. Then came Herod's Palace, the Temple, and Pilate's House with other earthly places, until you got to Hell Mouth at the extreme left.<sup>2</sup>

It is hard to believe that such elaborate productions could have been made just once a year, by amateurs; but commonly it was so. The funds were contributed by the Guilds, or by the benevolence of some prince or rich man. The authors of the plays, and the names of the actors or stage managers are rarely known, and when known, they have no significance. No great actor or writer emerged from the Miracles. Their rise and fall was bound up with the history of the Craft Guilds.

<sup>1</sup> In the York cycle.

<sup>2</sup> Lanson records a Nativity at Rouen in 1474 which had twenty-eight places named between Paradise and Hell (p. 207).

Before the fourteenth century, there was no organization capable of undertaking them; after the fifteenth, the craft guilds decayed with changes in industrial organization; the pageants fell to pieces in the inn-yards where they stood, the costumes were no longer refurbished, the scripts were lost, purloined, or destroyed.

What then did the Miracles contribute to the tradition of the theatre? First, a sign of its power; its emotional and spiritual significance. A vast public was bred which loved the theatre; not only so, but a public which made its own theatre. These actors were not vagabonds, not beggars to whom you threw a coin, or whom you entertained in charity: they were substantial and respectable tradesmen. The plays they produced were not confined to London or the halls of noblemen—they were given all over the country. The kinds of plays they did were accepted as a norm: a long succession of short scenes, loosely linked; the union of acute realism with an agreement to pretend. These things became axioms of the Elizabethan theatre, whose dramatists got their first knowledge of the theatre from these plays. The bladder of blood which the Elizabethan actor pierced when he stabbed himself; the mariners who entered dripping wet from shipwreck; the ordnance shot off; these are as medieval as the cloak of invisibility, the parades of rival armies from opposite doors of the playhouse, the main stage of the Elizabethan theatre which is now Capulet's house, and then Juliet's tomb.<sup>1</sup>

The significance of the Miracle plays may be understood best of all by looking at what happened in France. There, in a few places, the companies became professional. In Paris the *Confrérie de la Passion*, which had existed for at least a generation as an amateur company, obtained a Royal Charter (1402) giving it the sole right to perform Mysteries; it transferred its shows from the city squares to a roofed-in theatre in the Hôtel de Flandre. In 1548 it moved again to its famous headquarters in the Hôtel de Bourgogne.<sup>2</sup> But it now had powerful enemies, and at that very moment the company

<sup>1</sup> See below, p. 75. In Ireland the Miracle cycles were still being played at the end of the seventeenth century.

<sup>2</sup> Lanson, *Histoire de la Littérature Française*, pp. 210 and 417.

were faced with an edict from the Parlement of Paris confirming their monopoly, but denying them the right to play *sacred* mysteries: that is, their staple form; for they showed a vast cycle of scenes from Scripture and the Lives of the Saints. Opposition to them united the Protestants and some Catholic reformers, who found their shows blasphemous; and the Humanist students of Aristotle, who found their plays bad art: for should not a good play be short, succinct, and unified in time, place, and action?

In face of this edict, the Confrérie behaved much as the English Minor Theatres of the early nineteenth century behaved in the face of the Patent Houses:<sup>1</sup> they re-titled their Mysteries as tragedies or tragi-comedies (just as the English companies changed Macbeth into a burletta). But after they had struggled on for half a century against the challenge of the wandering comedians who visited Paris they gave in; and in 1599 let their theatre to Lecomte's company, which had as its playwright Alexandre Hardy. Notice that it is at this point that the story ceases to be anonymous—the Confrérie had plays, but no playwrights. Hardy adopted the technique and staging of the theatre he inherited. If Hardy had had his way, the French theatre would have been very like the English Elizabethan stage; and for a time it looked as if his style would be followed. Polite society took to the theatre, as it did in England; ladies began to be seen at the Hôtel de Bourgogne, and nobly born poets like Racan, Mairet, and Théophile wrote plays for the company (*Pyrame et Thisbé* by Théophile, 1620; *Bergeries* by Racan, 1623). However, as we shall see,<sup>2</sup> the French theatre turned its back on this direct development from the medieval stage.

We must now turn to consider the place of the Moralities in theatrical tradition. Although Miracles and Moralities are lumped together in most books, there is no established connexion between them, and the more they are examined the more different they appear.

It is a mistake to say that the Moralities "developed out of" the Miracles: they are different in spirit, structure, and technique. The Miracles are vast cycles of scenes taken from

<sup>1</sup> Above, pp. 28 ff.

<sup>2</sup> Below, p. 71.

history and legend, using hundreds of characters. The Moralities are short unified plays on allegorical themes, with a few characters and an invented plot. They are written in verse, but it is not the folk-verse of the Miracles with its alliteration and ballad-forms; their verse is rhymed couplet or elaborate stanza. They are written, not anonymously but by court poets like Skelton, clerics like Henry Medwall, chaplain to Archbishop Morton, humanists like Rastell (Sir Thomas More's brother-in-law), protestants like Richard Wever: men of literary pretensions and achievement, gentlemen and scholars. They are performed by amateurs or professional companies in palaces and the houses of gentlemen, at banquets or on festal occasions. They have a common theme—the redemption of mankind. Their heroes and heroines are all the same hero—that is, all of us: “Mankynde” (in *Mankynde*) or “Humanum Genus” (i.e. the Human Race, in *The Castell of Perseverance*); “Everyman” (in *Everyman*); or “Anima” (i.e. the Soul, in *Wisdom*). The hero is surrounded by characters whom the playwright inherits or invents: Nought, New-Gyse, and Now-a-Days; the Five Wits (often one character) and the Three Christian Powers, Mind, Will, and Understanding; the Seven Deadly Sins; Good Deeds, Pity, and Contemplation; Wealth, Dropsy, Pill, and Supper—personified abstractions of medieval thought or the playwright's own vision.

Except for the fragmentary secular farces of the Middle Ages, of which we still know little, the Moralities are the first plays with invented plot. Of course the poet inherited a great deal—the allegorical framework of his thinking, and many of the characters, but he had to invent a dramatic frame for them—a sequence of situations, events, details, and speeches, through which they could move. This may sound little, yet it is a great deal.

The application of medieval allegory to the drama was to have permanent consequences. Allegory has become so thoroughly a part of play construction that even in the realistic theatre its presence can be felt—Ibsen's *Pillars of Society* or Priestley's *An Inspector Calls* are capable of allegorical interpretation.

The Moralities, as we have seen, brought poets of learning and talent to the theatre. It is equally important that they brought these poets into relation with the professional theatre. The central characters of Medwall's *Fulgens and Luces* (an Interlude with a classical setting, which has sometimes been called the first English comedy) are not the Roman senator, his daughter, and her rich and poor suitors, but the nameless clowns. The clowns come from the professional itinerant theatre.

The Fool survived to become one of the central attractions of the Elizabethan companies when they left the road and settled in permanent theatres in Shoreditch or on Bankside; and the alliance between the Fool and the poet, even if it was sometimes uneasy, produced the characteristic greatness of our finest drama.

To sum up, the Miracles contributed to the stock of theatrical tradition the convention of the simultaneous stage with its blend of realism and make-believe, and its scenes loosely bound into a unity; they contributed also a nation-wide theatrical activity with a sense of lofty purpose. Over 100 towns in England are known to have had mystery cycles, and each involved hundreds of people in its staging. The Moralities, on the other hand, brought the use of allegory; the reunion of literary and professional histrionic talent; and the search for invented plot. We shall find the fruits of these things in the Elizabethan theatre.

### Italian Comedy

The improvised Italian comedy, the *commedia dell' arte* (as opposed to written drama, the *commedia sostenuta*), had no literature; and so it might seem at first that we could disregard it in a study of playwriting. This is, however, not so. The *commedia dell' arte* has a great importance to the literary theatre. First of all, because it forms the living link between the ancient Greek and the modern theatre.

Though it cannot be proved with absolute certainty, all the evidence favours the direct descent of the improvised comedy from the ancient theatre, and all the authorities accept it. There is, first of all, the evidence of the characters. The travelling companies which played the *commedia dell' arte*

always included certain types. The actors were trained in a particular role, and played it for years—often for a whole lifetime. These types were all male, at least down to the eighteenth century; and they were masked. Though women acted, they wore no masks and they had no clearly defined character; they were there as singers or dancers, or as *inamoratas*, subjects for the love intrigues of the male characters. Columbine, the only particularized woman character, is not found before the eighteenth century—the last period of the old comedy.

The chief male characters were the old men, Pantaloon and the Doctor; the Braggart Captain, who later became Scaramouche; and the scoundrels, Pulcinella (Punchinello or Punch) with the comic servants called *Zanni* (zanies), the knavish Harlequin and the stupid Brighella.

These characters are reincarnations of the ancient comedians; if the Greek and Roman vase-paintings, frescoes, statuettes, and terra-cottas are put side by side with sixteenth-, seventeenth-, and eighteenth-century drawings and engravings the identity is indisputable.<sup>1</sup> Punch is descended from Maccus and Bucco in the Atellane farces; Pantaloon from Casnar and Pappus, and, from the old men of Plautus, such characters as Theuropides, Euclio, and Demenutus; just as the Captain is from Plautus's braggarts; and Harlequin, with his black face and motley dress, from the African slaves, the pandars of the classic Roman comedy. To carry matters only one stage farther back, it is certain that Plautus and Terence used as their source the lost Greek plays of the "New Comedy" represented by the name of Menander.

The great strength of this long, persistent tradition influenced the literary theatre in many ways and at a large number of points. The Italian comedians, after they had achieved fame in the sixteenth century by becoming fashionable with the Italian aristocracy at a time when Italy was the cultural centre of Europe, began to travel. They established a permanent theatre in Paris, and they visited London and performed at the court of Queen Elizabeth as early as 1573.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See especially the illustrations in *Masks, Mimes, and Miracles*, by Allardyce Nicoll (Harrap).

<sup>2</sup> Busby, *The Fool in Elizabethan Drama*,



Shakespeare's early plays show their influence; *The Comedy of Errors* is based on Plautus; in *Love's Labour's Lost* Don Adriano is persistently referred to as the "Braggart"; *As You Like It* mentions Pantaloon in a way that shows Shakespeare's familiarity with the character. It was said of the actor who created Scaramouche at the court of Louis XIV—

*Il fut le maître de Molière  
Et la Nature fut le sien.*<sup>1</sup>

Molière often attended the performances of the Italian players in Paris, and lived on terms of intimacy with them. Scaramouche was the model he formed in training his troupe, according to a contemporary account;<sup>2</sup> characters from the Italian comedy appear in his plays, and even the plot of the *Misanthrope* comes in part from an Italian scenario. In the next century, Carlo Goldoni evolves from, and reacts against, the tradition of the *commedia dell' arte*.

The great contributions made by the *commedia* to dramatic technique lie in the conception of character and the skill of detailed invention which the mimes displayed. The actors had no written play; they sketched out a plot, which was then stuck up in the wings. The actors had as their equipment a training in acting, singing, tumbling, and pantomime, a stock of anecdotes, and their "business"—the *lazzi*. The original Scaramouche, at eighty-three, could still box a fellow-actor's ear with his foot. Vincentini could turn a somersault with a full glass of water in his hand, and delighted to keep the audience's heart in its mouth by running along the boxes as if he was going to fall off. Typical examples of the *lazzi* are Harlequin in pursuit of a fly (which he then munches) or a butterfly (which eludes him). He may be dressed as half a man and half a woman; or disguised as Diana; or as Mercury, astride a property eagle. The whole conception of comedy, and particularly of comic situation, owes much to the Italians. So does comic character. The Italians did not set out to "imitate" actual people, or even to "create" comic character. They inherited characters as the ancient Greek tragic poets inherited plots, and they then re-vivified them.

<sup>1</sup> Duchartre, *The Italian Comedy*, p. 247. ("He was Molière's master and Nature was his.")

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.

### The Neo-classical Convention

It is fascinating to contrast the different fates of humanist ideas in the English and the French theatre.

At the end of the Middle Ages, there came on men a mood of hatred and scorn for that great period, coupled with ignorance of and contempt for its achievement. The Miracles, Moralities, and Interludes were despised. But, looking back to the Greek and Roman world which they admired, and in which they sought their models, the Renaissance humanists were immediately struck with the prestige which the drama enjoyed. Aristotle, the greatest of critics, set up tragedy as the form *par excellence*. If the modern world was to vie with the ancient; if Italian and French and English were to establish their claim to be recognized as languages equal to Latin and Greek, not mere "vulgar tongues," then they must have a drama, and a great one. The humanists set themselves to create it.

Their first achievement was to make the drama an object of study. It was part of their theory of education that learning must be made attractive. Roger Ascham, the chief spokesman of the early humanists in England, gives the example of Lady Jane Grey, who sat over her Plato while the family rode hunting in the Park. When asked why, she contrasted the severity of her parents with the kindness of her tutor—

I think myself in hell, till time come, that I must go to Mr. Elmer, who teacheth me so gently, so pleasantly, with such fair allurements to learning, that I think all the time nothing, whiles I am with him.<sup>1</sup>

One of the "allurements" to learning devised by humanist schoolmasters was the performance of Greek and Latin plays; it was more fun and more effective education to act them than merely to study the construction of the sentences.<sup>2</sup> The Westminster play, still given every year, is a survival from this period; some Oxford and Cambridge colleges founded at the time included drama on their statutes (like modern American universities), and most Tudor gentlemen, like Polonius, might boast of their acting.

<sup>1</sup> Ascham, *The Scholemaster*, Arber's Reprint, p. 47.

<sup>2</sup> Erasmus, in the *Colloquia*, gave his authority to this practice; perhaps first suggested it.

It was not merely the boys who got fun out of it; the public began to show great interest. At Merchant Taylors' School, where the greatest of practical pedagogues, Richard Mulcaster, brought up half the great men of the age, the boys' performances were so thronged that the governors complained that they could not get a seat, and at last forbade the public performances.<sup>1</sup> At Eton, the head master, Nicholas Udall, wrote one of the best of early comedies in English, *Ralph Roister Doister*, for the boys (1553), using Plautus and Terence as models. All this activity soon had practical results of the most important kind in the theatre.

Meanwhile the scholars sat down to study the texts of ancient drama, and the critical commentaries. It happened that, although Aristotle was easily available, the great playwrights, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes, were not. Moreover, most people still learned Latin as the basis of study, and understood it best. So the dramatists who were commonly studied were not the great Greeks, but the Latins Plautus and Terence, and the tragedian Seneca, who wrote for the study, and not for the stage.

Besides reading the plays, the Italian humanists of the sixteenth century (followed by the rest of Europe), set themselves to constructing a code of rules which should govern the writing of plays. In doing this, they ignored the difference between the classic theatre and their own. If it was necessary to have buildings like those of the Greeks, they would build them. They did not pause to consider that they could not supply a classic audience. There still survives at Vicenza the Renaissance theatre which Palladio built (about 1580) from his study (and misunderstanding) of the Roman architect Vitruvius.<sup>2</sup>

The element of misunderstanding is very important; and it is not only inevitable, it is good as well as bad—for from it comes new invention. The Renaissance architects wished to copy the ancients; but in fact they created something new. They did not understand the differences between the Greek and the Latin theatre. There were passages in Vitruvius

<sup>1</sup> See F. S. Boas, *Tudor Drama* (Oxford University Press, 1933).

<sup>2</sup> There are pictures of Palladio's theatre in most text books, e.g. Allardyce Nicoll, *The Development of the Theatre*, or Sheldon Cheney, *The Theatre*. Vitruvius' treatise, *De Architectura*, had been rediscovered in 1486.

which puzzled them, and they worked matters out as best they could. Vitruvius described how changes of scene were *indicated* in Roman times by the *periacti*. On the three faces of a turning prism were two architectural views (for tragedy and comedy) and a pastoral view (for satyr-plays). These could be turned about at will, but they did not change the scene, they merely acted as an announcement. Working from this hint, Serlio developed the built architectural setting, the frame of his stage; he, or his followers, filled in the spaces with painted perspectives; and, gradually, the architecture became merely a frame—a *proscenium*, while the painted scenery, with the aid of machinery, held the stage alone. This new kind of stage was to have the effect of completely changing the techniques of acting and playwriting. But it took time to evolve, and in England it had a delayed impact; it did not become important until the end of the seventeenth century, except in the court Masques.

Just as the architects misconstrued their task, so did the critics. They read their Aristotle, and from their interpretation emerged the celebrated “Unities”: unity of Time, Place, and Action. Of these three, only one can really be justified from Aristotle: the Unity of Action. He described tragedy, in Chapter VI of the *Poetics*, as “the imitation of an action that is serious, has magnitude, and is complete in itself”; and in Chapter VIII he develops what he means by Unity of Action; it does not consist in having one man as its subject, for an infinity of things befall that one man, some of which it is impossible to reduce to unity.

In poetry the story, as an imitation of action, must represent one action, a complete whole, with its several incidents so closely connected that the transposal or withdrawal of any one of them will disjoin and dislocate the whole. For that which makes no perceptible difference by its presence or absence is no real part of the whole.<sup>1</sup>

We will only mention in passing the difficulties raised by these definitions, and the caution required in interpreting Aristotle’s word “mimesis” as “imitation.”<sup>2</sup> It is a matter

<sup>1</sup> Hamilton Fyfe’s edition of Bywater’s translation (Oxford University Press), pp. 24-5.

<sup>2</sup> Aristotle spoke of imitating what *ought to be*, not what is. (See Butcher’s edition, p. 116.)

of judgment what incidents are, or are not, connected; but the humanists were quite certain about it.

To the Unity of Action was added the Unity of Time, by changing a casual statement of Aristotle into an Imperative. Aristotle merely said that the dramatists "endeavoured to keep as far as possible within a single circuit of the sun or something near that" (and there are plays by all the great Greek dramatists still surviving of which this is not true).<sup>1</sup> The sixteenth-century critics said that the action of a good play *must* lie within twenty-four hours. To this they added (what is found neither in Aristotle nor the dramatists) that there must be no change of scene.

While the critics were busy formulating the rules, the dramatists had already got to work. The result of humanist schooling was to interest "gentlemen" in the theatre. At the beginning of the period, some influential plays were still written in Latin, imitating the ancients: notably those of the Frenchman, "Textor"—his "Prodigal Son" play *Juvenis, Pater, Uxor*, was widely imitated in English between 1530 and 1570; his *Thersites* appeared in an English adaptation as early as 1537. But the interest of the first "classical plays" in English is not only their aristocratic authors and sentiments and their Senecan tone; it is that they did *not* stick closely to their models. Plays like *Damon and Pithias* and *Horestes* (in the fifteen-sixties) were realistic and violent in tone; even *Gorboduc*, by Norton and Sackville, acted before Queen Elizabeth in 1562, would not pass as a model, according to regular critics. Here is part of Sir Philip Sidney's judgment on it—

notwithstanding as it is full of stately speeches and well sounding phrases, climbing to the height of Seneca his stile, and as full of notable morality, which it doth most delightfully teach, and so obtain the very end of Poesie, yet in troth it is very defectious in the circumstances, which grieveth me, because it might not remain as an exact model of all tragedies. For it is faulty both in place and time, the two necessary companions of all corporal actions. For where the stage should always represent but one place, and the uttermost time presupposed in it should be, both by Aristotle's precept and common reason, but one day, there is both many days, and many places, inartificially imagined. But

<sup>1</sup> See Hamilton Fyfe, *op. cit.*, p. xxi for examples,

if it be so in Gorboduck, how much more in all the rest, where you shall have Asia of the one side, and Affrick of the other, and so many other under-kingdoms, that the Player, when he cometh in, must ever begin with telling where he is: or else the tale will not be conceived?<sup>1</sup>

The interest of this passage is not merely its intrinsic criticism, but its evidence that the Humanist theory of the Unities was widely known and authoritatively stated *before the Elizabethan Drama began*, and more than half a century before it began to be of practical importance in France. The Elizabethan dramatists knew of the Unities, but except for Ben Jonson, they turned their backs on them. Shakespeare wrote one play, *The Tempest*, which observed the Unities; and he seems to have done this with ironic intention.

Even a hundred years after Sidney, when the classical and French influences combined to give the unities a prestige enhanced by the triumphs of Corneille and Racine, the English were still sceptical. Dryden's *Essay on Dramatick Poesy* gives the French hearty praise mixed with discerning criticism. One of the characters in Dryden's dialogue says—

By their servile observations of the unities of time and place, and integrity of scenes, they have brought on themselves that dearth of plot, and narrowness of imagination, which may be observed in all their plays.<sup>2</sup>

—and Fletcher and Shakespeare are praised for, among other things, their use of sub-plots and for mixing tragedy with comedy—

A scene of mirth, mixed with tragedy, has the same effect upon us which our music has betwixt the acts; which we find a relief to us from the best plots and language of the stage, if the discourses have been long. I must therefore have stronger arguments, ere I am convinced that compassion and mirth in the same subject destroy each other . . . co-ordination in a play is as dangerous and unnatural as in a state.<sup>3</sup>

But if the Unities never triumphed in England, it would be foolish to imagine that classical theories had no influence. The form of Elizabethan playwriting proves the contrary. Blank verse itself is the product of Humanist theorizing; for

<sup>1</sup> Sidney, "Apologie for Poetrie," (c. 1580), in *Poetry and the Poets*, ed. R. Brimley Johnson, 1926, p. 62.

<sup>2</sup> R. B. Johnson, *op. cit.*, p. 132.

<sup>3</sup> Dryden, *Essay on Dramatick Poesy*, p. 127, R. Brimley Johnson, *op. cit.*

classical Greek and Latin did not use rhyme. Ascham denounced

our rude beggarly ryming, brought first into Italie by *Gothes* and *Hunnes*, when all good verses and all good learning too, were destroyed by them.<sup>1</sup>

and Marlowe, in the Prologue to *Tamburlaine*, promised

From jiggging veins of rhyming mother wits  
And such conceits as clownage keeps in pay  
We'll lead you to the stately tent of war. . .

So, from the first experiments of Nicholas Grimald<sup>2</sup> and the Earl of Surrey about 1540, was evolved by 1580 Marlowe's "mighty line" which swept rhyme out of the theatre, and made possible the triumphs of Shakespeare and Jonson, Webster and Dekker.

The English playwrights owed also to the classics an acquaintance with classical form. So far as externals went, it must be confessed that the Elizabethans treated it with little respect. At the head of most Elizabethan plays is written the copy-book heading: *Actus primus, Scena prima*; but very few of them remember to carry through the division as far as Act V. Students who have never looked at the Folios and Quartos of Shakespeare will be surprised to find that the regular division of acts and scenes does not exist—it has been added by the editors, together with fancy stage directions which would have astonished Shakespeare. Nevertheless, indirectly the Senecan notion of a five-act play had its effect; and still more deeply, the Aristotelian theory of unity: they curbed the lawlessness of the medieval inheritance, and gave a new sensibility. In particular, the Elizabethans were aware of the Aristotelian outline of "Complication" and "Unravelling." "By the *Complication*," said Aristotle, "I mean all that extends from the beginning of the action to the part which marks the turning-point to good or bad fortune. The *Unravelling* is that which extends from the beginning of the change to the end." <sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Arber's Reprint, *The Scholemaster*, p. 145.

<sup>2</sup> Neither of these poets wrote blank verse for plays; Surrey used it for his translation of the *Aeneid*, and Grimald, a year or two earlier, for short poems. Grimald was a University man, and like Textor, he wrote plays in Latin. His *Christus Redivivus*, modelled on Plautus, was played by the scholars of Merton College for the Oxford townspeople. (See Berdan, *Early Tudor Poetry*, p. 351.)

<sup>3</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, Chapter XVIII, Butcher's trans., p. 65.

This skeleton structure has been accepted as the basis of plot by all schools of playwriting, even when (as often with the Elizabethans) it does not really express the situation.

Finally, and most whole-heartedly, the Elizabethans accepted the Greek conception of the tragic hero. To produce pity and fear, the hero chosen must be

a man who is not eminently good and just, yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice and depravity, but by some error or frailty. He must be one who is highly renowned and prosperous. . . . Again, since Tragedy is an imitation of persons who are above the common level, the example of good portrait painters should be followed. They, while reproducing the distinctive form of the original, make a likeness which is true to life and yet more beautiful. So too the poet, in representing men who are irascible or indolent, or have other defects of character, should preserve the type and yet ennoble it.<sup>1</sup>

In this, Shakespeare and most of the Elizabethan playwrights are enthusiastic Aristotelians; though a few of minor importance chose persons in common life for their tragic heroes, Shakespeare never descended below Othello, Venetian general and viceroy. It is worth noting that Aristotle does not say that the tragic hero must be of royal blood; though the Renaissance critics, especially in France, tightened up his edict once more, and often limited the choice to Kings and Princes.

In France, as in England, scholars had been busy with the Unities since the sixteenth century; but at that period they had no impact on the theatre whatever. Hardy, the most popular playwright of that time, seems never to have heard of them; and Corneille certainly had not when he wrote his first play, *Mélite*, in 1629. They came into the theatre through Mairet, one of the group of gentlemen-poets whom we have described above,<sup>2</sup> writing pastorals for the Hôtel de Bourgogne. In 1631 Mairet wrote a tragedy called *Silvanire*, and in the Preface applied the academic theory of the Unities to the practical theatre; though his play only partly carried out his principles. His later play, *Sophonisbe* (1634), may be called the first regular French tragedy.

The struggle was short and sharp. The Bourgogne company would not (indeed could not) receive the Unities—they would

<sup>1</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, Butcher's trans., pp. 45 and 57.

<sup>2</sup> See p. 60.



have had to rebuild their theatre. A rival company, that of Mondory, was established, and made the rules into a slogan. Pamphlets and prefaces appeared on both sides; notably, Ogier defended tragi-comedy in the joint names of truth and pleasure, much as Dryden did later in England. It was not true that in life tragedy and comedy were divided, and change of scene and mood pleased by affording relief to the spectator. But the issue was soon decided; and in part (as so often happens) by forces outside the theatre and independent of art. In 1635 Chapelain converted Cardinal Richelieu to the Unities. Henceforward the Court was their stronghold; and as art depended on the Court, the theatre became regular. That is, of course, a very inaccurate summary; the Court could not have prevailed unless men of genius had been able and willing to work within the frame of the Unities. The temper of the time and the French genius favoured order and retrenchment; and above all, the rules appealed to the spirit of *reason*.<sup>1</sup> It was not *reasonable* that a baby born in Act I should be married in Act III and die of old age in Act V; that a few boards should represent Carthage one minute, and Rome the next; that a tree should stand for a forest or Thebes be a name written on a board. "The establishment of the rules was a victory of realism over imagination."<sup>2</sup> From this victory springs, much later, the whole code of "realism" or "naturalism" in the nineteenth-century theatre.

But in France, in spite of the triumph of the Unities, one element remained curiously medieval—the verse. Whereas England accepted blank verse on humanist principles, France retained rhyme and the twelve-syllable line—the Alexandrine, which was medieval in name and nature.<sup>3</sup> But then, France had possessed in the Middle Ages a poetry of unexampled subtlety and technical perfection: such things are not thrown away without a thought. Each country works out its literary (and its political) revolutions in its own way. Through the Unities, as Lanson says, the French classical spirit worked

<sup>1</sup> "I say that the rules of the theatre are not founded on authority, but on reason"—d'Aubignac, cited Lanson, *Histoire de la Littérature Française*, p. 421.

<sup>2</sup> Lanson, p. 422.

<sup>3</sup> It took its name from the medieval lays about Alexander written in twelve-syllable lines.

out the form most apt to express itself; these new laws obliged the playwright to conceive tragedy as something quite different from a romance cut up into scenes.

### **The Elizabethan Tradition**

The Elizabethan theatre was both an art and an industry; both medieval and humanist; both popular and literary; drawing from the Court, the universities, and the people. To prevent this from appearing a series of platitudes, let us examine the conventions which were established in some detail. Fortunately, so much study has been concentrated on the Elizabethan theatre in the last fifty years that there is ample material available.<sup>1</sup>

First, then, the Elizabethan theatre was built out of the practical professional knowledge of the companies of players, especially such companies as those of Henslowe and the Burbages. Many hard things have been said of these actor-managers, and no doubt deservedly. The fact remains that men of genius worked with them, and that they raised the status of the profession, at a time when it had many enemies, from that of "common players of interludes," rogues and vagabonds outside the law, to one in which the greatest nobles, and even Queen Elizabeth and King James, were proud to patronize them. Nor was the reputation of the English companies known only at home—on the Continent they became as famous as the Italians. They settled their companies in theatres built for the purpose; the Elizabethan plays, without any conspicuous exception, were written for these theatres and the companies working in them. After 1590 there is no "closet drama," written for the study and despising the stage; there is no court drama written in opposition to the popular theatre. That means very much.

Because of this historical origin, the Elizabethan theatre was created by a tension between various attitudes and trends. Because the plays were written for the playhouses and the popular companies, they had to be fitted both to the building and to the people who performed them. "Piece out our

<sup>1</sup> For instance, in the work of E. K. Chambers, Una Ellis-Fermor, F. S. Boas, and M. C. Bradbrook.

imperfections with your thoughts”<sup>1</sup> was the playwright’s appeal, and it was not made in vain. Because patriotism was expressed in language, the Elizabethan audience listened to words and delighted in them. Dogberry and Verges wanted to use “ink-horn terms” as well as the Euphuists. Verse could hold its place; and where there was no scenery, verse painted the scene.

It would have been idle for the Elizabethan dramatist to settle *in theory* what sort of play he would write. If he wrote for the Lord Chamberlain’s company, then there must be music in his play, for otherwise Augustine Philips, Henry Wilson, and William Toyer would be idle; there must be comic characters, or Will Kemp and Richard Cowley would be left out, and the audience would be impatient; there must be a leading part that Burbage could play, or John Lowin; it was useless to write a play with twelve women’s parts, when there were only three boys in the company trained to play them. The playwright must exercise his ingenuity, not in inventing new sorts of play, but in fitting his ideas to the material available. It might sometimes be irksome (there are signs that Shakespeare found it so) but it tested his ingenuity and skill; in matching himself against the difficulties he might make a masterpiece.

If the company made its demands, so did the audience.<sup>2</sup> They expected from a “good play,” among other things, songs and dancing, because they were passionately fond of music and excellent judges of it; and sword play and fencing matches from expert swordsmen for the same reason. They expected clowning and bawdy jokes: as Dromo said in *The Pilgrimage to Parnassus*—

Why, what an ass art thou! dost thou not know a play cannot be without a clown? Clowns have been thrust into plays by head and shoulders ever since Kemp could make a scurvy face.<sup>3</sup>

But this was not *all* they wanted; they wanted as well a strict moral code. They wanted “sentences”—pithy, proverbial,

<sup>1</sup> Shakespeare, *Henry V*, Chorus to Act I.

<sup>2</sup> The best summaries of these demands are in Miss M. C. Bradbrook’s *Themes and Conventions of Elizabethan Tragedy* and S. L. Bethell’s *Shakespeare and the Popular Dramatic Tradition*.

<sup>3</sup> Busby, *Fool in Elizabethan Theatre*, pp. 5, 25. (Oxford University Press, 1926.)

and high-sounding restatements of the great common places. They expected that persons in the story should behave according to their character and degree; as Whetstone put it,

To work a comedy, kindly old men should instruct, young men should show the imperfections of youth, strumpets should be lascivious, boys happy, and clowns should speak disorderly.<sup>1</sup>

Characters in Court scenes were expected to indulge in the elaborate courtesy of compliments and sets of wit like verbal tennis matches; and the audience as well as the playwrights had studied and appreciated the devices of rhetoric and figures of speech.

It is a great mistake to think of the Elizabethan audience as simple-minded or "unsophisticated." It had a different set of rules for the game it played, and this makes it appear strange to us in its judgments. It was not troubled by the unlocalized stage, which was now a Palace in Athens, and next moment a wood without the town; or by continuous staging; or by split scenes in which some actors ignored the presence of others who were clearly visible. It did not mind actors bringing on a table or stool, for then it knew the scene was a hall; if there was a bed, then clearly the scene was a chamber; if an altar or tomb, it must be a church; if there was a tree or bank of flowers, then we must be in the country. A man carrying a lantern showed the scene to be night; armies which advanced from different doors must be rival armies; and a procession was worth while for its own sake. Dumb show, tableaux, pageantry, and patterned acting and grouping were all "natural" to the atmosphere of a ceremonial age.

The audience and the playwright still thought of the story as Uncle Remus did—

"Who was Miss Meadows, Uncle Remus?" inquired the little boy.

"Don't ax me, honey. She wuz in de tale, Miss Meadows en de gals wuz, en de tale I give you like hi't were gun ter me."<sup>2</sup>

Because they did not cross-question their stories, they did not (as we may) become impatient with King Lear for dividing

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in M. C. Bradbrook, *Themes and Conventions of Elizabethan Tragedy*, from the Dedication of *Promos and Cassandra*, 1578.

<sup>2</sup> *Uncle Remus*, by Joel Chandler Harris, Chapter VI, p. 24.

his kingdom among his daughters; nor with Valentine in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* for offering to cede Silvia to his sworn brother Proteus; they accepted the marriages which end the comedies, the substitution of one woman for another in *Measure for Measure* and *All's Well that Ends Well*, Marina's adventures in *Pericles*, and the wager-plot in *Cymbeline*. We may think that Henry V sometimes behaved like a cad; but to them it was right that "young men should show the imperfections of youth"—as a Prince he might condescend to Falstaff, but as a King he could not be judged by ordinary rules, he assumed the majesty of the State, and was superhuman.

So they responded differently to the telling of the story. We have become so accustomed to scientific thinking that even our games, detective stories, and crossword puzzles depend on it. The Elizabethan audience used its mental agility within a different frame; it was highly trained to respond to words, to interpret allegorically as the sermons, moralities, and exempla did. It did not bother about tidiness, about cause and effect, or steady consecutive development; but it was sensitive to many things of which we can only become aware by study. The neutral background of the stage did not draw its attention to place and time, but it was conscious of parallels, of themes and phrases. It could lay side by side in *Twelfth Night* the kind of love that Orsino had for Olivia, Olivia for Viola, Viola for Orsino, Malvolio for Olivia, and discern the various degrees of artificiality in them. It could hear the words "Nature" and "Nothing" go echoing through *King Lear*—

*Lear*. . . . What can you say to draw

A third more opulent than your sisters. Speak.

*Cordelia*. Nothing, my lord.

*Lear*. Nothing!

*Cordelia*. Nothing.

*Lear*. Nothing will come of nothing; speak again.

(*King Lear* 1. 1.)

*Gloucester*. What paper were you reading?

*Edmund*. Nothing, my lord.

*Gloucester*. No? What needed then that terrible dispatch of it into your pocket? the quality of nothing hath not such need to hide itself. Let's see: come, if it be nothing, I shall not need spectacles.

(*King Lear*, 1. 2.)

*Lear.* Go to, they are not men o' their words; they told me I was every thing; 'tis a lie, I am not ague proof. . . .

(*To Gloucester*)

O, ho, are you there with me? No eyes in your head, nor no money in your purse?

(*King Lear*, iv. 6.)

All this, of course, the audience did without conscious effort, because their training had come naturally in the atmosphere of the theatre—

So the Elizabethans were able to attend to a number of different aspects of a situation simultaneously and without confusion: they were aware of the balcony as Juliet's balcony and as a part of the auditorium; they recognized Burbage as Burbage and accepted him as the Prince of Denmark; they took the First Player's speech as serious for Hamlet, though intended for them as a burlesque of the old-fashioned drama. This was the common playhouse situation for an Elizabethan dramatist, meaning very little to most of them, no doubt, but producing in the hands of surpassing genius a poetic drama which in its depth and breadth of perception, its complex unity of vision, defeats all ultimate analysis and ranges the critic with the common file in humility and wonder.<sup>1</sup>

## Realism in the Theatre

The word realism means so many things that writers have recently substituted the word "naturalism" for it in discussions of art. Yet the word *naturalism* covers just as many different ideas; and as it is an ugly word, and as the older term seems to me to represent more precisely the trend of the theatre, I am going to stick to it.

Of course, realism has been an ingredient of every kind of theatre. The critics of antiquity complained of the realism of Euripides, his beggars in rags, his baskets and other properties, the moral outrage of incest on the stage. The Miracle plays depicted the garden of Eden with real figs and oranges; in the Elizabethan theatre Alleyn died with real blood, and Gloucester had his eyes put out with painstaking detail. The eighteenth century boasted the realism of Garrick's acting ("I am sure if I had seen a Ghost, I should have looked in the very same manner, and done just as he did," said Partridge, when Tom Jones took him to Drury Lane<sup>2</sup>).

<sup>1</sup> S. L. Bethell, *The Winter's Tale, a Study*, p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> *Tom Jones*, by Henry Fielding, Book XVI, Chapter V.

But there comes a change when realism, instead of being an *element* in the theatre, which it always was and always must be, becomes the central principle of theatrical art. This change was very gradually prepared for, between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, and it then affected a revolution which appeared much more sudden than it was. As the course of this change is rather unexpected, it is worth looking at in detail.

We have seen that the neo-classical theories of playwriting placed an emphasis on verisimilitude. It was unreasonable that we should have to pretend that fifty years had gone by in an hour, or that the same place was France one moment and Italy the next. Yet the classical theories did not lead directly to realism as we know it; there were too many factors involved. There was the practice of the theatre, for one thing, which was conservative. Actors were trained in an elaborate declamatory technique, and this persisted down to the nineteenth century. Gestures and delivery were beautiful and formal; the actors' movements resembled a dance; and this was acceptable because grace was appreciated in the drawing-room as well as on the stage, and declamation was customary in Parliament and the Courts of Law as well as at Drury Lane. But a slight variation of this technique could produce an impression of great reality; it was only necessary to fill the style with meaning. Thus Garrick and later, Irving, might appear formal, even stilted, to us; but to their own time they were intensely convincing.

The form of the theatre, too, prevented any rapid development of picture-frame realism. It was impossible, before the nineteenth century, to darken the auditorium; the audience must remain aware of the place and the occasion. The side-boxes still extended on to the sides of the stage itself, framing the actors with members of the audience. The stage had still its apron, the echo of the old Elizabethan platform stage, jutting out into the pit. The audience resisted attempts to change the form of the theatre.

Another conservative element was the prestige of verse. The Greek dramatists had invariably used verse; the great Elizabethans had used it; so had the fashionable Racine and

Corneille in France. Tragedy in prose was, therefore, unthinkable down to Ibsen's time. A few pioneers, like George Lillo in the eighteenth century, who attempted to use prose, found themselves falling into the lilt of blank verse almost inevitably. Comedy had begun to use prose in Elizabethan times, and after the Restoration used it exclusively. But this meant that there was a dangerous and growing rift between the manners and aims of comedy and tragedy, which ended in complete divorce. Tragedy failed to renew its verse form, or to find a second generation of University wits who would unite poetic power with workaday practical experience. The result was that in the end, tragedy died, being written either by hack playwrights who were not poets, or by poets like Addison, Johnson, Byron, Shelley, Tennyson, and Browning, who were not playwrights.

Yet comedy itself could not proceed alone towards realism. For it too had an inheritance of convention and conservative practice. Restoration Comedy was built upon the Jonsonian Comedy of Humours, united with the situations beloved in the popular theatre and derived from the Italian comedy and the antics of the medieval clown. When we look at Sir Wilful Witwoud and Sir Tunbelly Clumsy, at Horner, Heart-free, Constant, and Sir John Brute,<sup>1</sup> we can see from their names and their conduct that they are still "humorous"; and that we are expected to interpret them allegorically, as we interpret Mr. Facing-both-ways and Evangelist in the *Pilgrim's Progress*. The eighteenth century paid the price of the success of Restoration plays in endless imitations.

So it is not in the *texts* of the plays that we must look for the impulse to realism; the texts were the last to feel it. Its first stage is academic theory; its second, the ambition of scene designers; its third, a passion for history; its fourth, the reform of acting; its fifth, new plays.

The first stage of scenic development comes, as we have seen, in the seventeenth century from Italian inspiration and the Court masque; but it could not get very far. It introduced

<sup>1</sup> Characters in *The Way of the World* (Congreve), *The Relapse* and *The Provoked Wife* (Vanbrugh), and *The Country Wife* (Wycherley).



the proscenium and the idea of a picture stage; but it had to accept many compromises.

In the first place, there was not the money available for elaborate staging in the public theatres. The early Stuart queens might be willing to spend thousands of pounds on a masque mounted by Inigo Jones; but the public theatres had to look a long time at spending a hundred. In their small playhouses, with their limited audiences, they could not get the money back. Then there came the Puritan revolution, and the Stuart masque disappeared, though it left a legacy in the operatic staging of Davenant and Purcell, supported, later, by the Italian visitors.

More elaborate staging depended on larger theatres with larger stages equipped with machinery, and larger auditoriums capable of holding more money. Larger auditoriums were not practical until the growth of London in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries made a much larger potential audience, and until artificial illumination could make the actors clearly visible from a distance. For all these reasons, it was only in the huge gaslit barn of early Victorian Drury Lane and the crimson elegance of Covent Garden that scenery came into its own. By that time the audience had been expelled from the stage, the side-boxes pushed back, and the apron stage lessened to a small shelf; the orchestra pit and the proscenium frame made an absolute division between the "house" and the stage. While this was happening, an audience had grown up which wished for spectacle.

This audience had found a new curiosity which sprang from its enthusiasm for science and education. Machinery itself was a form of applied science which could be treated as a charming toy. Lectures at the Royal Institution, illustrated with experiments magnified by "the magic lantern"; displays of "pyrotechnics"; geographical models and dioramas; these were all eagerly visited, along with aquatic performances at Cremorne and Vauxhall, circuses at Sadler's Wells and Astley's Amphitheatre, "poses plastiques," and Madame Tussaud's Waxworks. They combined education with instruction, performing some of the functions now fulfilled by the illustrated periodical and the cinema. One of the most

ambitious, Wyld's "Model of the Globe," consisted of a sphere 68 feet in diameter viewed from seats in the centre. When such ambitious effects were possible, and people flocked to see them, the theatre was sure to take notice. Science was called in to the service of theatrical effect. For his production of *Pericles* at Sadler's Wells in 1854, Phelps used seven miles of canvas—

*Pericles* is perpetually shown (literally as well as metaphorically) tempest-tost; or in the immediate vicinity of the treacherous waters; and this idea is most happily enforced at Sadler's Wells by scene-painter and machinist. They reproduce the rolling of the billows and the whistling of the winds . . . when he is shown on board ship in the storm during the birth of Marina, the ship tosses vigorously. When he sails at last to the temple of Diana of the Ephesians, rowers take their places on their banks, the vessel seems to glide along the coast, an admirably painted panorama slides before the eye, and the whole theatre seems to be in the course of actual transportation to the temple at Ephesus, which is the crowning scenic glory of the play.<sup>1</sup>

But these splendours were not indulged in entirely for their own sake. There is no doubt, if we look at the designs which have survived and read the descriptions, that effects of great dramatic beauty and realistic effect were obtained. But another impulse was at work, the passionate love of history which had come with the Gothic revival. Charles Kean employed scholars to ensure the accuracy of historical detail and costume in his productions. Garrick had still played *Macbeth* in knee-breeches and shoes with silver buckles, and Barry's *Othello* wore English regimentals. Now *Macbeth* must wear the kilt. Planché designed the costumes for Kemble's *King John* at Covent Garden in 1823; and Charles Kean's biographer makes this large claim for his *Richard II*—

If a citizen of London at 1399 could have been actually revived, and seated within the walls of the theatre without passing through the changed external world, he would have fancied that he saw a living repetition of what he had once taken part in. There could not have been less than five or six hundred persons on those contracted boards, all moving in trained regularity or organized disorder, according to the varying incidents. The music, the joy bells, the dances, the crowded balconies and windows, the throngs in the streets, the civic processions,

<sup>1</sup> E. E. Reynolds, *Early Victorian Theatre*, p. 33, quoting Henry Morley, *Journal of a London Playgoer*, p. 98.

the mailed warriors, the haughty Bolingbroke, the heart-broken Richard, the maddening shouts of gratulation which attend the one, while the other is received with silence gradually deepening into murmurs, groans, and insults, the scrupulous accuracy with which every dress and movement is portrayed; all this completed a picture which brought back the past to the eyes of the present, and bewildered the spectators with a mingled sensation of astonishment and admiration.<sup>1</sup>

So far, so good; yet a moment's consideration will show what gulfs were opening before a theatre of this kind. It was not merely the mirage that it could really recreate the fourteenth century at will that lured it to destruction. What had become of the actor and the playwright among these six hundred well-drilled persons? It is worth observing that the scene-painter and machinist preferred to lavish their trouble on the masterpieces of dead writers rather than the new plays of their contemporaries. Shakespeare, after all, could not object when his plays were re-shaped to permit of spectacle and pageantry. And the actor? In the days of Burbage he had towered mightily among the audience alone in his splendour. Now he had been pushed back into a frame, and dwarfed by Gothic towers, thunder and lightning and the presence of six hundred supers, among whom he was picked out with difficulty by the new lime-light. But at least he could still declaim and gesticulate. There was worse to come, when the standards of realism were at last applied to the contemporary scene.

In the sixties and seventies of the nineteenth century, scene-designers and stage managers were entranced with the discovery of the "box-set." Hitherto, domestic scenes had been played in rooms where bookshelves, windows, and other fittings were painted on back-cloths, and the walls were represented on flats which faced the audience, sliding in grooves parallel to the proscenium.<sup>2</sup> An actor who knocked at the door had to pretend to do it, as the Duke still does in the ballet *Giselle*. The room had no ceiling. Then they set out to change all that. The flats were turned round into real

<sup>1</sup> J. W. Cole, *Life and Theatrical Times of Charles Kean*, Vol. II, pp. 209-10, cited in E. E. Reynolds, *Early Victorian Theatre*, p. 37.

<sup>2</sup> "Some of us who are not yet centenarians can remember to have seen rooms on the stage with no furniture at all except two or three chairs 'painted on the flat.'"—W. Archer, *Play-making*, p. 50 (1912).

walls, and real doors and windows which opened and shut were set in them; ceilings with chandeliers were lowered from the flies; and the audience found itself looking through the "fourth wall" into a "real room."

But this revealed certain inconsistencies. It meant that verse must be banished; for "real people" in "real rooms" don't speak in verse. Nor do they speak in confidential asides, or in the terms used by Evelyn in Lord Lytton's *Money*—

*Evelyn (aside).* Oh Heaven, give me strength to bear it! *(aloud)* And is this the same voice that, when I knelt at your feet—when I asked but one day the hope to call you mine—spoke only of poverty, and answered, "*Never*"?

A new kind of theatrical dialogue had to be found, and a new style of acting, which abandoned florid declamation and gesture, something more characteristic of "real people." When the circumstances had been provided, the playwrights at last appeared to provide the plays. The necessity of thinking things through afresh combined with a mood of social questioning; the atmosphere of revolutionary nationalism, and revolutionary socialism and revolutionary feminism; these together produced the "realistic theatre."

Of course, the greatest masters of realism never lost sight of its conventional basis; for after all, a room with three walls is not a room, nor is Miss Olga Knipper Madame Ranevsky. "When someone brings a candle on to my stage," said Tree, "I light three thousand candle-power." Ibsen vehemently denied that he intended to make photographs. Stanislavsky, the director of the Moscow Art Theatre, although he carried realistic staging to its extreme point, knew that there *was* an extreme point. He took his company into the Moscow underworld before they played Gorki's *Lower Depths*, and introduced a peasant from Saratov province to supervise the accuracy of detail in Tolstoy's *Power of Darkness*. The peasant was such a success that one day, when one of the actors was ill, they allowed him to play a part on the stage. Then the difference between art and reality became manifest; the illusion fell to pieces.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> C. Stanislavsky, *My Life in Art* (Bles).

But what the masters understand, lesser men forget; and so realism hardened into a new convention, remarkably like the neo-classical convention in some ways, but lacking its sense of style. The unities of time, place, and action are commonly observed in the West End theatre to-day; tragedy and comedy are kept distinct, verse and prose are never mingled; sub-plots are remarkably rare; the action is often continuous; and the scene is rarely changed.

We are at the end of the realistic period in the theatre, and for that reason it is hard for us to be fair to it. We are surrounded by the imitations of a great style, and as Professor Bowra has remarked in another context, "nothing resembles a great style so little as its imitation."<sup>1</sup> But the justification of realism is not the theory; it is the great dramatists which the movement produced and the new sense of importance which they brought to the theatre. The realistic theatre represents its age as certainly as the Aeschylean or Shakespearean theatres did theirs.

Just as the University wits, with their ideas derived from books and the classic past, came into the popular theatre of the sixteenth century to make it fruitful, so the impulse of realism came from outside the nineteenth-century theatre, and was bound up with a much wider movement, as the University wits were with humanism. The impulse behind realism was social change.

Oppressed nations saw in the theatre a potent instrument for the preservation of their culture and *morale*. Ole Bull founded the first Norse National Theatre at Bergen, because Norwegians resented the Swedish political, and the Danish cultural, domination of their country. He had to found it at Bergen, because the capital city, Christiania, was Danish-controlled; every theatre had a Danish company playing in Danish; the Norse language had only the status of a dialect, and when young Ibsen, who emerged as a playwright on the staff of the Bergen theatre, wished to read the sagas of his native country, he had to read them in a Danish translation, because no Norse edition was available!

In a similar passion for freedom, the Irish Literary Theatre

<sup>1</sup> C. M. Bowra, *The Heritage of Symbolism* (Macmillan), p. 15.

came into existence at the end of the century. Earlier, the Czechs had founded the Prague National Theatre, the home of Smetana.

For the Irish, the Norwegians, the Czechs, the Poles, and the Italians, nationalism was in the nineteenth century a revolutionary creed. But there were other revolutionary creeds, and to them, too, the theatre offered a weapon. Heijermans, Strindberg, Shaw, and the later Ibsen made the theatre a theatre of ideas; hand in hand with aesthetic revolt went criticism of existing moral standards and social institutions. The stock theatrical situations, the melodramatic plots of the old convention were ousted.

With one exception, the great figures of the realistic theatre came from outside the theatre itself; they were amateurs. This is true of Ibsen, who began as a chemist's assistant in a small Norwegian town; Antoine, who worked in a Paris gasworks; Shaw, a journalist; Stanislavsky, a merchant's son who organized his own amateur company among his acquaintance, and Chekhov, a doctor who began writing short stories to keep his family and pay his way through college; all the important members of the Abbey Theatre, including its actors (except W. G. Fay); the German sculptor, Gerhard Hauptmann; and the Spanish law student, Jacinto Benavente.

This overwhelming preponderance of talent from outside brought inevitable dangers. In the first place, it meant a fissure between the two kinds of theatre, the popular or so-called "commercial" theatre, and the literary, or so-called "art" or "highbrow" theatre. The new movement was not accepted by the playhouses, as the University wits had been by Henslowe and the Burbages in the sixteenth century. There were many reasons for this, the chief being the different organization of the theatre, and the explosive doctrines of the new school.

In the time of Burbage, the playhouses were greedy for plays. They had a small audience to draw on, and they could not put plays on for runs; they had to have a repertory, and a play which saw ten performances was outstandingly successful. Plays were welcome, wherever they came from; the capital

outlay was small, and so were the risks. But in the nineteenth century, the theatre had become a highly capitalized industry. We have seen how, in 1843, the London theatre was freed from the monopoly of the patents. After a generation, about 1860, large-scale building of theatres began in a small area, and the modern "West End" emerged; at the same time the "touring system" began, which supplied large provincial towns with London successes after they had been seen in the metropolis. Although some theatres still played on the old "stock" system, with a settled company possessing a repertory of plays, it now became customary to present plays "for the run of the piece," and to engage actors specifically for a part in one play. The results of this system were that large sums of money were now involved in a new production; theatre building was financed by speculators and rents became exorbitant; and a play was thought of, not as an item in a varied repertory, which could be produced for little by a standing company, and dropped if unsuccessful, or built up into favour, but as a "gold-mine." Theatre managers were inevitably preoccupied with selling their stalls, with engaging "star" actors and finding vehicles for them. Risks had to be minimized and experiment was discouraged.

The new writers retorted by making their own organizations; and some of these developed into magnificent theatres: the Théâtre Libre of Antoine in Paris, the Moscow Art Theatre of Stanislavsky and Danchenko. But others remained makeshift. In England, Ibsen and Shaw had to depend at first on the efforts of J. T. Grein and the Incorporated Stage Society. The performances of their plays were the occasion of virulent criticism, and sometimes of actual riot. The rift between the two theatres, once established, was never healed in England; in Russia it was. Every outstanding figure in the Russian theatre of the last forty years has been trained in the school of Stanislavsky. Other countries show various stages between these two extremes. Curiously enough, the position of England was due in part to a significant exception mentioned above. The only important realist writer in Europe who came out of the popular theatre, and was born in the profession, was Tom Robertson, whose plays *Caste* and *Society*

are usually, and justly, held to mark the beginning of the realist movement in England. Robertson was, almost literally, born in a skip; his sister, Madge Robertson, was the outstanding actress of her time. Tom Robertson was, significantly, not only the founder of English realism, but the inaugurator of the touring system; the tour of *Caste* in 1867 is the first professional tour known. Profiting from his example and learning by his method, the popular theatre was able to produce playwrights like Pinero and Henry Arthur Jones, who injected some realism into the traditional body of theatrical situations, and held the stage to prevent the intransigents from getting a footing.

The realist playwrights were, in general, aware of the need of professional grounding and experience. Ibsen served in the Bergen theatre, and afterwards in the National Theatre at Christiania; on its behalf he also made a tour of Europe to examine theatres and systems of stage management. Benavente became an actor, and for a time managed a circus. There have never been closer students of theatrical technique than Coquelin and Stanislavsky. Shaw became a professional dramatic critic. But even these strenuous efforts were not enough. It remains true that the great realists did, in a sense, empty out the baby with the bath water. For there is a *genuine* theatricality which even the worst of the old melodramas possess, which is missing from the work of the realists. Their theory put them and their actors at a great disadvantage; for they cast away many of the resources of language and gesture.

Ibsen began as a poet, both lyric and dramatic. His early historical plays, and the first of the satires, *Brand* and *Peer Gynt*, were written in verse; indeed, one might say that there has never been more magnificent dramatic verse than that of *Peer Gynt*. It employs a great diversity of forms to suit the various scenes; now rapid, fierce, or gay, in stanzas with short lines and supple rhyme schemes; now long, slow, dignified, or contemplative, full of colour and memorable phrase. It is remarkable that such a poet could desert the use of verse. Yet Ibsen did so, in decisive words—

The verse form has done the art of acting a great deal of harm . . .  
the verse form will hardly find any place worth mentioning in the



drama of the near future; for the literary purposes of the future will certainly not be reconcilable with it. It will therefore disappear. I have myself in the last seven or eight years hardly written a single verse, but have exclusively cultivated the far more difficult art of writing in the plain truthful language of reality.<sup>1</sup>

In this he was influenced, not merely by the demands of realism, but by the attraction of a new field; he found verse easy, and prose difficult, not only from the natural bent of his talent, but because Norwegian literary prose did not exist—he had to create it, to catch the idiom of living speech and make it memorable. There is not a doubt that he succeeded; yet in doing so he rejected a great part of himself, and of theatrical tradition. For the realists ousted not only verse as incompatible with realism but also every kind of prose which employs poetic or rhetorical devices or idiosyncrasies of idiom. They reduced their characters to expressing everything by the half-sentences and cliché phrases which we employ every day; and which in life we make significant by intonation, look, and gesture. The actors in realistic plays were equally tied by their authors, restricted by their convention to such looks and gesture as were compatible with drawing-room behaviour. There is no wonder that they ended in the morasses of the “cup-and-saucer” drama and provoked that last new mood in the theatre which we have to notice, the symbolist movement and its outcomes.

### Poetry Returns to the Theatre

The last fifty years of theatrical history show a bewildering series of fresh starts, which often seem to have been false starts. Symbolism in 1900, Expressionism in 1920 vying with Constructivism, Social Realism in 1930 opposed by the New Moralities which continued the Expressionist tradition, as it continued Strindberg’s Symbolism. Yet I think we can simplify the mass of detail, the numberless experimental groups which form and reform in various countries, if certain facts are borne in mind.

The theatre is part of a wider world of art, and we may expect the general tendencies of that world to find their place

<sup>1</sup> H. Koht, *Life of Ibsen*, Vol. II, p. 127.

in the theatre. In all the arts, the past fifty years have been a period of experiment unparalleled since the Renaissance. That is in part because of social change; in part because the tendencies inaugurated at the Renaissance have now been exhausted. Of course, in any period of experiment, many of the things attempted prove fruitless—that does not mean they have been valueless.

At such times, there is a wide search in the past for models to follow. Just as the political revolutionaries of the seventeenth century appealed to Magna Carta, or nineteenth-century socialists to the example of the Medieval Craft Guilds, so artists who were discontented with contemporary practice looked back to find models which they could admire and imitate, and by which they could justify themselves. Because of the weapon of historical scholarship, we can look further afield than any one could before. In Mendelssohn's time, even the music of Bach was inaccessible to a musician. To-day, a musician can study Monteverdi, Palestrina, or Schütz, can hear the music of the troubadours sung to their own instruments, can learn the idiom of Indian or Chinese music if he wishes. With this historical knowledge has come a new respect for the past; we no longer assume that every change has meant inevitable progress—we see that each gain has been bought at a price; that we shall never be able to do so well certain things that Euripides did, or Congreve. Only the ignorant now talk patronizingly about the "primitive" Elizabethan stage. The seventeenth century was very condescending to the Middle Ages. We discover now that that was only because the seventeenth century didn't know what the Middle Ages were like.

Consequently, the theatre in our time has been open as never before to a succession of influences, contemporary and historical. The stage-struck girl in Milwaukee pores over Stanislavski's accounts of the methods and ideas of the Moscow Art Theatre. Theatrical magazines reproduce the jottings of Cocteau. Eliot, O'Neill, Auden and Isherwood, Obey, experiment with the use of a chorus. Ohlopkov's production of Pogodin's *Aristocrats*, or Thornton Wilder in *Our Town*, dispense with scenery and properties, inspired by the example

of the Chinese theatre. Yeats appeals to the classical Japanese Nō; Yeats, O'Neill, and Jacques Copeau try masks. Buildings, too, suffer changes. Copeau's Vieux Colombier Theatre in Paris and Nugent Monck's Maddermarket Theatre in Norwich go back to Elizabethan models; Reinhardt produces in a circus, and Ohlopkov puts his flexible stage in the middle of his audience.

Behind all these experiments are certain ideas. In opposition to realism, they insist on reminding us that we are at a *play*—that we are making believe. The barrier between the stage and the audience, the orchestra pit, the proscenium arch, and the pass-door which must not be used in a performance—this barrier is to be torn down. Part of the play may take place in a box, characters will speak from the audience, as they do in Odets' *Waiting for Lefty*, in *Cockpit*, or in Auden's *Dance of Death*; they may enter and exit through the audience, or the audience will be harangued, as they are in *Our Town*. The music-hall is admired and held up to emulation because of the free-and-easy relationship which George Robey, Danny Kaye, or Martha Raye have with the customers. Of course, this can easily become very tiresome; but undoubtedly the playwright, designer, and producer are right to emphasize that the audience which builds its own illusion by co-operating in the game is preferable to that which has to be cheated with a suggestion of photographic realism.

Behind the experiments, too, is a criticism of the waste which realism imposes. In a photographic play time must be spent in passing round tea-cups which (eight times out of ten) contribute little to the play; and in explaining the presence of characters which we would be glad to take for granted. There is a good example of this in J. B. Priestley's *The Long Mirror*, whose theme is the telepathic relationship between Branwen Elder and Michael Camber. Whether we believe in telepathy or not (and Priestley insists that the play is founded on fact) we should be glad to accept the situation for purposes of the play, to see what comes of it. By his realistic approach, however, Priestley condemns himself and us to a series of explanations which only end by making us impatient instead of convincing us.

Realism also wastes the resources of the actor. This is notably more true in England than elsewhere, since we do not in normal life express ourselves very much by gesture or through the body or face. Many of the experimental theatres have asked of their actors acrobatic or dancing skill: the power to express themselves through movement as well as words. This has been true especially of the Habima Players, the Vahtangov Theatre in Russia and the early experiments of Tairov and Meyerhold, the Compagnie des Quinze in France, the last plays of Pirandello in Italy, and plays by William Saroyan, in America—one, *The Time of Your Life*, was made possible by the collaboration of Eddie Dowling, a musical comedy star.

But, above all, we find an effort to enrich the significance of the play: to give it a bearing beyond the immediate occasion, to open up all those things in life—the parallels, the overtones, those things which are so hard to express photographically, the realm of the unconscious mind, the doubts, the hesitations—to give these a dramatic embodiment.

Because these things are the province of poetry, there seems to be throughout this period, whether consciously or not, whether in verse or not, a return of poetry to the theatre, meaning by poetry all those things which indirectly illuminate life without pedantically describing it. The poetry of the theatre involves many factors. It involves the right to use any means of expression, whatever they are—dance or gesture, verse or prose or song, silence or action, even a mechanical device like film-projection if necessary. The test is significance, appropriateness, that is all: whatever is done must be in place in the theatre, and illuminate the particular situation. As William Saroyan has put it—

There can be no experiment in art. There can be only attempt and accomplishment, or attempt and failure. If the thing attempted is of greater importance than the mere attempting, it is likely to be successful in spite of failure somewhere or other.<sup>1</sup>

Yet in the theatre as in other arts, the search for what we have to say is inseparable from the search for the way to say it.

<sup>1</sup> Article in *Theatre Arts*, May, 1940, p. 387, in answer to a questionnaire sent out by the magazine.

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The characteristic weapon of poetry is metaphor—the bringing together of things which are apparently unrelated, to show what they have in common. The search of poetic drama in our time is the search for those images and symbols which can appropriately be expressed in theatrical terms.

## SUMMARY, BIBLIOGRAPHY, AND QUESTIONS

### Summary

There are two kinds of theatre: the *popular*, and the *literary*. The latter has provided the abiding masterpieces; the former the professional background, traditions, and stability of the theatre.

The *conventions* are the accepted rules and customs which have governed the writing and performance of plays. *Greece* supplied the first masterpieces; the division of comedy and tragedy and the pre-eminence of the latter; the conception of the tragic hero; the chorus; the germs of the Unities. The *Middle Ages* supplied great themes and taught the power of drama; roused a national interest not confined to the metropolis or large cities; persuaded people to make believe with small means. The *Italian Comedy* taught comic plot and incident, and gave us perennial types of character. It showed what elaborate results could be achieved by small means with a high degree of professional skill. *Neo-classicism* gave form and discipline, developed rules from Aristotle, gave drama prestige and made it tackle important subjects. The *Elizabethans* united neo-classical and medieval sources, used them with supple, subtle imagination, and ingenuity. *Realism* brought a new outlook, new dramatists, new themes; made the theatre an instrument of nationalism and social change. *Symbolism* brought poetry back to the theatre, united music and painting, elaborated fantastic expression to make the unconscious vocal, experimented with stage technique.

Effects of these sets of conventions will be seen in Part III in a series of detailed comparisons—

Greek: *Oresteia of Aeschylus*.

Medieval: *Everyman*.

Elizabethan: *Faustus*, *Antony and Cleopatra*.

Neo-classical: *All for Love*.

Realist: *Mourning Becomes Electra*, *Cæsar and Cleopatra*.

Expressionist: *Masses and Man*.

Modern Poetical: *The Family Reunion*.

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### Questions

(For discussion or written work)

(1) "Without action there cannot be a tragedy; there may be without character." (Aristotle, *Poetics*, vi. 11.) Do you agree?

(2) "It is not the function of the poet to relate what has happened, but what may happen—what is possible according to the laws of probability and necessity—Poetry is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular." (*Poetics*, ix. 1, 3.) Discuss this.

(3) Is there any place in modern plays for a Chorus in the Greek style?

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(4) Write a brief modern Miracle or Morality play; or describe a country visitor's impressions of the Corpus Christi plays in medieval times.

(5) The Italian comedians had no play but a scenario stuck up in the wings. Invent such a scenario for the usual characters (Harlequin, Pantaloon, Brighella, The Doctor, the Captain), adding any others you need.

(6) Why are so few Elizabethan plays seen on the stage to-day, although they are so highly praised in books?

(7) Why did classicism triumph in the French theatre and not in the English?

(8) Take any modern play you know well and show its debt to its predecessors.

(9) Discuss the conventions of the West End stage.

(10) Discuss the future of realism in the theatre.

(11) We speak of Elizabethan *drama* but of Restoration *comedy*. What went wrong with Restoration *tragedy*?

(12) Out of the experiments made in dramatic form during the past fifty years, which do you think will prove of lasting value?





**PART III**

**COMPARISON AND CONTRAST**

**PLAYS FROM DIFFERENT PERIODS  
WITH A COMMON THEME**

I have heard many People say: "Give me the Ideas. It is no matter what Words you put them into" and others say "Give me the Design, it is no matter for the Execution." These people know Enough of Artifice, but nothing of Art. Ideas cannot be given but in their minutely Appropriate Words, nor can a design be made without its minutely Appropriate Execution.

William Blake, *Public Address*  
Works, ed. Keynes, p. 814.

Seemingly impossible subject matter may be shaped into dramatic form; a supreme work of art may win a victory where least expected by transcending the normal limitations; but there are less remarkable triumphs . . . which are made possible by skilful and unobtrusive technique. These are almost all matters of detail rather than of basic structure.

Una Ellis-Fermor, *The Frontiers of Drama*, p. 77.

## CHAPTER V

### THE HOUSE OF ATREUS

#### Aeschylus' "The Oresteia"

THE *Oresteia* is a trilogy: that is, three plays with a common subject, designed to be played upon a single occasion.

Its theme is Homeric; it tells of the fate of Agamemnon on his return from Troy; its tragic significance that it deals with members of the same house, and that a princely one, the most revered in Greece at that time.

Agamemnon is great and victorious, but he and his house are already stained with crime. His father, Atreus, and his uncle, Thyestes, had wronged each other. Thyestes had seduced the wife of Atreus; and after a pretended reconciliation, Atreus had made for Thyestes a banquet of his own sons' flesh. Thyestes and his surviving son, Aigisthos, had murdered Atreus in return.

When Agamemnon gathered the Greek host to sail to Troy, they were becalmed and decimated by disease at Aulis, because they had offended the goddess Artemis. To appease her, Agamemnon sacrificed his daughter Iphigenia, in spite of his wife's despair. Clytemnestra, therefore, accepted the unlawful love of Aigisthos, and plotted with him to kill Agamemnon on his return from the Trojan War.

In the first play of the trilogy, the *Agamemnon*, the King returns from the war, bringing as his prize Cassandra, the prophetess who was daughter of Priam, King of Troy. She had been priestess to Apollo, who had endowed her with the prophetic gift; but she had offended him, and he had added the condition that her prophecies should not be believed. When the city fell, she sought sanctuary in the temple of Athene; Ajax son of Oileus had dragged her thence and brought on the Greeks the wrath of the goddess.

In the course of the play Clytemnestra and Aigisthos achieve their vengeance on Agamemnon and Cassandra. The second play, *Choephorae* ("The Libation Bearers"), shows Orestes,

the exiled son of Agamemnon, returning in disguise with his friend Pylades to exact vengeance for his father's death with the help of his sister, Electra. He succeeds; but although it may be a duty to avenge his father, it is still a crime to kill his mother; the Furies pursue him, and he is stricken with madness.

The last part of the trilogy deals with his attempts to expiate the crime. Neither Apollo nor Athene can free him although they sympathize. He is sent to Athens, where the issue is tried before the newly constituted court of the Areopagus. The Furies accept Justice, and the worship of the Athenians who establish a shrine for them, transforming them from Erinyes (Furies) to Eumenides (Kindly Ones).

### **Eugene O'Neill's "Mourning Becomes Electra"**

In *Mourning Becomes Electra*,<sup>1</sup> Eugene O'Neill took this story, and rewrote it in terms of the American Civil War. His play also has the triple shape. The first part, *The Homecoming*, tells how General Ezra Mannon (Agamemnon) returns from the war to a home full of hatred. Captain Adam Brant (Aigisthos) is the son of David Mannon, cast out for seducing and subsequently marrying a Canadian nursemaid, Marie Brantome. For revenge, Brant has in Ezra Mannon's absence been courting both the general's wife, Christine (Clytemnestra), and his daughter Lavinia (Electra), thereby increasing their already profound hatred of each other. Christine hates not only her daughter, but her husband; the only person she loves is her son, Orin (Orestes); for he was born during his father's absence in Mexico. Christine works on Brant to obtain poison with which she can kill her husband under the pretence of heart failure. At the end of the first play she achieves her aim; but is discovered by Lavinia.

The second play, *The Hunted*, shows the struggle for the soul of Orin, between Christine, Lavinia, and the girl Hazel to whom he is engaged. To convince him of Christine's guilt, Lavinia enables him to overhear a conversation between her mother and Brant on board his ship, *The Flying Trades*, as she lies in Boston harbour. When Christine has gone, Orin

<sup>1</sup> Cape (1931).

kills Brant. On her return home, Christine discovers the murder, and shoots herself.

The last play, *The Haunted*, shows the disintegration of Lavinia and Orin; the hatred that grows between them; the way they destroy each other's souls, and involve also Hazel and Peter, the people from the outside world who love them; how Orin kills himself, and Lavinia is left alone in the house full of ghosts—

*Lavinia*: I'm not going the way Mother and Orin went. That's escaping punishment. . . . I'll live alone with the dead, and keep their secrets, and let them hound me, until the curse is paid out and the last Mannon is let die! I know they will see to it I live for a long time! It takes the Mannons to punish themselves for being born! (p. 287).

The parallels between the two trilogies are certainly striking; so also are the contrasts. First of all, O'Neill writes in prose which lacks the quality which is so relieving and revealing in Greek tragedy—the purgation effected by the verse itself. The speeches writhe and twist in broken fragments, like this—

*Orin*: You've said all that before! Do you think I'm a fool? I'm not anxious to be hanged—for that skunk! I heard her asking him to kiss her! I heard her warn him against me! And my islands I told her about—which was she and I—she wants to go there—with him! Damn you! Why did you stop me? I'd have shot his guts out in front of her! (*The Hunted*, p. 186.)

The greatness of O'Neill is not in his *dialogue*, it is in his sense of the stage, his command of situation and *silence*. The Mannons confront each other over the General's dead body under the huge family portraits that embody their defiled yet cherished tradition; or, for another example, Christine shrinks back from her dying husband, holding out her empty hand before her like a child as if to prove her innocence. Such details are unforgettable.

Another contrast between O'Neill and Aeschylus is their treatment of the story. The plays of Aeschylus are concerned with one of the most topical questions of his day—the supersession of the blood-feud by public justice between private persons. We who take justice within the state for granted cannot see the point of the last play in the Trilogy, the *Eumenides*; we find it an anti-climax after the *Agamemnon*.

To feel its force we must substitute the lack of public justice between states in our own time; and imagine that a great poet in a play of magnificent polemic has celebrated the half-achieved victory which replaces national sovereignty by international justice. The end of Aeschylus' trilogy is full of hope; it is not a tragedy in our sense of the word, in spite of all the horrors it has described. The end of O'Neill's trilogy goes down into the blackness of despair.

The crimes in Aeschylus are open; those in O'Neill are concealed, and therefore infinitely more sordid. Clytemnestra faces the people with the battle-axe still red with her husband's blood, and her paramour at her side. Christine buys poison secretly, and takes advantage of her husband's weakness to exonerate herself; as Orin later rifles Brant's cabin on board ship so that thieves may be blamed for the murder. This is inevitable; for now that public justice has been long established, murder implies subterfuge. Nor could an American general return from the Civil War with a captured concubine, and she with the gift of second sight—so O'Neill can find no parallel for Cassandra.

Inside the family, the relationships are also changed. Clytemnestra's hatred for Agamemnon is engendered in the loss of her daughter Iphigenia; Christine's hatred for Ezra springs from sexual loathing. Agamemnon's crime is *hubris*—self-pride; Ezra's is stupidity and lack of sensitiveness. Christine hates her daughter, Lavinia, and loves her son, Orin; but there is nothing in Aeschylus to show that Clytemnestra had any perverse feelings about Orestes or Electra.

Finally, among many other contrasts that might be drawn is a formal one. The trilogy of Aeschylus is built on a balance between the Chorus (which represents all of us, seeing and sharing the tragedy, yet unable to intervene directly) and the few principal actors. In O'Neill's play there is also a chorus, but instead of twelve or fifteen anonymous Elders, as in the Agamemnon, there are in *The Homecoming* four particularized characters; and they are minor characters except for Seth Beckwith, the gardener, who has a special function unlike that of the Greek chorus. It is really Hazel and Peter, the "ordinary people" in the play, who are much more nearly a Chorus—

yet they are involved in the tragedy itself. The *Choephoraë* has a Chorus of Furies, but in O'Neill the Furies are within the characters, they are not personified.

### T. S. Eliot's "The Family Reunion"

T. S. Eliot's play *The Family Reunion*<sup>1</sup> presents certain similarities with both of the others, and certain differences from both. Like O'Neill's play, it is concerned with the states of mind of the persons; and its principal persons are a mother and a son. The stages of a family history are implied, but the common crime is not a blood-feud. The mother, Amy, Dowager Lady Monchensey, may be equated with Clytemnestra; but Harry, her eldest son, is part Orestes, part Agamemnon—we might also say that he is part Oedipus; for like Oedipus (and unlike Orestes) he is ignorant of the web of crime in which he is enmeshed, and learns its nature as the play progresses.

Eliot's play has a Chorus; and, like O'Neill's, it is made up of particularized actors: the two Aunts, Ivy and Violet; the two uncles, Gerald and Charles. But like Aeschylus, and unlike O'Neill, Eliot gives his Chorus an important function in the play, and a generalized significance. He is able to do so because he uses verse, and has found a dramatic form for it appropriate to our time; and possessing this, he can make the Chorus speak for us, yet remain in the play—

Why should we stand here like guilty conspirators, waiting for some  
revelation

When the hidden shall be exposed, and the newsboy shall shout in the  
street?

When the private shall be made public, the common photographer  
Flashlight for the picture papers: why do we huddle together

In a horrid amity of misfortune? why should we be implicated, brought  
in and brought together?

(Part I, Sc. 1, p. 43.)

The Furies of Eliot, like those of O'Neill, are not speaking characters; they are presences. But they are not merely within the characters—they do appear first to Harry alone, then to Harry and us; finally to other characters in the play;

<sup>1</sup> *The Family Reunion* (Faber and Faber, 1939).



they appear to be exorcised. There cannot be, in *The Family Reunion*, any individual stanzas like the terrible Binding Song (terrible still even to us, for whom witchcraft is only a memory) which the Furies sing in the *Eumenides*—

Up, let us tread the dance, and wind—  
The hour is come!—our shuddering spell  
Show how this Band apports well  
Their fated burdens to mankind. . . .<sup>1</sup>

Yet in a sense, the play itself, until almost the end, is a binding song. For the closeness of Eliot's parallel with Aeschylus is only at moments a parallel of detail; but in spirit there is a close parallel indeed. Eliot's play, like the *Eumenides* and unlike *The Haunted*, ends in expiation, in a tentative hope of reconciliation, more shadowy than that of Aeschylus, but still consoling.

Eliot's success is partly due to the fact that he has not let Aeschylus cast a shadow over him. He has particularized his play, setting it firmly in a place and at a time: "The Drawing Room, after Tea. An afternoon in late March." There the Monchenseys sit waiting for the boys, and in particular for the return of the heir, Harry. Amy, his mother, is celebrating her birthday; she is ailing; and the rest are ready with advice and criticism: there are the cross-currents of a family reunion.

The first suggestion of a skeleton in the cupboard is followed by a stronger one—

*Agatha.* It is going to be rather painful for Harry.

but Agatha does not yet bring out anything precise—

Wandering in the tropics  
Or against the painted scene of the Mediterranean,  
Harry must often have remembered Wishwood—  
The nursery tea, the school holiday,  
The daring feats on the old pony,  
And thought to creep back through the little door.  
He will find a new Wishwood. Adaptation is hard.

(Part I, Sc. 1, p. 17.)

We are being involved emotionally in Harry's situation before

<sup>1</sup> Translated by R. C. Trevelyan (Bowes and Bowes).

we know what that situation is. Gradually we piece it together—

*Gerald.* Make him feel that what has happened doesn't matter.

He's taken his medicine, I've no doubt.

Let him marry again and carry on at Wishwood.

In the next few minutes most of it comes out. Harry made an unsuitable marriage to a woman who wouldn't fit in; she dragged him half round the world, and died in an accident at sea, after they had been married eight years.

Then Eliot plays on us one of the simplest and oldest of dramatic conjuring tricks. Having prepared us all through the scene for the arrival of the younger brothers, Arthur and John, he suddenly confronts us with Harry instead: a Harry haunted and pursued. To convince us of the presence of the unseen Furies, the playwright finds another simple and effective expedient. The window curtains are undrawn, and from the very beginning of the act, "finger-posts" have been indicating this to us. Harry bursts out—

How can you sit in this blaze of light for all the world to look at?

If you knew how you looked, when I saw you through the window!

Do you like to be stared at by eyes through a window?

(Part I, Sc. 1, p. 24.)

As he continues, however, we realize that he is seeing more than we or his family do—that he is seeing the Furies for the first time.

After his outburst the family try, like well-bred people, to pretend that nothing has happened; they talk about the house and the estate. Only Agatha presses him to explain. With her help he gets it out—

It was only reversing the senseless direction

For a momentary rest on the burning wheel

That cloudless night in the mid-Atlantic

When I pushed her over.

(Part I, Sc. 1, p. 30.)

The rest are dismayed, not because they believe Harry, but because of his state of mind. Agatha, however, still helps him, as she had done when he was a child—

*Agatha.* It is only because of what you do not understand

That you feel the need to declare what you do.

There is more to understand: hold fast to that  
As the way to freedom.

*Harry.* I think I see what you mean,  
Dimly—as you once explained the sobbing in the chimney  
The evil in the dark closet, which they said was not there,  
Which they explained away, but you explained them. . . . (p. 32.)

When he has gone, the family decide to consult Dr. Warburton. They also interview his man, Downing. The only light Downing can throw is the half-kindly, half-cynical light of common sense, the light of those who live at close quarters with people's foibles—

*Downing.* It's my opinion that man and wife  
Shouldn't see too much of each other, sir. . . .  
And there's my complaint against these ocean liners  
With all their swimming baths and gymnasiums  
There's not even a place where a man can go  
For a quiet smoke, where the women can't follow him.  
(Part I, Sc. 1, p. 41.)

The presence of Downing anchors the play to earth in a way which *Murder in the Cathedral* always lacked. The Women of Canterbury in the earlier play were never women in the sense that Juliet's Nurse or even Mrs. Malaprop were. Downing is a man, all the more real for belonging to the folk-lore of our time: the folk-lore of Jeeves and old Hethers of the barley-water advertisements—the symbol of vanished security, of a world in which those who knew our worst failings and could predict our future behaviour still loved and served us, advised and consoled us. As he goes they ask Downing why he has been going over the car—

*Downing.* Nothing wrong, sir:  
Only I like to have her always ready.

and we can trust Downing's judgment, though he wouldn't be able to put in words what is going on. The time will come when Harry will need the car.

The second scene begins with the two outsiders—Agatha, the rebel aunt; and Mary, the cousin who loves Harry, who has been kept as an unpaid companion, and feels that Amy now designs to add to this the double role of a tame second wife for Harry. She asks Agatha, who is the head of a

women's college, to try and get her a fellowship. Agatha refuses—

You and I, Mary,

Are only watchers and waiters: not the easiest role.

(Part I, Sc. 2, p. 50.)

When Agatha has gone to change for dinner, Harry finds Mary there, waiting. The memories of unhappy childhood which they share bring them near together; Harry tries to explain to Mary the experience of the death of hope. She challenges him—would he have come home if he had no hope?—for another hope keeps springing in an unexpected place. As there grows between these two people the possibility of new birth—the spring, with all the pain of growth—the Eumenides are at their shoulder. *We* see them now, as well as Harry; but Mary cannot—she offers sympathy, but not understanding, and by that the breach is renewed.

The last scene which concludes the first part is very short; an exchange of uneasy small talk that skirts dangerous places, until they go in to dinner. By all the canons of dramatic construction this scene ought to be superfluous, for it adds nothing to the story; it has no effective curtain, but fades out as quietly as possible. Nothing? Well, it adds the metronomic beat of routine against which our inner tragedies gain their significance by the agonized patterns they scrawl as the routine beats on.

The second part of the play takes place in the library after dinner. Harry, like Henry in Pirandello's play, knows why Dr. Warburton is there; and so, when they talk alone, they are at cross-purposes. The Doctor wants to warn Harry about the state of his mother's health, and the danger of excitement. Harry cross-examines him about his parents' marriage; and when his replies are unsatisfactory, threatens to ask Agatha. For, searching his mind, there has come back to Harry the summer day of unusual heat, the night when he felt the trap close—

It is the conversations not overheard,

Not intended to be heard, with the sidewise looks,

That bring death into the heart of a child.

(Part II, Sc. 1, p. 77.)

They are interrupted by the arrival of the local police sergeant with bad news. Harry thinks the policeman has come about his wife, but the occasion of his call is to say that the younger brother, John, driving home in the fog on the West Road, has met with an accident. Hard upon this comes news of the other brother, Arthur: he has disgraced the family by running into a roundsman's cart while drunk on New Year's Eve. The family react to these disasters, each in his own way. But when they have finished their comments on the plane of everyday experience, the Chorus of Aunts and Uncles end the scene with these words—

. . . There is no avoiding these things  
And we know nothing of exorcism  
And whether in Argos or in England  
There are certain inflexible laws  
Unalterable, in the nature of music.  
There is nothing at all to be done about it,  
There is nothing to do about anything,  
And now it is nearly time for the news  
We must listen to the weather report  
And the international catastrophes.

(Part II, Sc. 1, p. 97.)

"We know nothing of exorcism"—in Aeschylus's trilogy *Orestes* had been able in part to rid himself of his blood-guilt—

. . . the blood sleeps and is fading from my hand:  
The stain of matricide is washed away.  
While yet fresh, at divine Apollo's hearth  
It was expelled by purging blood of swine.

For Harry's deliverance, no ritual is possible, there are only contacts of the spirit . . . Agatha, Mary, Warburton. The second scene of Part II between Agatha and Harry is the crisis of the play; Harry finds that his Aunt, whom he had looked upon as liberated from the human wheel, is like himself, in pursuit of liberation. For she had loved his father, and in the months before Harry's birth had prevented Amy's murder only because she felt that the child in the womb was her own.

A curse comes to being  
As a child is formed. . . .

(Part II, Sc. 2, p. 110.)

Harry sees the Eumenides for the last time in the play—

This time you are real, this time you are outside me  
And just endurable. I know that you are ready,  
Ready to leave Wishwood, and I am going with you. (p. 109.)

As they disappear, Agatha identifies herself with them, taking the place they have left in the window . . . the Furies and the Kindly Ones, the Erinyes, and the Eumenides. Harry knows now—"I only dreamed I pushed her." But only Agatha understands—and she is the Furies, inexorable as well as kindly. There is no hope that his mother will respond to his new-found sanity, and his spiritual health cannot struggle with the family—he must go away. In his going he fulfils the curse. His mother's delicate physical health cannot stand the shock. After a bitter scene of recrimination with Agatha, who has now deprived her of her son, as once she did of her husband, she is carried away to die. As the play ends, Agatha and Mary, the victims and agents of the curse, extinguish gradually the candles on the birthday cake which will not be eaten.

The success of Eliot's play is its success in finding a way of stating the commonplaces of our day in terms of tragic greatness, and in suggesting the supernatural without making us wish to giggle; but most of all in conveying by imagery what we all have felt yet been unable to say: the underlying, intangible terrors of isolation.

## CHAPTER VI

### CLEOPATRA

IN HIS Preface to *All for Love*, Dryden called the subject which he had chosen: "This Bowe of Ulysses," for the subject, he tells us, "has been treated by the greatest wits of our Nation, after Shakespeare"—

In my Stile I have profess'd to imitate the Divine *Shakespeare*; which that I might perform more freely, I have disincumber'd my self from Rhyme. Not that I condemn my former way, but that this is more proper to my present Purpose. I hope I need not to explain myself, that I have not Copy'd my Author servilely: Words and Phrases must of necessity receive a Change in succeeding Ages: but 'tis almost a Miracle that much of his Language remains so pure. . . .<sup>1</sup>

Bernard Shaw also aspires to draw the bow. The Preface to *Three Plays for Puritans*,<sup>2</sup> among which *Caesar and Cleopatra* is included, has a famous section headed "Better than Shakespeare?" which gave great scandal in its time. People did not notice the intense humility which was mixed with his attack on bardolatry. He berates Shakespeare because—

after giving a faithful picture of the soldier broken down by debauchery, and the typical wanton in whose arms such men perish, Shakespear finally strains all his huge command of rhetoric and stage pathos to give a theatrical sublimity to the wretched end of the business, and to persuade foolish spectators that the world was well lost by the twain. . . . Woe to the poet who stoops to such folly! The lot of the man who sees life truly and thinks about it romantically is Despair.

Shaw, in fact, takes Octavius Caesar's view of the whole affair; he has no use for tragedy in the Shakespearean sense—the point of *Antony and Cleopatra* is that the end of the lovers is to be preferred to that of the Emperor. Shaw does not agree—

Besides, I have a technical objection to making sexual infatuation a tragic theme. Experience proves that it is only effective in the comic spirit. . . . Let realism have its demonstration, comedy its criticism, or even bawdry its horselaugh at the expense of sexual infatuation, if it must; but to ask us to subject our souls to its ruinous glamour, to

<sup>1</sup> *Five Restoration Tragedies* (World's Classics), ed. Dobrée, p. 19.

<sup>2</sup> Constable, 1900.

worship it, deify it, and imply that it alone makes our lives worth living, is nothing but folly gone mad erotically. . . . Whoever, then, expects to find Cleopatra a Circe and Caesar a hog in these pages had better lay down my book and be spared a disappointment.

For Shakespeare, as Shaw tells us, could not understand the strength of a Julius Caesar; he wrote Caesar down for the merely technical purpose of writing Brutus up; Brutus, the perfect Girondin, whose fate it is to have his head cut off by the coarser Antonys and Octaviuses, who at least know the difference between life and rhetoric.

Shaw then defends himself for claiming to offer his Caesar to the public as an improvement on Shakespeare's. His right to criticize Shakespeare is nothing new, and even his criticisms are not original, he merely repeats them "in the dialect of my own time and in the light of its philosophy." "It is the philosophy, the outlook on life, that changes, not the craft of the playwright. . . . Besides, new ideas make their technique as water makes its channel." At the close of his Preface, Shaw admits his debt to the theatre of his mid-Victorian boyhood; the theatre in which he had sat entranced to watch Barry O'Sullivan, the last master in the school of Garrick, play Hamlet, and listened, as every Dublin child must, to the repertory of Grand Opera.

Technically, I do not find myself able to proceed otherwise than as former playwrights have done. True, my plays have the latest mechanical improvements; the action is not carried on by impossible soliloquys and asides; and my people get on and off the stage without requiring four doors to a room which in real life would have only one. But my stories are the old stories; my characters are the familiar harlequin and columbine, clown and pantaloon (note the harlequin's leap in the third act of *Caesar and Cleopatra*); my stage tricks and suspenses and thrills and jests are the ones in vogue when I was a boy, by which time my grandfather was tired of them . . . the unexpectedness of my attempt to substitute natural history for conventional ethics and romantic logic may so transfigure the eternal stage puppets and their inevitable dilemmas as to make their identification impossible for the moment.

### **Shakespeare's "Antony and Cleopatra"**

But we must come to the plays. All three writers have made Plutarch's *Lives* their main source, and have followed his narrative pretty faithfully. It is notable that, although Shaw



pays a tribute to the nineteenth-century historian Mommsen, he does not really modify Plutarch in any important detail; only the interpretation is his own. Shakespeare, however, is the most faithful; he not only sticks close to Plutarch, he versifies whole passages of North's translation.

Here is North—

It was a wonderful example to the soldiers to see Antonius, that was brought up in all fineness and superfluity, so easily to drink puddle water and to eat wild fruits and roots; and moreover it is reported that, even as they passed the Alps, they did eat the barks of trees, and such beasts as never man tasted of their flesh before.

Shakespeare—

. . . thou didst drink  
 The stale of horses, and the gilded puddle  
 Which beasts would cough at: thy palate then did deign  
 The roughest berry on the rudest hedge;  
 Yea, like the stag, when snow the pasture sheets  
 The bark of trees thou browsedst. On the Alps  
 It is reported thou didst eat strange flesh,  
 Which some did die to look on: and all this—  
 It wounds thine honour that I speak it now—  
 Was borne so like a soldier that thy cheek  
 So much as lank'd not.

(Act I, Sc. 5.)

Notice that the only intrusions which Shakespeare has made are a few rhetorical devices, especially alliteration, and one simile (roughest . . . rudest; like the Stag, when Snow the pasture Sheets). The finest passages in the play are "found" in this manner—

. . . she disdained to set forward otherwise, but to take her barge in the river of Cydnus, the poop whereof was of gold, the sails of purple, and the oars of silver, which kept stroke in rowing after the sound of the music of flutes. . . .

The barge she sat in, like a burnish'd throne  
 Burn'd on the water: the poop was beaten gold;  
 Purple the sails, and so perfumed that  
 The winds were lovesick with them; the oars were silver  
 Which to the tune of flutes kept stroke and made  
 The water which they beat to follow faster  
 As amorous of their strokes. . . .

(Act II, Sc. 2.)

The skill of Shakespeare consists, not only in the subtle heightening of the atmosphere ("like a burnish'd throne," "the winds were lovesick with them," "as amorous of their strokes") but in the placing of the speech. It is given to the cynical Enobarbus (Shakespeare's own and his only creation) and related by him to the Romans Agrippa and Maecenas; it not merely explains Cleopatra's charm to them—it assures us of the inevitability of the tragedy—

*Maecenas.* Now Antony must leave her utterly.

*Enobarbus.* Never; he will not:

Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale

Her infinite variety.

In Plutarch, then, we may find not merely the outline of Shakespeare's story; but the detail. He tells us of Sextus Pompeius, and the supper on board ship—

There he welcomed them, and made them great cheer. Now in the midst of the feast, when they fell to be merry with Antonius' love unto Cleopatra, Menas the Pirate came to Pompey, and whispering in his ear, said unto him: "Shall I cut the cables of the ankers, and make thee lord not only of Sicily and Sardinia, but of the whole empire of Rome besides?" Pompey, having paused upon it awhile, at length answered him: "Thou shouldst have done it, and never have told it me, but now we must be content with that we have. . . ."

Ventidius is there, and Octavia, "sister to one of the emperors and wife of the other," Eros, commanded by his master Antony to kill him, and killing himself instead—

. . . turning his head at one side he thrust his sword into himself, and fell down dead at his master's foot. Then said Antonius, "O noble Eros, I thank thee for this, and it is valiantly done of thee. . . ."

the whipping of Caesar's ambassador; the sentries who heard at dead of night

. . . a marvellous sweet harmony of sundry sorts of instruments of music, with the cry of a multitude of people, as they had been dancing . . . and it seemed that this dance went through the city to the gate that opened to the enemies. . . .

these and the outcome, Cleopatra's flight to her monument, Antony's death, and the cheating of Caesar; all are in

North's Plutarch.<sup>1</sup> But everywhere Shakespeare shapes them dramatically, and adds his own touch. In North, it is Bacchus whom the sentries hear at dead of night forsaking Antony; but Shakespeare gives his scene added dignity by taking Hercules from another part of the story—

*First Soldier.* What should this mean?

*Second Soldier.* 'Tis the god Hercules, whom Antony loved  
Now leaves him

(Act IV, Sc. 4.)

Bacchus finds his place in the scene on board ship, when the triumvirs are threatened with Menas' treachery—

Come, thou monarch of the vine,  
Plumpy Bacchus with pink eyne!  
In thy vats our cares be drowned,  
With thy grapes our hairs be crowned:  
Cup us, till the world go round,  
Cup us, till the world go round!

(Act II, Sc. 7.)

There, Bacchus serves for dramatic irony (since we in the audience know the danger of which these statesmen are ignorant; and we see these "great fellows" reduced like lesser men to drunken folly).

The scene of Antony's attempted suicide begins with the words—

Sometime we see a cloud that's dragonish,  
A vapour sometime like a bear or lion . . .  
My good knave Eros, now thy captain is  
Even such a body; here I am Antony,  
Yet cannot hold this visible shape, my knave

(Act. IV, Sc. 14.)

and the servant's tragically appropriate name goes echoing through the scene—

Unarm, Eros; the long day's task is done  
And we must sleep . . . . .  
. . . . . Apace, Eros, apace. . . . .  
Eros!—I come my queen. Eros—stay for me!  
. . . . . Come, Eros, Eros!

<sup>1</sup> Plutarch, *Four Lives*, ed. R. H. Carr (Oxford University Press, 1907), pp. 178, 185, 192, 235, 236.

The whipping of Caesar's messenger gives a twist to our entrails and nevertheless re-establishes when it is most threatened the heroic stature of Antony—

*Antony.* I am Antony yet. Take hence this Jack, and whip him.

*Enobarbus (aside).* 'Tis better playing with a lion's whelp

Than with an old one dying.

(Act. III, Sc. 13.)

So much for the details of Shakespeare's use of Plutarch, both his fidelity and his invention. He adds only a single character, though that is one of his most brilliant inventions—Enobarbus. He has no sub-plot. Instead, he contents himself with the contrast of Roman and Egyptian: the two worlds.

In the construction of the play, this sets him a series of problems. There is, first, the predominance of Roman material in the early part. There is little for Cleopatra to do—

*Cleopatra.* Give me to drink mandragora.

*Charmain.* Why, madam?

*Cleopatra.* That I might sleep out this great gap of time

My Antony is away.

(Act I, Sc. 5.)

Next, there is the mass of political intrigue and the progress of the wars to assimilate. Last, there is the incredibly sustained crisis; for we know by the time the play is half over that Antony is defeated; two acts (in the modern division of scenes) are given to the deaths of Antony and Cleopatra.

Such a treatment would be impossible without the conditions of the Elizabethan stage. Shakespeare lets the play flow on, with little localization except on the galley (in the middle of the play) and the pyramid (at the end). The play is divided, in modern editions, into 42 scenes—some with only four or five, ten or twenty lines. At times, he sketches rapidly and casually; then he pauses to weight a detail with poetry or dramatic action.

To overcome the first difficulty—the lack of proportion between his Roman and Egyptian material, he employs a number of devices. He constantly reminds us of Egypt while we are in Rome. The soothsayer is there (brought specially from Egypt) at Antony's elbow. Matters of world politics are interrupted, while Enobarbus describes the "Egyptian

wassails" and the "charms of Cleopatra" to the Roman statesmen. On Pompey's galley the talk is all of crocodiles and pyramises. The news of Antony's treachery is split into two scenes; in the first we see Cleopatra savage and suffering; in the second, she appears cold and deceitful. In all the changes of mood, Shakespeare is building the character which will justify him in the last two acts.<sup>1</sup>

Having got to the centre of the play, Shakespeare must compress the Roman material so as to get back to Cleopatra. He does so, but he does not show us Antony's return to Egypt. On the contrary, he *reports* it: we hear of it from Caesar. To have shown it would take too long, and risk raising the tone too soon; we must not have the climax before it is due.

In showing us the wars, Shakespeare relies on the established conventions of his stage: short scenes, processions, marches and countermarches, noises off, and few words. But to bring this alive he introduces a series of incidents: Antony's school-master sent as ambassador to Caesar; Caesar's messenger whipped; Antony's loyal soldier—

O noble emperor, do not fight by sea;  
Trust not to rotten planks. Do you misdoubt  
This sword and these my wounds? Let the Egyptians  
And the Phoenicians go a-ducking: we  
Have used to conquer, standing on the earth  
And fighting foot to foot.

(Act III, Sc. 7.)

Together with such lively details, he shifts the emphasis from the main characters; he uses Antony's servant Eros, and Enobarbus—who in abandoning Antony becomes a tragic character, and dominates the play at the end of Act III and the beginning of Act IV.

Having done this, Shakespeare can give Antony and Cleopatra the rest of the play. He has so well established their personalities that they can do anything without losing our sympathy. We can accept Antony's suspicions of Cleopatra's faith; the bungling of his suicide, and his long-drawn-out dying. We can accept Cleopatra's cowardice at Actium, and her sending of the message to Antony that she has killed

<sup>1</sup> In this analysis I follow H. Granville-Barker, *Prefaces to Shakespeare*, Series II (Sidgwick and Jackson, 1930).

herself. None of these things affects the glory of the end. At the beginning of the play, Antony and Cleopatra had played at being commoners—

All alone  
Tonight we'll wander through the streets and note  
The qualities of people. . . .

(Act I, Sc. 1.)

at the end of the play they have achieved the right to be commoners—

Empress. . . . No more, but e'en a woman, and commanded  
By such poor passion as the maid that milks  
And does the meanest chares . . . . (Act IV, Sc. 15.)  
Dost thou not see my baby at my breast  
That sucks the nurse asleep?

(Act V, Sc. 2.)

For after Caesar has been and gone comes Cleopatra's last visitor, an old countryman with a basket of figs; and among them "the pretty worm of Nilus, that kills and pains not."

### **Dryden's "All for Love, or The World Well Lost"**

Let us turn now to Dryden. Convention demands a prologue, and this one has all Dryden's charm and warm humanity. There are the flocks of Criticks waiting like vultures for the carcase of a play; and the poet is at a disadvantage—

He fights this day unarm'd, without his Rhyme.  
And brings a Tale which often has been told;  
As sad as Dido's, and almost as old.  
His Heroe, whom you Wits his Bully call,  
Bates of his mettle; and scarce rants at all:  
He's somewhat lewd, but a well-meaning mind;  
Weeps much; fights little, but is wondrous kind.  
In short, a Pattern, and Companion fit  
For all the keeping Tonyes of the Pit.  
I cou'd name more; a Wife, and Mistress too;  
Both (to be plain) too good for most of you:  
The Wife well-natur'd, and the Mistress true.

The terms of Dryden's defence need to be remembered by the modern audience as well as by the "Fops" and "Half-wits" to whom they were addressed—

Errours, like Straws, upton the surface flow;  
He who would search for Pearls must dive below. . . .

But, as the Rich, when tir'd with daily Feasts  
 For change, become their next poor Tenants Ghests;  
 Drink hearty Draughts of Ale, from plain brown Bowls,  
 And snatch the homely Rasher from the Coals:  
 So you, retiring from much better Cheer,  
 For once, may venture to do penance here.  
 And since the plenteous Autumn now is past,  
 Whose Grapes and Peaches have Indulg'd your taste,  
 Take in good part from our poor Poet's board  
 Such rivell'd Fruits as Winter can afford.

It is absurd, as some critics of our time have done, to ask us to forget Shakespeare in reading Dryden. True, we must not expect Dryden to be Shakespeare—Dryden is Dryden; yet the Prologue ought to show us that his vision of the tragedy is not so far from Shakespeare's; he, too, sees in it that unexpected quality of homeliness, and expresses it in the most famous lines of the play—

Men are but Children of a larger growth,  
 Our Appetites are apt to change as theirs,  
 And full of craving too, and full as vain;  
 And yet the Soul, shut up in her dark Room  
 Viewing so clear abroad, at home sees nothing;  
 But like a Mole in Earth, busie and blind,  
 Works all her folly up, and casts it outward  
 To the Worlds open view; thus I discover'd  
 And blam'd the Love of ruin'd Antony;  
 Yet wish that I were he, to be so ruin'd.

(Act IV, p. 70.)

The great difference between Shakespeare's treatment and Dryden's is in construction. Dryden dispenses with the "magnificent poetic journalism"<sup>1</sup> of Shakespeare; his play is beautifully *built*. Shakespeare's 34 speaking parts are reduced to 10; his 42 scenes to 5 acts without scene division. Dryden begins his play at the point which Shakespeare reached in Act IV; Actium is lost; the alliance with Caesar, the marriage of Antony to Octavia, the suppression of Pompey's rebellion, are all memories. Shakespeare had used Ventidius, Antony's victorious lieutenant, for a moment of contrast; Dryden develops Ventidius into a leading character, and shares the Roman qualities between him and Dolabella; no other Romans appear—we do not see Caesar or his court. For

<sup>1</sup> H. Granville Barker, *Prefaces to Shakespeare*, Vol. II.

Dryden observes (in a modified form) the Unity of Place: we do not leave Egypt.

The Fabrick of the Play is regular enough, as to the inferior parts of it; and the Unities of Time, Place, and Action more exactly observ'd, than, perhaps, the English Theatre requires. Particularly, the Action is so much one, that it is the only one of the kind without Episode or Underplot; every Scene in the Tragedy conducing to the main design, and every Act concluding with a turn of it. The greatest error in the contrivance seems to be in the person of Octavia: for though I might use the privilege of a Poet, to introduce her into Alexandria, yet I had not enough consider'd, that the compassion she mov'd to her self and Children, was destructive to that which I reserv'd for Antony and Cleopatra; whose mutual love being founded upon vice, must lessen the favour of the audience to them, when Virtue and Innocence were oppress'd by it.<sup>1</sup>

The action of Dryden's play is very simple, and its development is controlled, as he says, by the act divisions which had meant nothing to Shakespeare. The first act begins in the Temple of Isis, with the priests describing portents of disaster, and Alexas the Eunuch, on the other hand, stressing that all is not over—

Yet still War seems on either side to sleep.

It is the moment, described by Plutarch and used also by Shakespeare, when Cæsar did not press home the advantage he had gained at Actium; and Antony took courage to resist for the last time. In Dryden's play, it is Ventidius who inspires Antony with fresh resolve. He is able to do so because Antony, after the shame of his cowardice at Actium, has deserted Cleopatra, and taken refuge in the Temple of Isis; Ventidius interrupts his sad reverie, and recalls to Antony his former greatness. The "turn of the action" with which the Act ends is the revived heroism of Antony. "I prefer the Scene between Antony and Ventidius in the first act, to anything which I have written in this kind," said Dryden.

The second act begins with the deserted Cleopatra. It is notable that Dryden, although he prides himself on the Unities, has here employed the unlocalized Shakespearean stage; for after a short scene in which Cleopatra resolves to try and win Antony back, she retires, and Antony with his

<sup>1</sup> Preface to *All for Love in Five Restoration Tragedies* (World's Classics), p. 10.



army marches on. Alexas meets them with Cleopatra's bribes and messages; and while Antony hesitates, Cleopatra comes at Alexas's heels to revive Antony's passion.

How I lov'd  
Witness ye Days and Nights, and all your Hours  
That Danc'd away with Down upon your Feet  
As all your bus'ness were to count my Passion . . .

(Act II, p. 48.)

In vain for Ventidius to repeat "Remember Actium"; the Act ends with the "turn"—Cleopatra has her Antony again, resolved to conquer and to love.

Act III opens with Antony's success in battle; after "A dance of Aegyptians" Antony is crowned by Cleopatra and there is a short love scene. Ventidius waits in the background, and when Cleopatra is gone urges Antony to seek peace with Caesar through his friend Dolabella. For Dryden's Antony is not the realist of Shakespeare's story—a man who knew the chances of war and the impossibility of his success. This Antony has to be reminded—

*Ventidius.* I know, Sir, you have conquer'd against odds;  
But still you draw supplies from one poor Town  
And of Egyptians: He has all the World  
And at his back Nations come pouring in  
To fill the gaps you make.

(Act III, p. 56.)

Antony agrees to receive Dolabella, who had left him after being forbidden Cleopatra's sight—

Because I fear'd he lov'd her: he confess'd  
He had a warmth which, for my sake, he stifled.

(Act III, p. 57.)

Now, when Dolabella comes in, the old friendship is revived in all its warmth—

*Antony.* Tis he himself, himself, by holy Friendship!  
Art thou return'd at last, my better half?

while in Dolabella's reply sounds once more the note of home—

*Dolabella.* I must be silent; for my Soul is busie  
About a noble Work: she's new come home,  
Like a long absent Man, and wanders o'er  
Each Room, a Stranger to her own, to look  
If all be safe.

Dryden puts into Antony's own mouth the account of Cleopatra upon the river Cydnos, which Shakespeare had given to Enobarbus in Rome. Dryden's verse is little inferior in poetry, but it is vastly inferior in dramatic significance—

*Antony.* Her gally down the Silver Cydnos row'd,  
The Tackling Silk, the Streamers wav'd with Gold,  
The gentle Winds were lodg'd in Purple Sails:  
Her Nymphs, like Nereids, round her Couch, were plac'd;  
Where she, another sea-born Venus, lay.

(Act III, p. 58.)

Dolabella justifies himself for having felt love for Cleopatra by contrasting his age and circumstances with those of Antony. Antony is touched, and to confirm him in his repentant mood Dolabella produces Octavia and Antony's two children.

*Antony.* I am vanquish'd; take me,  
Octavia; take me, Children; share me all.

(Act III, p. 65.)

Alexas quickly carries the news of this disaster to Cleopatra, and the third act ends with a battle of words between the successful wife and the discarded mistress.

I judg'd it both natural and probable, that Octavia, proud of her new-gain'd Conquest, would search out Cleopatra to triumph over her; and that Cleopatra, thus attack'd, was not of a spirit to shun the encounter: and tis not unlikely, that two exasperated Rivals should use such Satyr as I have put into their mouths; for after all, though the one were a Roman, and the other a Queen, they were both Woman.<sup>1</sup>

In Act IV, attention shifts from Antony, and the play takes on a character which is at its farthest from Shakespeare and, indeed, from Plutarch; on the other hand, it reveals strong affinities with Restoration comedy and with Racinean tragedy. We think of comedy as we watch Ventidius on the gallery above (note the Elizabethan staging) commenting—

Woman, woman!  
Dear damn'd inconstant Sex!

(Act IV, p. 73.)

We think of Racine as we watch Dolabella and Cleopatra at cross purposes. Dolabella wrestles with the desire to succeed Antony as Cleopatra's lover. But he makes a false step; his

<sup>1</sup> Dryden's Preface to the Play, p. 11.

lying account of Antony's fury makes Cleopatra reveal her real feelings. Admitting his mistake, Dolabella justifies Antony—

I find your Breast fenc'd round from humane reach,  
Transparent as a Rock of solid Chrystal;  
Seen through, but never pierc'd. My Friend, my Friend!  
What endless Treasure hast thou thrown away. . . .

(Act IV, p. 76.)

Meanwhile, Ventidius has carried to Antony the news of what he has observed of the "treachery" of Dolabella and Cleopatra; once more, the results are not what he expects. Antony shows the strength of his feelings; Octavia quarrels with him and leaves him; Dolabella and Cleopatra are heaped with Antony's reproaches, and the act ends with despair—

*Antony.* Now, all take several ways,  
And each your own sad fate with mine deplore;  
That you were false, and I could trust no more.

The war is renewed with Octavia's departure; and Act V begins with the news (brought by the priest, Serapion, acting as a Messenger in the style of Greek Tragedy) that the Egyptian fleet have abandoned Antony and joined Caesar. Dryden now draws closer to Shakespeare once more in his account of events. As Antony dies, it is once more with the persistent metaphor of home on his lips—

'Tis as with a Man  
Removing in a hurry: all pack'd up.  
But one dear Jewel that his haste forgot;  
And he, for that returns upon the spur:  
So I come back, for thee. (Act V, p. 101.)

Cleopatra follows him; but not with that last hoydenish twist that Shakespeare gives her—the fear that Iras will steal Antony's first kiss in the next world, and the desire to prove Cæsar "ass unpolicied." Dryden's Cleopatra dies with dignity, seated beside her Lord—

Let dull Octavia  
Survive, to mourn him dead: my Nobler Fate  
Shall knit our Spousals with a tie too strong  
For *Roman* laws to break.

So, as the poison works—

A heavy numbness creeps through every Limb,  
And now 'tis at my Head; my Eye-lids fall,  
And my dear Love is vanish'd in a Mist.  
Where shall I find him, where? O turn me to him,  
And lay me on his Breast—Caesar, thy worst;  
Now part us, if thou canst.

The analysis we have made reveals some expected and some unexpected things. Dryden is much more closely bound than Shakespeare by two external codes: the æsthetic code of the Unities, and the social code of decorum. He resists the extreme pressure of both, as the play and preface show. He allows Cleopatra and Octavia a quarrel; and vigorously attacks the squeamishness of critics. He points out that French dramatists, in their extreme desire to observe the proprieties, outrage common sense and our deeper sense of decency—

Thus their Hippolitus is so scrupulous in point of decency, that he will rather expose himself to death, than accuse his Stepmother to his Father; and my Criticks I am sure will commend him for it: but we of grosser apprehensions, are apt to think that this excess of Generosity, is not practicable but with Fools and Madmen.<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, Dryden insists here and elsewhere that the Unities may be broken with impunity on occasion. But the force of his defence, and the text of the play, show that Dryden constantly felt the pressure of the rules, even when he reacted by defying them.

With history, on the other hand, Dryden is much less scrupulous; he takes liberties which Shakespeare did not choose to allow himself; and, indeed, to keep the shape of his play he is bound to do so. He defends himself on the plea of reason: "I judg'd it both natural and probable . . . 'tis not unlikely." Similarly, the shape of the play affects the characterization; at several points, he allows the necessity for good "turns" to take something from Antony's manliness; to show him worked on by others, a prey to whoever can catch his ear. Shakespeare's Antony is a dissolute but not a weak character.

<sup>1</sup> *All for Love*, Preface, p. 13.

### Shaw's "Caesar and Cleopatra"

When we turn to Shaw, we find that he is concerned neither with moral and sensual weakness, nor with weakness of character; he is out to draw a portrait of human strength. He has nothing to say about Antony. He goes back to an earlier stage in Cleopatra's history; her salad days when she loved Julius Caesar.

*Antony and Cleopatra* is a play about Antony and Cleopatra. *All for Love* is about a tug-of-war for the soul of Antony between Cleopatra (and Alexas) on one side; Ventidius (and Octavia) on the other. *Caesar and Cleopatra* is a play about Julius Caesar. Cleopatra cannot influence Caesar, for she has no power over him—that is the point of the play. It is a play for Puritans. The moral is admirable; but there are historical objections to it. According to Plutarch, Cleopatra bore Caesar a son, Caesarion; Shaw's Cleopatra hardly gets closer to Caesar than a friendly pat on the head. Nor are we reminded that, though Caesar may be superior to lust, anger, and narrow vision, the conspirators' daggers are waiting for him at home. The last point may have troubled Shaw, for he faces it in *Saint Joan*. But there is nothing in *Caesar and Cleopatra* to remind us that those who achieve the greatest wisdom and serenity, even those who are the most loved, may still have to pay the price that Jesus, Socrates, Gandhi paid: death at the hands of little men. *Caesar and Cleopatra*, in other words, is not a tragedy.

Shaw is much troubled about anachronism, which did not trouble his predecessors. He claims that the only anachronism in his play is making Cleopatra recommend rum as a cure for Caesar's baldness; but his defence of apparent anachronisms is largely irrelevant, as he admits at the end—

My reason for ignoring the popular conception of Progress in *Caesar and Cleopatra* is that there is no reason to suppose that any Progress has taken place since their time. But even if I shared the popular delusion, I do not see that I could have made any essential difference in the play. I can only imitate humanity as I know it. . . .

. . . Nobody need deny Caesar a share, at least, of the qualities I have attributed to him. All men, much more Julius Caesars, possess all qualities in some degree. The really interesting question is whether I am right in assuming that the way to produce an impression of greatness

is by exhibiting a man, not as mortifying his nature by doing his duty, in the manner which our system of putting little men into great positions . . . forces us to inculcate, but as simply doing what he naturally wants to do. For this raises the question whether our world has not been wrong in its moral theory for the last 2,500 years or so.

(Notes, p. 205.)

Shaw understands the virtues of magnanimity and disinterestedness; he has vision and humour, and, therefore, in imitating humanity as he knows it, he does create a portrait which has greatness—a rare feat indeed. If his success leaves us questioning, that is what it is intended to do.

*Caesar and Cleopatra* is written in prose; a prose subtly compounded of contrasting elements. It is capable of moments of poetry—

The blackness and stillness breaks softly into silver mist and strange airs as the windswept harp of Memnon plays at the dawning of the moon.

(Act I, p. 102.)

It delights, not only in paradox (as has often been noticed) but in all the tricks of classical rhetoric—

I have found flocks and pastures, men and cities, but no other Caesar, no air native to me, no man kindred to me, none who can do my day's deed, and think my night's thought. . . . My way hither was the way of destiny; for I am he of whose genius you are the symbol: part brute, part woman, and part god, nothing of man in me at all (p. 103).

Such devices need space for their effect; and Shaw delights in long speeches—indeed he claims to have reintroduced them to the English stage. But he can cut across them with colloquial vernacular. For the first act of his play has shown us the terror which the coming of the Romans inspires; it has then given us Caesar's soliloquy to the Sphinx; and having created this large effect, it bursts the bubble with the shouts of Cleopatra—

Old gentleman, don't run away . . . climb up here quickly or the Romans will come and eat you . . . take care. That's right. Now sit down: you may have its other paw (pp. 103-4).

The pleasure we get from this dialogue is not merely that of bathos; there is also the dramatic irony of the situation, developed until the curtain line of the act when Cleopatra, still ignorant of Caesar's identity, hears the cry of the legions: "Hail Caesar."

If the whole act had been written as slangily as Cleopatra's speeches, it would have produced an effect of anachronism. If it had all been as rhetorical as Caesar's soliloquy, we should have lost pace. So Shaw begins in a timeless prose, based on Bunyan and the Bible, which is vaguely archaic yet acceptable; it is not the speech of any period, yet it is not offensively imitative—

*Bel Affris.* Know then, that I am a novice in the guard of the temple of Ra in Memphis, serving neither Cleopatra nor her brother Ptolemy, but only the high gods. . . . What think ye, did we learn? Even that Caesar is coming also in hot pursuit of his foe, and that Ptolemy has slain Pompey. . . .

(Act I, p. 95.)

The first act of *Caesar and Cleopatra* has given us little exposition (contrary to the usual practice). In the second act we see Caesar interrupt a State Council of the young King Ptolemy, and not only do we see Caesar in action, we get also a close account of the political situation in Egypt, and the events which led up to Caesar's presence there. The scene is brilliantly convincing; only at one point does it waver; that is when Caesar is confronted by the Egyptian courtiers with the murderer of his rival, Pompey. They jeer at Caesar's reputation for clemency, and offer him vengeance as well. Caesar is grieved; but he answers them with rhetoric which is less convincing than few words would have been.

For most of the act, Cleopatra is present, but present only to be ignored: to behave like a child, and to be treated like one. She cannot touch Caesar, except for a moment with jibes about his age. Nor can he touch her to any effect: she can learn from him the desire for power, but she cannot learn any of his wisdom. The act ends with the burning of the Alexandrian library, and Caesar's attack on the Pharos. It is typical of Shaw's method, and of the period in which the play was born (the nineties), that many of the things which are apparently slipped into the text are really of central importance: the denunciation of pedantry over the burning library, contrasted with the indifference to Pompey's murder; the fun at the expense of Britannus, Caesar's secretary; the jokes about money and state ceremonial.

This is even more true of Act III. It is full of colour and action; the incidents are drawn from Plutarch; but the significance of the incident in Plutarch quite evaporates in Shaw's treatment. Here is Plutarch's account—

Caesar said (to Pothinus) that he would not ask counsel of the Egyptians for his affairs, but would be paid: and thereupon secretly sent for Cleopatra, which was in the country to come to him. She, only taking Apollodorus Sicilian of all her friends, took a little boat, and went away with him in it in the night, and came and landed hard by the foot of the castle. Then, having no other mean to come into the court without being known, she laid herself down upon a mattress or flock-bed, which Apollodorus her friend tied and bound together like a bundle with a great leather thong, and so took her up on his back, and brought her thus hampered in this fardel unto Caesar, in at the castle gate. This was the first occasion (as it is reported) that made Caesar to love her. . . .<sup>1</sup>

In other words, Caesar (in Plutarch) wanted to get hold of Cleopatra; in Shaw, he wants to be rid of her. Though she schemes her secret way into the Pharos, in Plutarch it is at Caesar's desire; he wishes to use her in his political game, to set her up as a puppet queen of Egypt. In Plutarch, she gets up out of the carpet to become Caesar's mistress; in Shaw, she gets a ducking. This kind of manipulation of history is more anachronistic than Cleopatra's cure for baldness. Shaw's treatment makes a gay and lively third act, incomparably well told. But it is a harlequinade, which does not bear to be taken seriously.

By throwing away Act III, however, Shaw has solved one of the thorniest technical problems—what to do with the fourth act of a five-act play. Act IV of *Caesar and Cleopatra* is the fullest of meat and the longest of the play. Shaw makes the orthodox move of bringing a fresh character into prominence; which is nearly always profitable at this stage of the game, if you have the right character in reserve. Ftatateeta has affinities with the Alexas of Dryden's play: like him, she has become the incarnation of court intrigue; she has lost her humanity; she breathes poison; and while she seems to serve, she pursues her own ends. Round her, Shaw groups all those for whom Caesar's clemency and wisdom exist in vain—Cleopatra, a kitten growing into a tigress; the politician

<sup>1</sup> Plutarch, *Four Lives*, ed. Carr, p. 91.



Pothinus; the dilettante Apollodorus; the soldier of fortune, Lucius Septimius. If they serve Caesar it is because his luck still holds—for though the mob has been roused against the Romans by the assassination of Pothinus in defiance of Caesar's orders (an act which even the faithful Rufio applauds)—yet Mithridates of Pergamos is on the march, he has taken Pelusium; Caesar and his garrison will be saved.

That is really the end of the play. Act V is an Epilogue, with little more than the function of rounding off the story. Caesar leaves Cleopatra with the promise that he will send her Mark Antony, and no more moving or memorable words than these—

I will not forget. Farewell, I do not think we shall meet again.  
Farewell.

*(He kisses her on the forehead. She is much affected and begins to sniff. He embarks.)*

The sting is in the tail—for the only words Cleopatra utters are in reply to Apollodorus' consoling "He will return some day"—

I hope not. But I can't help crying, all the same.

Just that. Shaw has accused Shakespeare in his Preface of a doctrine of Despair. Yet it is to be questioned whether Cleopatra with the aspic at her breast really makes a sadder end than Cleopatra waving her handkerchief to greatness as it moves away, with the hope that it will not return.

## CHAPTER VII

### THE DESTINY OF MANKIND

LET US now consider three morality plays: *Everyman*, thought to be an English adaptation from a Dutch original of the early fifteenth century; *Doctor Faustus*, by Christopher Marlowe, first played in the early fifteen-nineties and published in 1604; and *Masses and Man*, a German expressionist play, written in prison at Niederschoenenfeld by Ernst Toller in 1919, and produced in 1921 by the Volksbühne.<sup>1</sup>

We may most easily work back to the spirit which created these plays through the one which is nearest to us in time. Toller described the inception of *Masses and Man* in his prison cell like this—

I see convicts in the prison yard, sawing wood with a monotonous rhythm. In sympathy I think: these are men. This one may be a workman, the next a farmer, the next a clerk. . . . I see the room in which the workman lived, his little peculiarities, the characteristic gesture with which he threw away a match, or kissed a woman, or came out of the factory gates in the evening. I see the broad-backed farmer and the narrow-chested little clerk just as clearly. Then suddenly—they are no longer human beings, X and Y and Z, but dreadful puppets dimly aware of the compelling fate that governs them.

Two women once walked past the window of my cell, while I was clinging to the bars. Apparently two old maids. Both had short white hair and dresses identical in shape, colour, and cut; both carried grey umbrellas with white dots and both wagged their heads.

Not for one moment did I see these as “realistic human beings” going for a walk in the narrow prison lane of a “realistic” Neuberg. It was a dance of death by two old maids, one old maid and her mirrored death, that stared me in the face.

*Masses and Man*, considered as a whole, is the presentation of such visionary insight. It literally broke out of me and was put on paper in two days and a half. The two nights which, owing to my imprisonment, I was forced to spend in “bed” in a dark cell, were abysses of torment. My mind was tortured with visions of faces, daimonic faces, faces tumbling over each other in grotesque somersaults. In the mornings, shivering

<sup>1</sup> *Masses and Man*, translated by V. Mendel (John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1934).

with fever, I sat down to write and did not stop until my fingers, clammy and trembling, refused to serve me. . . .

The laborious and blissful work of pruning and remoulding lasted a year.<sup>1</sup>

The intense agony of such experiences is linked both to the medieval asceticism which produced *Everyman*, and to the Renaissance *furor poeticus* which inspired the brief and meteoric career of Marlowe.

These plays have in common, then, an intensity of experience on the part of the author, expressing itself in a form which is abstracted from ordinary experience. As Toller put it (and his words might stand for all three)—

These pictures of "reality" are not realism, are not local colour; the protagonists (except for Sonia) are not individual characters. Such a play can only have a spiritual, never a concrete, reality.<sup>2</sup>

The closest parallels are, of course, between *Everyman* and *Masses and Man* (*Massemensch* in German). The characters have dramatic identity, but no individuality. Toller names them only The Woman, Her Husband, the Nameless One, the Guide, Prisoners, Bankers, Sentries, Shadows; as *Everyman* is endowed with Good Fellowship and Good Deeds, Knowledge, Strength, Discretion, and the Five Wits, and encounters Death.

### "*Everyman*" (Anonymous)

Both are short, simple, and concise. *Masses and Man* has seven scenes or "pictures," of which the third, fifth, and seventh, are "dream pictures"—visionary abstracts a degree more removed from reality than the rest. *Everyman* is continuous in action, but may also be divided into seven scenes. The first is God's summons to Death—

Go thou to Everyman,  
And shew him, in my name,  
A pilgrimage he must on him take,  
Which he in no wise may escape;  
And that he bring with him a sure reckoning,  
Without delay or any tarrying.

The second scene is Death's encounter with *Everyman*;

<sup>1</sup> *Masses and Man*, "The Author to the Producer."

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

Everyman prays for respite, but all he gets is the grim answer—

See thou make thee ready shortly.

The third and fourth scenes show Everyman appealing in vain for help to Fellowship first, and then to Kindred and Cousins. In the fifth he turns from friends and relations to his possessions. It is only when his Goods have curtly abandoned him that he thinks of his Good Deeds. Goods bids him farewell—

Nay, Everyman; I say no.  
As for a while I was lent thee. . . .  
Weenest thou that I will follow thee  
From this world? nay, verily.

And when he seeks Good Deeds, she speaks from the ground—

Here I lie, cold in the ground.  
Thy sins hath me sore bound,  
That I cannot stir.

She is willing to go with him, and shows him his book of account; but she cannot go, so she calls her sister, Knowledge—

Everyman, I will go with thee, and be thy guide,  
In thy most need to go by thy side.

Under the direction of Knowledge, therefore, Everyman prepares himself for his journey. The last scene of the play symbolizes the journey itself. Good Deeds is released as Everyman puts on the robe of Contrition; Discretion, Strength, Five Wits and Beauty are summoned to accompany him. On their advice, Everyman takes his last shrift before they go with him to the brink of the grave. There in turn they desert him—Beauty first, then Strength and Discretion, and afterwards, Five Wits. Everyman and Good Deeds go down into the Grave together; Knowledge cannot go with them, but she stays and pronounces Everyman's epitaph.

### **Toller's "Masses and Man"**

The greatness of Everyman is its bare, grave, laconic simplicity. It is a simplicity infinitely removed from insipidity or imbecility; a simplicity which relies only on its tremendous subject. Although *Masses and Man* has these same qualities, it has them in a lesser degree. It is conceived with more art;

and although it relies little on literature, it relies a good deal on theatrical devices, on lighting, music, and production. Here is a note by the producer, Fehling, on the original production at the Volksbühne—

The stage, curtained and carpeted in black, only occasionally opened on a domed horizon with white or yellow lighting, and itself tinged with glowing light, gave the illusion of illimitable space and freedom for the imaginative visualization of scenes appropriate to the changing dramatic situation. The brief transitions from one scene to the next are bridged by veiled music which completes and introduces the mood of each in turn. The second "picture" closes on a bizarre fox-trot. In the fourth the ghostly rhythms of the concertina develop into a shrill *danse macabre*. The orchestral interlude before the seventh picture dissolves into a violin solo sounding under Sonia's opening lines.

The first scene shows us a workman's tavern, where a Woman and some Men sit round a clumsy table. The Woman is the leader of a strike which is proclaimed for the next morning. The meeting is interrupted by her Husband, who does not sympathize with her revolutionary aims, feels dishonoured by her activities, and is sure that they will harm his career. The Woman stands firm; yet at the end of the scene her love for her Husband sends her home with him—

*The Woman.* Good night.

*(As the husband is about to go.)*

May I go with you?

To-day for the last time . . .

Or am I shameless?

Or am I shameless—

Shameless to my last drop of blood?

*(The Woman follows her husband.)*

The second scene takes us to the Stock Exchange, but the Stock Exchange of nightmare; the Official Recorder has the face of the Husband. It is war-time and the market is breaking under fear of defeat. The bankers and brokers decide that the failing morale is due to lack of love, and as a remedy they float the National Convalescent Home Limited—to run brothels. Confidence is re-established; but the Guide and the Woman enter to remind the Brokers that the system works on human creatures. The Brokers are touched; they run a dance for charity and as they fox-trot in their top-hats the scene ends.

Such satire sounds naïve indeed after thirty years, and it is worth asking why; for it contains a truth, even if a very distorted one. The mannerisms of its theatrical presentation have become so commonplace, that we can no longer tolerate them for the present; they prevent us from learning more of the truth about war or about stockbrokers. We are left only with the statement, and once we reject the statement we reject the whole scene.

However, there is a play of more than topical interest in *Masses and Man*; it lies in the divided mind of the Woman. Even in the second scene we can see this in her dream; for her personal predicament is concerned with love: the Recorder of the Stock Exchange has her husband's face. The third scene takes us to the meeting where the masses are voicing their wrongs. First they propose to wreck the machines, but the Woman dissuades them—

For see, this is the twentieth century;  
The case is judged, is settled,  
Machines can never be undone.

Instead she urges them—

Strike! Not a hand's turn more!  
To strike is action!

But she is interrupted by a Nameless One from the audience, who asserts relentlessly the inadequacy of a strike—

A strike to-day  
Is but a bridge without the piles.  
We need more than a strike. . . .  
I call more than a strike,  
I call: a war!  
I call: the Revolution! . . .  
Your power to match his power!

The Woman is appalled: "I will not have fresh murder," she cries. But the Masses reject her leadership—she is an intellectual, a leader from outside, who has not shared their sufferings. She acquiesces—

You . . . are . . . the Masses.  
You . . . are . . . right.

But once more she carries her preoccupation into the world of dream. In the fourth picture we are in the court of a prison,

where the People's Sentries, taught by Schools, Barracks, and War to worship violence, bring each his own grievance to the holocaust. They sing in jazz rhythm—

*First Sentry.* My mother bore me—  
In a ditch one night.  
Lalala la  
Hm, hm.

*Second Sentry.* Father spawned and ignored me  
In his cups one night.

*Third Sentry.* Three years they shore me—  
'Tis a gaolbird's plight.

The Nameless One with his concertina leads a Dance of Death of the condemned prisoners; and in the dream the Woman with her Guide arrives in time to see her husband amongst them, condemned for firing on the Workers. He is to be shot, and the Woman intervenes to plead for forgiveness. Why should we forgive, ask the sentries? The woman replies: because you have suffered yourselves—

*The Woman.* Only Man counts.

*Sentry.* Only the Masses count.

*The Woman.* I offer up  
Myself  
To Mankind.

*(Ugly laughter from the Sentries. She stands beside her husband.)*

Then shoot me!  
I renounce.

But this is only the decision of her dream. In the fifth picture we are back in the Hall, the centre of the Workmen's Revolutionary Movement. Reports come in—disastrous reports—from the districts. The Woman is still the Leader, but her worst fears are being realized. The Nameless One urges more ruthlessness; he applauds a suggestion to use their bourgeois hostages as a shield in the firing line. The Woman's protests are taken for cowardice and treachery; she belongs to the Intelligentsia, she wants to shield her own. In vain she cries—

Revenge is not the will to new and living forms,  
Revenge is not the Revolution;  
Revenge is but the axe that splits  
The crystal, glowing, angry, iron will  
To Revolution.

As the Workers shout her down, the soldiers rush in; she is taken with the rest.

The sixth and seventh scenes are parallel scenes in prison. The sixth is a dream scene between the Woman (as a Prisoner) and the Guide, her Conscience (as a Warder). She feels doubly guilty; guilty of the blood of her comrades, whose accusing ghosts surround her; guilty of acquiescing in a decision which she did not really believe. The last scene is a "visionary abstract of reality"—that is, a scene of life presented in poetic terms. The woman is in fact a prisoner, and she receives three visitors. The first, her husband (for whom she still yearns, and by whom she longs for a child) comes with a faint hope; her death sentence is not yet confirmed. But in spite of her love she rejects his consolation; she still belongs to the workers; she accepts her guilt, and declares that he shares it. When her husband has gone, the Nameless One brings her an offer of escape; all is planned; two Warders have been bribed—the third must be struck down. But the Woman will not buy her life at this price: the Warder is also a man—

If I took but one life  
I should betray the Masses.  
Who acts may only sacrifice himself.  
Hear me: no man may kill men for a cause.  
Unholy every cause that needs to kill.

To the Nameless One she is merely a sentimentalist—

You lack the courage  
To take upon yourself  
Action—hard action.  
Only by ruthless action  
Can this free people  
Come to be.  
Atone then, by your death.  
Perhaps your death is useful to us.

With this cheerful cynicism he leaves her; and last comes the Priest. He tells the Woman: "Mankind is evil from the first." Against him she asserts: "Mankind gropes towards goodness," and with this repeated affirmation she goes to her death.



### Marlowe's "Doctor Faustus"

As Toller summarized the preoccupations of the period between the wars, so Marlowe in *Doctor Faustus* summarized the preoccupations of the Renaissance. This is a play of infinitely greater poetic power than either of the others, and of subtler characterization; yet it is inferior in structure to both. It has a splendid opening and an unforgettable close, but the middle scenes are empty and wearisome. Of course, they were intended to be—it is part of the moral that Dr. Faustus should make no profitable use of the power which he had purchased from the Devil at the price of his soul; that he should throw it away in practical jokes, tiresome journeys, and pointless conjuring tricks. A producer of genius might persuade us to accept these things by subtlety of presentation; just as a producer of genius can give depth to the dangerous flatness of some stretches of *Masses and Man*. But he would do it without help from the text.

*The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus* still has much of the machinery of the medieval morality. The Good and Evil Angel contend for Faustus's soul; the Seven Deadly Sins are paraded before him; Lucifer and Mephistophilis plot his destruction; and in the end he is carried screaming to Hell by devils, to the accompaniment of thunder and lightning. Prologue and Epilogue introduce and close the play; the prologue gives us information and begs our patient hearing. Faustus's opening scene shows him alone, and is nothing but a single long soliloquy, ignoring time and condensing into one speech a series of choices. Faustus tries in turn philosophy, medicine, law, and divinity, coming finally to necromancy—

. . . his dominion that exceeds in this  
Stretcheth as far as does the mind of man.

This may be a summary, but no one who sees it on the stage has any difficulty in accepting it, though it defies every realistic canon. A modern dramatist would probably try to show us the stages of Faustus's decline from innocence and learned eminence to the black art. Marlowe takes all that for granted,

merely indicating it in a backward glance at the opening of the second scene—

*First Scholar.* I wonder what's become of Faustus that was wont to make our schools ring with *sic probo*.<sup>1</sup>

Faustus has already made his decision at the end of the first scene—

This night I'll conjure tho' I die therefore.

In his diabolical progress he is accompanied by his servant, Wagner. Many critics have doubted whether Marlowe wrote the comic scenes in which Wagner imitates his master's learning and devilry. But the conception of the magician's foolish servant is part of the fairy tale: Friar Bacon had his servant Miles, whose stupidity was responsible for the spoiling of the Brazen Head;<sup>2</sup> and so firmly was the association rooted in men's minds, that when John Aubrey in the next century collected biographical anecdotes, he tells how Dr. Butler, a philosopher of his time, had his search for the elixir of life ruined at the last moment by the negligence of a servant.<sup>3</sup>

And surely the presence of the foolish servant gives to all these legends an extra irony. For "the wise man knoweth himself to be a fool"—and the folly of Dr. Faustus is only greater than that of Wagner because he thinks himself to be wise; he glories in his audacity and the power it brings him, when all it gains him in truth are toys and the certainty of destruction. Is there any folly of Wagner's more ludicrous than the cocky reply of Faustus to the devil's dismay—

What, is great Mephistophilis so passionate  
For being deprived of the joys of Heaven?  
Learn thou of Faustus manly fortitude  
And scorn those joys thou never shalt possess.

<sup>1</sup> *Sic probo*: thus I prove it.

<sup>2</sup> *Early English Prose Romances*, ed. Thoms, p. 299—

"*The Brazen Head*. Time is.

*Miles*. Do you tell us, copper-nose, when TIME IS, I hope we schollers know our times, when to drinke drunke, when to kiss our hostess, when to go on her score, and when to pay it—that time comes seldom."

<sup>3</sup> Aubrey, *Brief Lives*, ed. Clark, Vol. I, p. 143: "His maid came running in to him one time, like a slut and a fury, with her hair about her ears, and cries: 'Butler! come and look to your devils yourself if you will: the stills are all blown up!'"

The time will come when Faustus will feel a little less assurance—

Ah, Faustus

Now hast thou but one bare hour to live  
And then thou must be damned perpetually !  
Stand still, you ever-moving spheres of Heaven,  
That time may cease, and midnight never come ;  
Fair Nature's eye, rise, rise again and make  
Perpetual day ; or let this hour be but  
A year, a month, a week, a natural day,  
That Faustus may repent and save his soul !  
*O lente, lente currite, noctes equi !<sup>1</sup>*

There is no speech of Shakespeare or any other dramatist that has greater power than this last speech of Faustus, which convinces us that it lasts an hour—from eleven o'clock to midnight—though it takes about eight minutes in the representation.

<sup>1</sup> Faustus quotes Ovid (*Amores* I. 13, 40)—the words Ovid whispered in Corinna's arms: "run slowly, horses of Night"; but besides the exquisite irony of the quotation Marlowe gets added effect by doubling the *lente*.

**PART IV**  
**IN THE WORKSHOP**



## CHAPTER VIII

### BEGINNINGS, MIDDLES, AND ENDS

WE must now consider the structure of a play; and we may begin with Aristotle's classic definition of unity as requiring a beginning, a middle, and an end.

As we have seen, however, there is more than one kind of unity, and there are certainly many more than one kind of good beginning, middle, or end. The kind of beginning required depends on the end to be achieved.

At the very beginning of a play by Euripides we shall find something that seems deliberately calculated to offend us and destroy our interest: a Prologue. It is a long speech with no action to speak of; and it tells us not only the present situation of the characters—which is rather dull—but what is going to happen to them—which seems to us to spoil the rest of the play. And the modern scholastic critic says in his heart, "Euripides had no sense of the stage."<sup>1</sup>

Gilbert Murray, having opened his discussion of the technique of Euripides in this way, proceeds to show what the Greek tragedian achieves by his Prologue. It has a practical use, for the Greeks had no playbill or programme. It is economical, for the Greeks did not waste time on explanatory and introductory acts; their tragedy is concentrated. It does not "let out the secret," for there was no secret; it serves to recall the outline of a story well-known to the audience; and the dramatist depends on their knowledge for ironic effect. *We* know that *Oedipus* is doomed before *he* does; *we* know that, however much Menelaus may threaten Helen with death in *The Trojan Women*, he will end up by taking her back and living peacefully with her in Sparta.

The Greek playwright does not need to capture the attention of his audience—that had already been done by the ritual of the religious festival of which the drama is a part; prayer has been offered and incense burnt on the altar of Dionysus, and this must be done in silence. Therefore, the Greek

<sup>1</sup> Gilbert Murray, *Euripides and His Age*, p. 135.

playwright does not need a noisy or surprising opening; on the contrary, it would be an embarrassment to him; for if he begins too loudly, how is he to work up the tension steadily to his climax? Nor is the shape of his play controlled by act and scene divisions, for there were none. But he does need atmosphere, and that the Prologue provides: atmosphere and poetry, atmosphere through poetry. Here is the sea-God, Poseidon, opening *The Trojan Women*—

Up from Aegean caverns, pool by pool  
Of blue salt sea, where feet most beautiful  
Of Nereid maidens weave beneath the foam  
Their long sea-dances, I their lord am come  
Poseidon of the sea. . . .<sup>1</sup>

Yet we must not exaggerate the difference between Greek and later practice. Every Greek opening, even the quietest and slowest, contains an element of action; and Greek playwrights, like later ones, differ between themselves. Sophocles, for instance, is noticeably quicker in getting things moving than Euripides. All the three Theban plays have a highly dramatic opening scene. Take *Oedipus Rex*, with the stricken citizens coming as suppliants to the King—

You too have seen our city's affliction, caught  
In a tide of death from which there is no escaping—  
Death in the fruitful flowering of the soil,  
Death in the pastures, death in the womb of woman. . . .<sup>2</sup>

No one could say that such an opening is not dramatic, in any sense of the term. On the other hand, the quiet opening, or the informative opening, are not confined to the Greeks. There is the flat, formal stichomythia of our first glimpse of *Antony and Cleopatra*—

*Cleopatra.* If it be love indeed, tell me how much.

*Antony.* There's beggary in the love that can be reckoned.

*Cleopatra.* I'll set a bourn how far to be beloved.

*Antony.* Then must thou needs find out new heaven, new earth.

Or there is the empty stage, quietly filling with the company

<sup>1</sup> *The Trojan Women* of Euripides, trans. Gilbert Murray.

<sup>2</sup> *Oedipus the King*, trans. E. F. Watling (Penguin Books, 1947), p. 26.

for the rehearsal which begins *Six Characters in Search of an Author*—

The actors and actresses of the company enter . . . first one, then another, then two together: nine or ten in all. . . . Some standing, some sitting, chat and smoke. One perhaps reads a paper, another cons his part. Finally the Manager enters and goes to the table prepared for him.

*Manager.* I can't see. Let's have a little light, please.<sup>1</sup>

When William Archer gave the highest praise to the opening of *Richard III*, he did so as a defiance of the rules—

Most theorists of to-day would make it an axiom that you must not let your characters narrate their circumstances, or expound their motives, in speeches addressed, either directly to the audience, or ostensibly to their solitary selves. But when we remember that, of all dramatic openings, there is none finer than that which shows Richard Plantagenet limping down the empty stage to say—

“Now is the winter of our discontent

Made glorious summer by this sun of York;”

we feel that the axiom requires large qualifications.<sup>2</sup>

But this is not, perhaps, the best way of putting it. It was not that the axiom required large qualifications; the mistake was to treat it as a universal axiom. Shakespeare in his historical plays frequently follows Greek practice, because he has a similar problem: he has to tell us at what point in history he proposes to begin, to remind us of event which we ought to know; and to work a charm by the incantation of poetry—

O for a Muse of fire, that would ascend  
The brightest heave of invention,  
A kingdom for a stage, princes to act,  
And monarchs to behold the swelling scene!  
Then should the warlike Harry, like himself  
Assume the port of Mars. . . .

(*Henry V*)

The medieval poets of the Miracle cycles followed still more strictly the Greek practice of reciting the matter to be played. The difference is more directness, less subtlety, flatter poetry, and complete dissociation from the action. But in spirit they are akin, and fulfil the same function. Nor can

<sup>1</sup> *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, by Pirandello, trans. by Edward Storer.

<sup>2</sup> William Archer, *Playmaking*, p. 3.



it be denied that their very simplicity and strength have an assurance that commands attention—

I pray you all give your audience,  
And hear this matter with reverence,  
By figure a moral play. . . .  
Here shall you see how Fellowship, and Jollity,  
Both Strength, Pleasure, and Beauty,  
Will fade from thee as flower in May;  
For ye shall hear how our Heaven King  
Calleth Everyman to a general reckoning.  
Give audience, and hear that he doth say.

(*Everyman*<sup>1</sup>)

It is still possible to employ this kind of opening to a play—

Peace! Be silent and hearken unto me, ye quaint little islanders. . . .  
Look upon my hawk's head, and know that I am Ra, who was once in  
Egypt a mighty god. . . . I do not ask for worship, but for silence.  
Let not your men speak nor your women cough, for I am come to draw  
you back two thousand years over the graves of sixty generations. . . .  
(*Caesar and Cleopatra*)

But the playwright who chooses such an opening to-day does it with a subtle difference from the Greek or medieval playwright; he does it from choice, not because it is the only natural way, and that means another feeling on his part and that of the audience. It brings a temptation to be whimsical or facetious, or to emphasize that the playwright realizes that he is rejecting the devices of his craft. Shaw has not entirely escaped this in *Caesar and Cleopatra*, in spite of the brilliance of Ra's prologue.

Let us now consider the alternative method; the plunge into the action which allows the exposition to develop by inference. The canons of realistic drama clearly demand this kind of opening; for a slice of life must be a slice. But it is a great mistake to suppose that this kind of opening is less conventional than the other. We have only to think of the innumerable plays of the French well-made school which open with the servants dusting the furniture and discussing the fortunes of their employers, or with the arrival of a stranger

<sup>1</sup> In *Chief Pre-Shakespearian Dramas*, ed. J. Q. Adams, p. 288 (spelling modernized).

who has to be told all about the place, or the return of someone after long absence who must, of course, know all the family news; or in the most recent variation, the telephone bell which rings as the curtain rises (or soon after) so that we may overhear all that is going on.

There is the reminiscent mood of port and cigars after Aubrey Tanqueray's dinner-party in the Albany, which begins Pinero's *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray*; and it is really very considerate of Aubrey to go to "scribble a couple of notes" so that his friends can discuss his second marriage. There is Carmen Campos, who used to be in service with Doña Marciala, and who is summoned at the beginning of Quintero's *A Hundred Years Old* to hear the arrangements for Papa Juan's hundredth birthday. There is Mrs. Tenbury sitting in the lounge of the hotel waiting for tea in Priestley's *The Long Mirror*, scolding Thomas and discussing the guests with him by turns. There are Redpenny (the Receptionist) and Emmy (the charwoman) talking over Sir Colenso Ridgeon's knighthood, at the beginning of Shaw's *The Doctor's Dilemma*, and the procession of friends coming to offer their congratulations. Further examples are surely unnecessary—the expedient is obvious enough. Technical ingenuity can rarely justify itself in the opening of a realistic play; the simpler and less obtrusive the exposition is, the better—and the remarkable thing is that playwrights and the public should ever have been lyrical with enthusiasm about the opportunities there were in this kind of exposition.

There is, however, an alternative method open to the realistic dramatist, with which the last great masters of realism have occupied themselves; that is, to distribute the exposition piecemeal through the play, so that we can't be sure of having all the prior facts until the curtain has gone down at the end . . . in fact, to destroy the exposition as a separate thing.

Ibsen did it. Archer described "the substance of his art" as "the complex interweaving of the past with the present, and event with character." Thus, for instance, the scene between Hedda and Eilert Lovberg in Act II of *Hedda Gabler* both recreates for us the old days at General Gabler's and carries forward Hedda's temptation at the same time.

Chekhov was a master of it. Thus in the *Cherry Orchard* it is the middle of Act II before we learn the essential facts about Madame Ranevsky—

I married a man who made nothing but debts. My husband died of champagne—he drank dreadfully. To my misery I loved another man, and immediately—it was my first punishment . . . here in the river, my boy was drowned and I went abroad. . . .

and Act III before the story is completed—

He is ill, he is alone and unhappy, and who'll look after him, who'll keep him from doing the wrong thing, who'll give him his medicine at the right time? And why hide it or be silent? I love him, that's clear. . . .

Finally, there is a wonderful example in Pirandello's *Henry IV*. A film version quite destroys the point of the play by telling us at the beginning what it was that made Henry mad—in other words, supplying us with an orthodox exposition. The play, on the other hand, does not enable us to complete the picture until the very end—we must gradually piece it together from remarks dropped here and there, so that present events and their shadow in the past move step by step all the time. This method, of course, demands much more intelligence and closer attention from the audience, but it is more rewarding—and more “real.”

We must now discuss the “middles” of plays. Technically they are the most straightforward. If the playwright has done his work of preparation properly—Dumas *filis* said: “The art of the theatre is the art of preparations”—then the middle must fall logically into place. Not that it need follow one pattern. French nineteenth-century theorists demanded as the heart of the play the *scène à faire*—the *obligatory scene*, as Archer translates it in *Playmaking*. Archer classified and discussed five types of obligatory scene—

1. That necessitated by the logic of the theme.
2. That demanded by the exigencies of dramatic effect.
3. That which the playwright has made obligatory by seeming to lead up to it unmistakably.
4. That which is required to justify some important modification of character or will.
5. That imposed by history or legend.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Playmaking*, p. 174.

I do not propose to summarize the classifications as set out by Francisque Sarcey (the originator of the phrase), or by Archer in criticizing Sarcey. Archer himself compares the rigidity of Sarcey's classification to the rule of eighteenth-century landscape painters, who are said to have held that no one could be a master of his art till he knew where to plant "the brown tree." If we are going to chop logic, the mistake surely is to insist on a particular scene as "obligatory"—in a good play all scenes should be obligatory. Of course, there must be a contrast, relaxation, and tension—but one is as necessary as the other. The climax of a play need not be a scene, it may be a moment within a scene, a single speech, or even a moment of silence; on the other hand, it may be the sum of various scenes or moments added up in the mind of the audience, supporting, explaining, and reinforcing each other.

If the play has a multiple plot, its structure must clearly differ from the play with a single fable for the main and sub-plots must each have their development and climax, and the crises may come together in a single scene, or they may be spaced out.

Where would you place the *scène à faire* of O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock*, for instance? In the Fool's Paradise of Act II, when the Captain and his friends celebrate the legacy which he knows to be imaginary? Or in Act III, when a succession of blows destroys everything—when Mary is with child, when the furniture is taken and the gunmen come for Jim?

In *Twelfth Night*, is Act II, Scene 5, in which the conspirators plant the letter for Malvolio, any less or more a *scène à faire* than Act III, Scene 4, in which Malvolio presents himself in his yellow stockings before Olivia?

On the other hand, it is clear that there are plays in which "the big scene" counts, and can be pointed to unmistakably. It is a question to be decided, not in the abstract, but by reference to a number of factors in the context of the play—and among these must be numbered the five points in Archer's list (although the boundaries between the first three are not very clear in practice).

If the middle of a play is technically straightforward, the

end is notoriously difficult. "If it were as easy to write a good last act as a good first act, we should be able to reckon three masterpieces for every one that we can name at present," said Archer, with justice. Not even Shakespeare can always overcome the languors of the fourth act of his five, or resist the temptation to tie the ends together summarily in his fifth.

Archer, criticizing from the point of view of realism, finds the chief reason for this difficulty in the fact that a crisis, in life, "is much more apt to have a definite beginning than a definite end . . . nine times out of ten (it ends) in some petty compromise, or does not end at all, but simply subsides."<sup>1</sup> He is anxious, therefore, to justify the playwright who does not impose a shape, but allows his action to sink away into an unemphatic ending; and he quotes *Punch's* examination paper for dramatists—

A—FOR THE CLASSICAL SIDE ONLY.

1. What is a 'curtain,' and how should it be led up to?

B—FOR THE MODERN SIDE ONLY.

2. What is a 'curtain'; and how can it be avoided?

But there is more to it than a reflection of life, or of particular fashions in playwriting; it is inherent in dramatic structure that unravelling or *dénouement* must be more tiresome than knitting up; that the greater the complexity, the more effective the climax, the more danger there is for the playwright and the audience of fatigue and anticlimax.

The playwright must therefore rely on a number of strata-gems. If he uses a multiple plot, he can bring forward the sub-plot into prominence after the climax of the main plot has been reached; and if he uses tragi-comedy he can give us an intentional change of key. If he uses a single fable, an equivalent device is to bring into prominence one of the characters who has so far been in the background, or even to bring in a new character for whose arrival we have been prepared. An extreme example of this is the family play, in which we meet a new generation of characters—as, for example, in Peter Ustinov's *The Banbury Nose*. In James Bridie's *The Anatomist*, the chief character, Dr. Knox, withdraws for a time into the background, while the stage is

<sup>1</sup> *Playmaking*, p. 245.

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occupied in succession by the murderers Burke and Hare, and the young lovers.

Remarkably often, the playwright uses what, in musical analogy, may be called "modulation"—a comedy is subtly transformed for the time into farce, or even melodrama; a tragedy may also (though more dangerously) turn towards melodrama; or it may be relieved by lyric beauty, by music (especially song), by dance or pageant. Very often there is a notable quickening of pace.

The alternative is for the playwright to eschew a distinct point of climax—to hold it in suspense through the last part of his play, as Shakespeare does in *Othello*. This is a device for the greatest masters only, for it requires the most subtle virtuosity not to weary the audience, or to lose the climax altogether.

Here, as elsewhere, the essence of dramatic art is a perpetual wrestling with the limits of the medium, and the successful solution must always be a particular solution depending on the material of each specific play.

## CHAPTER IX

### THE PLAYWRIGHT'S TOOLS

SO far we have been stressing the differences in approach between conventions and schools of play-writing, and between the individual genius of playwrights. Yet there is a residuum which is common to all plays, however and whenever they are written and produced—something which belongs to the genus rather than the species. In this chapter we must try to isolate this common element in order to find out what belongs to all plays, in verse and prose, realist or symbolist, from Pekin to Pasadena, from Sophocles to Saroyan.

A play is something acted on a stage by living people (or, if we wish to include the widest definition, to take in cinema and puppet-drama, by shadows or puppets endowed with personality.) Even if the characters of a play are abstract or allegorical, they will succeed only if they are living beings as well. The most important tools of the playwright are his actors. They are sometimes like the hoops and the flamingos in Alice's game of croquet: they don't stay put—they are not wholly amenable to discipline; but, on the other hand, they have something to add of their own—they are interpreters. The playwright's task is to give them something to bite on—something which kindles, challenges, and supports them.

Because a play is something acted on a stage, it must portray character in action. The playwright who wishes to shy away from that time-honoured formula is doomed. He can't be allowed to feel a little unhappy about having to tell a story (as E. M. Forster confesses himself a little unhappy about having to have a story in a novel<sup>1</sup>). A playwright may be allowed subtlety, but it must be subtlety through directness. A play may appeal on various levels, but it must never fail in its elementary duty of being a story which holds our attention about people with whom we do not lose patience. Because a play passes in front of us, and we can't stop it—we can't look

<sup>1</sup> E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*.

at it for an hour, as we can look at a picture or a building; we can't turn back the page and read it again as we can a poem or a novel—therefore there are subtleties which are out of place on the stage; there must be a clear thread for us to hold on to, even if we feel at the end that there is much more to the play than we have gathered, and that we want to see it again so as to get more of its meaning.

Because a play deals with character in action, there are phases of human experience which resist the playwright: the passive virtues and vices, the abstract sciences, the recesses of mental and spiritual experience. Since Ibsen's time a number of playwrights, notably Chekhov and O'Neill have been occupied with what, in shorthand, may be called "psychological drama." O'Neill's *Strange Interlude* is the end of the process. There are certain things which must be left to the novel and lyric poetry; the drama must let them alone. Of course, there are ways *round* any problem, but sometimes there is no way *through*.

Bearing in mind the limitations of drama—which are also, of course, from another point of view, the conditions of its greatness—its concentration, directness, and emotional power; let us now turn to particularities—to those tools which any playwright, working in any tradition at any time, must use, because they are the means of expressing character in action.

He has, first of all, a choice of attitudes which he can adopt towards character itself. He may accept type-character; either the types which have been evolved by the immemorial tradition of the theatre, or those which society has, by moral judgment, accepted in life as a rough and ready classification of approval and disapproval. He may, on the other hand, set himself to disregard types, to create, or to study direct from nature.

In theory, we should probably prefer the second method; yet there is more to be said than would appear at first sight for the types, both in practice and theory. Blake's praise of Chaucer states the theoretical case perhaps as well as it could be stated—

The characters of Chaucer's Pilgrims are the characters which compose all ages and nations: as one age falls, another rises, different to mortal



sight, but to immortals only the same; for we see the same characters repeated again and again, in animals, vegetables, minerals, and in men; nothing new occurs in identical existence; Accident ever varies, Substance can never suffer change or decay.<sup>1</sup>

And if we need practical proof of the fertility of the types, we can consider the innumerable transmutations of the types of the *commedia dell' arte*. There are Harlequin and his cousins Firk (in *The Shoemaker's Holiday*), Feste (in *Twelfth Night*), Figaro (in Beaumarchais' *La Folle Journée*), the zanies of Molière and Goldoni, down to Charlie Chaplin. There are the boastful drunken soldiers, from Menander and Plautus to Cyrano de Bergerac and Sergius in *Arms and the Man*; sometimes cowards like Falstaff and Bobadill, sometimes bold like Sir Toby Belch, nearly always braggart like Ancient Pistol. There are the misers, the pedants, the innocent simpletons: Sir Andrew Aguecheek, Androcles (in *Androcles and the Lion*), sometimes there to be gulled, sometimes, like Topaze in Marcel Pagnol's play or the film *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*, to prove themselves cleverer than the wise guys.

For the dramatist can delight us by upsetting the accepted pattern of the theatre—or of life: so long as he doesn't do it too often. Society pins the label "undesirable" on the drunkard or the prostitute or the thief. In the theatre we may be willing to accept the drunkard as a good fellow, to believe that the prostitute has a heart of gold, that the thief is a Robin Hood who robs the rich to give to the poor, or even that Peachum is right when he sings in *The Beggar's Opera*—

The Priest calls the Lawyer a cheat,  
The Lawyer be-knaves the Divine;  
And the Statesman, because he's so great,  
Thinks his trade as honest as mine.

These are our protests against the inadequacy of human justice and human judgment, and it is the divine prerogative of the playwright to have a universal sympathy. But he must beware of eking out his sympathy with sentiment. If we are told too often that the prostitute has a heart of gold, we shall remind ourselves that it is set in a body of clay—that the

<sup>1</sup> W. Blake, *A Descriptive Catalogue of Pictures in Works*, ed. Keynes (Nonesuch edn.), p. 783.

prostitute and the nun may both have faults, being human, though they are not likely to have the same faults.

Of course, it is also true that playwrights who have begun with the type characters have made very different use of them; the differences between Captain Bobadill and Sir John Falstaff are just as important as the relationship between them; and in a sense it may be unimportant at what point the playwright began—it is the point where he ends that matters. Bobadill and Falstaff are not lay figures, they have been endowed with the exuberant creative power, the wit, the observation, of their creators. Mosca (in Jonson's *Volpone*) may be a parasite of the stock kind the Renaissance writers learned from ancient Rome—he is; but what parasite ever praised his calling as Mosca does, extolling not those

With their court-dog-tricks, that can fawne and fleer,  
Make their revenue out of legs and faces,  
Echo my-Lord, and lick away a moath;  
But your fine, elegant rascall, that can rise  
And stoop (almost together) like an arrow;  
Shoot through the air, as nimbly as a star;  
Turn short, as doth a swallow; and be here,  
And there, and here, and yonder, all at once;  
Present to any humour, all occasion;  
And change a visor, swifter, than a thought!  
This is the creature, had the art born with him;  
Toils not to learn it, but doth practise it  
Out of most excellent nature; and such sparks  
Are the true parasites, others but their Zani's.

(*Volpone*, III. 1.)

That could be no other voice but Jonson's, the exquisite relish, the dramatic appropriateness, the beauty of phrase, the moral condemnation implied through irony—all inseparably linked, vitriol with honey. It is worlds away from Falstaff's dismissal of honour—

What is Honour? A word. What is that word Honour? Air: a trim reckoning. Who hath it? He that died a' Wednesday. Doth he feel it? No. Doth he hear it? No. Is it insensible, then? Yea, to the dead. But will it not live with the living? No. Why? Detraction will not suffer it, therefore I'll none of it. Honour is a mere scutcheon, and so ends my catechism.

(*Henry IV*, Part I, v. 1.)

This really makes you feel, what is partly true, that if people didn't stand on principle, on honour, the world might be a happier and more comfortable place; it is the belly's protest against the brain.

So wherever he begins, the playwright must end with knocking out the dead wood; all must be new minted. There are still, however, two ways of going to work: he may show the characters flat or in the round—in two or three dimensions; from the outside, or the inside; static, or changing and developing. Neither of these ways is to be despised; both are necessary. It is obvious that if a play is to have any proportion, the characters cannot all be developed to the same point; we cannot see Osric as we see Hamlet. Osric is a brilliant thumb-nail sketch, Hamlet is a portrait in three dimensions; yet both meet happily in the play. It is possible to have a very good play in which even the main characters are flat, especially in comedy, farce, or the picaresque play—where the stress is on a succession of events, the story itself. The point of *The Dog beneath the Skin*, by W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood, is that Alan Norman meets every predicament with the same simplicity. There would be no point in *Everyman* if Everyman ceased to be all of us.

In elucidating character, the playwright is not always entirely deprived of indirect comment. He may use a Chorus in the Greek style, as we have seen; or he may use a single narrator as the Elizabethans often did—like the Stage Manager in Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*. He may set his play in a frame, like the Induction of *The Taming of the Shrew*, or the Tramp in Karel Capek's *The Insect Play*, or the Beggar in *The Beggar's Opera*. Elizabethan examples of this technique, which has been comparatively neglected by recent playwrights, are numerous. Among the best, and certainly the best known, are Beaumont and Fletcher's *Knight of the Burning Pestle*, and George Peele's *Old Wives' Tale*. The effect in each is very different. The first uses the device for parody and pure fun, like Sheridan's *The Critic*, which may owe something to it. In the second, the atmosphere created is that of dream, of fairy tale, of lyric poetry—we pass from a scene in which the benighted travellers in the lonely cottage while away their

time by listening to the Old Wife's story into the story itself. So far as realistic playwrights have been able to employ this method of writing on two planes, they have, in the main, been forced to use the excuse of a dream; for the danger of such a trick from the realist's point of view is that it perpetually reminds us of the theatre.

Obviously such devices, however tempting, are suitable only for certain subjects and certain treatments. Apart from them, the playwright has only two resources, dialogue and action—speech and silence—and of these silence is as important as speech. This is the thing which the reader forgets, and which makes it so hard even for the most expert to judge the effect of a play from a script. A playwright's merit consists not only in writing good dramatic dialogue but in providing situations and actions which are dramatically significant and impressive. A playwright may write dialogue which has no greater merit than being workmanlike; which is bald to the point of ineptitude—who remembers and could quote a single memorable line of Noel Coward, or even of Eugene O'Neill? Yet if he is a ~~master of silence~~ (as O'Neill is) his plays will hold the stage. In Goldoni in the eighteenth century, or in Saroyan in our own time (without taking such special cases as the entire scene in the third act of Galsworthy's *Justice*) we may see the virtues of pantomime. Here is an example from William Saroyan's *The Time of Your Life*. The scene is a waterfront café in San Francisco—

Willie, the marble-game maniac, explodes through the swinging doors and lifts the forefinger of his right hand comically, indicating one beer. He is a very young man, not more than twenty. He is wearing heavy shoes, a pair of old and dirty corduroys, a light green turtle-neck jersey with a large letter "F" on the chest, an oversize two-button tweed coat, and a green hat, with the brim up. Nick sets out a glass of beer for him, he drinks it, straightens up vigorously, saying Aaaaah, makes a solemn face, gives Nick a one-finger salute of adieu, and begins to leave, refreshed and restored in spirit. He walks by the marble game, halts suddenly, turns, studies the contraption, gestures as if to say, Oh, no. Turns to go, stops, returns to the machine, studies it, takes a handful of small coins out of his pants pocket, lifts a nickel, indicates with a gesture, One game and no more. Puts the nickel in the slot, pushes in the slide, making an interesting noise. . . . Takes a very deep breath, walks in a small circle, excited at the beginning of great drama. Stands

straight and pious before the contest. Himself versus the machine. Willie versus Destiny. . . .<sup>1</sup>

Of course such elaborate pantomime can be reconciled only with certain kinds of dramatic situation and treatment—it would be inconceivable in a drawing-room play, for instance, unless one of the characters was drunk, crazy, deaf, or entirely ignorant of English. But even in the quietest of drawing-room plays silence plays a significant part; it is an axiom of the theatre that ~~actions speak louder than words~~: the attention of an audience is immediately drawn from what one character is *saying* (however significant) if another character *does* something. The good playwright is he who makes it possible for his characters ~~to do as well as to say significant things~~. The significance usually consists, not in the action itself, but in the context: the offer of a cigarette is highly significant in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, and the handing of a drink in *Hedda Gabler*; the taking of a chair will be significant to an audience which associates that chair, let us say, with the head of a family who has just died.

In setting out his play there are certain lines that the playwright must follow. He must prepare us by giving us certain essential information, by creating a mood, and by pointing forward to the events that are coming. He must arouse our curiosity and sustain it by tension, by invention, and by surprise. He must endow the situations he creates with significance by direct or indirect comment (which need not be in words). He must resolve the situation he has created with dramatic justice (which is not necessarily the justice of a court of law). The essence of dramatic justice is that we must really feel the solution emerges from the facts with which we have been presented; we must not feel that it has been “tagged on,” or that the playwright has been keeping a card up his sleeve to bring out at the last moment, or that he has been unfair to his characters.

To achieve these ends, the playwright naturally uses all the resources of the theatre. He may invoke atmosphere with music, poetry, lighting, or scenery. He may charge words or actions with significance, so that the repetition of them acquires

<sup>1</sup> *The Time of Your Life* (Faber and Faber, 1945).

cumulative power. All these and other devices are best studied in the examples which follow : we shall see how the setting of the Mannon house, for instance, creates the atmosphere of *Mourning Becomes Electra*, with its bleak classical façade and the great threatening portraits which embody the tradition and look down on the little living people who inherit it. We shall hear Shakespeare summarize for us the fate of Antony in his opening scene—

Take but good note, and you shall see in him  
(The triple Pillar of the World) transform'd  
Into a Strumpets fool.

We shall see Christy Mahon, the Playboy of the Western World, winner of all the races, and idol of all the girls, thrust down by peripeteia into a cowering wretch about to be dragged away and lynched. But before we pass to these examples, there are one or two general matters of interest that deserve comment.

The first is the omnipresence of dramatic irony, and the large number of forms that it may take. Dramatic irony means the presentation of a situation so that it has one significance for the people involved (or some of them) and a different significance for us in the audience. This is so essential a condition of the whole art of drama that it is hard to find a play without a trace of it. A character in disguise, like Brayneworm in *Every Man in His Humour*, appears in one light to those he is gulling and in a different light to us. In the first act of *On Approval*, by Frederick Lonsdale, we first hear Maria offer Richard Halton, who has long loved her in secret, a month on approval in Scotland. His delight is dashed when he finds that he will be expected to leave the house at eleven o'clock every evening; but by the time he tells his friend the Duke of Bristol about the proposal he has quite recovered his equanimity. As the Duke repeats to him the series of flabbergasted questions he had himself put to Maria a few minutes earlier, he has all Maria's answers pat to repeat to the Duke. The comedy is ironical—for we have seen both occasions. Dramatic irony may be the simplest of tricks, as when in melodrama the hero is quietly reading his paper while the villain steals up behind him with the lead piping; or it may be the most subtle,

as in *Henry IV* when Pirandello's hero addresses the two Matildas in one person: the twelfth-century Marchioness of Tuscany and the twentieth-century Matilda di Spina.

Last of all, there are certain general things to be noted about dialogue. All dialogue should be idiosyncratic; that is, it should belong to the character who speaks it, and to him only. There is a constant pull between this necessity and the personal style of the author; yet the two are not necessarily inconsistent, any more than an actor's style of playing is inconsistent with good characterization. Even Shakespeare, the most anonymous of playwrights, has a recognizable style, and would not be great without it.

Then there is the use of imagery. The poetic playwright (using the word *poetic* in the widest sense to cover not only verse, but also the use of the figures of speech and rhetoric) has at his command a most valuable weapon in shaping his dialogue. Through imagery he may express what cannot be expressed in direct or abstract statement (as in *The Family Reunion*). But he may also use it to express character; either to summarize—

a fox  
Stretched on the earth with fine delusive sleights  
Mocking a gaping crow.

(Ben Jonson, *Volpone*)

or to indicate through the individual imagery which a character uses, his nature and bent of mind (Falstaff, for instance). The conciseness of imagery may prepare us for the events that follow, or it may convey the prevalent mood and idea of the play (as Shakespeare uses disease metaphors in the great tragedies, or sea metaphors in the late romances). Last of all, it may indicate an essential part of the content of the play which cannot be presented in action on the stage.

## CHAPTER X

### COMEDY AND FARCE

IT IS with humour as with other forms of happiness—the way to achieve it is rarely to pursue it directly. *Trying to be funny* is commonly a painful process; and we might apply to comedy what Keats said of poetry: “If it comes not as naturally as the Leaves to a tree it had better not come at all.”<sup>1</sup> That does not mean, of course, that either poetry or humour is incompatible with taking pains; success in both depends on highly professional skill. But just as there are good writers who cannot make themselves poets (such as George Eliot), so there are good actors and writers who cannot make themselves comic: Christopher Marlowe, for instance, and Mrs. Siddons. The *vis comica* must be present.

#### The Comic Impetus

The *vis comica*, in writer or actor, is a force drawing its strength from unconscious sources, and these may be different in different people; just as the expression of comedy involves different elements. The pathos of the clown is a commonplace of all discussions of comedy; and some would see the comic process as one in which sadness is always present. For comedy and tragedy have a common source—incongruity, a want of harmony or fitness. They may differ in their field and treatment, but much of their ground is held in common.

In *The Craft of Comedy*,<sup>2</sup> Athene Seyler describes how she once saw James Welch in the part of a little man who joined a circus because he was starving, and tried to do the job without training. Discovering that he was inclined to bolt when the performance drew near, the manager locked him in a room so that he shouldn't desert. His efforts to escape aroused in Miss Seyler pity and terror instead of laughter; and she attributed this to the actor who had ceased, she

<sup>1</sup> John Keats, *Letters*, ed. M. Buxton Forman, 2nd edn., p. 108.

<sup>2</sup> *The Craft of Comedy*, by Athene Seyler and Stephen Haggard.



thought, to play the part with comic detachment, and filled it with a sincerity which communicated itself to the audience. But is this necessarily true? May not the reaction be entirely in the mind of the audience, reflecting the fact that the material itself is neutral? To slip on a banana skin, stand under a booby-trap, or carry a grand piano upstairs, are not things comic in themselves. I remember a gramophone record of Horace Kenney's on which he tries to obtain a hearing for an ineffective music-hall turn from a heartless manager. While the rest of the room were laughing, one auditor was in tears; and when the record was over she turned on the rest furiously: "What are you all laughing at? It's horrible!" Most of us must have had similar twinges over the discomfiture of Malvolio in the madhouse. Many things which were once considered suitable material for comedy are now rejected: to the eighteenth century, the pleasure of laughing at the lunatics in Bedlam was coupled with the pleasure of seeing the Lions in the Tower and the tombs in Westminster Abbey. Perhaps a future age will find our own amusement at the predicament of homosexuality equally inexplicable.

The Greek word *pathos*, which we apply so loosely to the art of a comedian like Chaplin, is really a technical term of tragedy, describing a misfortune, the suffering it entails and the violent passions it arouses. It seems clear that though some comedies may, others do not, involve *pathos* in the strict sense.

The tragic hero must be great in status or conception. In ancient tragedy he is a prince, a leader, a general, a man of great gifts. In modern tragedy he need no longer be a prince by blood or a military leader; he may be the head of a great commercial enterprise, an outstanding scientist; he may even be a criminal if his crime is associated with courage and the gift of leadership. He need not even be any of these if he is representative, and his predicament shadows forth something bigger than himself. The fate of the tragic figure is death and failure, involving others as well as himself: he falls from his high estate, loses his kingdom, his house, his wife, his lands, his cherished ambition. The tragic figure is articulate; he comments on and expresses the calamity which overtakes him

—his understanding and sensitiveness are part of his function for us, because his predicament is ours as well as his; the predicament must be something which we accept as huge and terrifying.

The comic hero has a different status, and the events of comedy a different outcome. The comic hero wears a mask; his fate is to have the mask plucked from him, if only for an instant. When he is unmasked, the comic figure loses his plots, is stripped of his dreams, is put to shame, suffers public ridicule, is found out. The end of Falstaff is—

I know thee not, old man: fall to thy prayers;  
How ill white hairs become a fool and jester!

Of Malvolio—

Alas, poor fool, how have they baffled thee!

Of the plotters in Congreve's play—

If it must all come out, why let 'em know it; 'tis but the way of the world.

Of Goldfinch in Holcroft's *The Road to Ruin* to be described as—

A broken gamester, nurtured in idleness, ignorance, and dissipation, whose ridings, racings, and drivings are over. . . .

And of the whole pack in *Our Betters*—

They're not worth making a fuss about. I'm sailing for America next Saturday!

These are the moments when the private worlds which the comic characters have so laboriously built up are brought about their ears like the card houses they are. For if to inhabit a private world is the prerogative of lunacy, there is a whiff of lunacy in all comedy. The comic hero never comes to terms with the everyday world. That is a world in which all comic characters, like Nick Bottom and his friends in the wood outside Athens, find that "senseless things begin to do them wrong," a world in which carpets and rugs, stairs and doorsteps exist to trip you up; crockery comes to pieces in your hand; words get twisted and refuse to mean what they're supposed to mean; messages get mangled; the legacy you ought to

receive is somehow invalid; and the butterfly on which you threw down your hat has somehow escaped from under it.

But the comic hero never accepts this. Like Charlie Chaplin, he goes down the road at the end of the picture, indomitable as ever. Falstaff's reply to his discomfiture is—

Do not you grieve at this. I shall be sent for in private to him.

Malvolio's—

I'll be revenged on the whole pack of you.

Goldfinch's (when he is asked to forsake his courses and apply to trade)—

Damn trade! Who's for the spring meeting?

while "Our Betters" in Maugham's play are quite oblivious of the verdict passed on them, and are left after their ferocious quarrels happy in each others' arms, with the admiring comment of Ernest the dancing-master—

What an exquisite spectacle—two ladies of title kissing one another. So, whereas the tragic figure is always more sensitive and aware than we should find him in the clutter of actual life, the comic figure is detached; yet in his detachment there is an uneasy sense of something lacking—in Bottom's dream "methought I was,—and methought I had,—but man is but a patched fool if he will offer to say what methought I had . . . it shall be called Bottom's Dream because it hath no bottom." The epitome of the comic predicament is Sir Andrew Aguecheek's cry of self-congratulation tinged with envy: "I was adored once too!"

Comedy, therefore, is the kingdom of the writer, the actor, and the audience who can accept motley as everyday wear. The audience is included because its acceptance is essential. The first audience for *The Way of the World* were not amused, and Congreve left the stage. The first audience of Chekhov's *Wood Demon* were not amused, and he vowed that he would never write another play. There are those who can watch the Marx Brothers unmoved, and say "It's just silly." No comedy is funny if played to a cold or an empty house; all comedy is evanescent, perishable stuff. Look at an old volume of *Punch* if you don't believe that this is true.

But in the kingdom of comedy there are many provinces. High Comedy, or the Comedy of Manners, Light Comedy, Broad Comedy, Farce, Nonsense, Satire, Wit—they may sound like separate kingdoms but they are only provinces. It would be hard to find a “pure” example of any of them. Nearly every comedy has some farcical elements; nearly every farce has some comedy. The difference between Comedy and Farce may be described as a degree of distance from the everyday world with which neither comes completely to terms. Satire is the form of comedy in which the everyday world is most constantly in mind; satire is a comic criticism of life. Wit is the verbal and intellectual weapon by which a connexion is established between things which appear to be unrelated; so wit is often the weapon of satire, but it is not the only weapon. The Comedy of Manners reflects the established habits and customs of a unified social group—although with a difference. Broad Comedy is “low”—that is, less bound by social constraint; and therefore in general, less bound by the actuality of the ordinary world. Congreve had it in mind when he described—

. . . the great Freedom, Privilege, and Liberty which the Common People of England enjoy. Any man that has a Humor, is under no Restraint, or Fear of giving it Vent; they have a Proverb among them, which, may be, will show the Bent and Genius of the People, as well as a longer Discourse: *He that will have a May-pole, shall have a May-pole.* This is a Maxim with them, and their Practice is agreeable to it.<sup>1</sup>

Farce is the form in which the ordinary world recedes, giving place to fantasy; but the fantastic effect may be achieved merely by an unlikely selection of elements which in their place might be normal enough. A room with a corpse in it is possible; a room with one corpse on the table, a second under the sofa, and a third in the cupboard, becomes farcical. Mr. Robertson Hare standing in a bedroom in his underpants is normal enough; when it is a strange lady's bedroom it begins to be odd; when Mr. Alfred Drayton is there in the same condition, and both are on a mistaken errand, it becomes farcical. Finally, we arrive at the kind of nonsense where the

<sup>1</sup> “Concerning Humor in Comedy,” a letter from W. Congreve to John Dennis, *Works* (Tonson edn., 1761, Vol. III, p. 513).

rules of everyday cease to apply—the other side of the looking-glass. Yet in farce and nonsense we must still be prepared to receive the fantasy as real in its kind; for that reason these forms have strict rules and conventions and traditions of their own which are binding.

The reader who has attentively considered the quotation from Congreve just given will have perceived that the word *humor* is not used quite in the sense in which it is commonly employed to-day. There was originally nothing intrinsically funny about the word. It was a technical term of medieval medicine, which anticipated modern glandular theories by declaring that the make-up of the individual was controlled by the balance of “humors” in his body. If blood prevailed, he was sanguine; if bile, he was choleric; if phlegm, phlegmatic; if black bile, he was melancholy. These *complexions* themselves resulted from an interweaving of the four elements of which all nature was composed: hot and cold, moist and dry (earth, air, water, and fire). They controlled not merely temperament but physical appearance; a sanguine man had a red face, inclined to fat, and liked eating and drinking; a melancholy man was pale and abstemious. Chaucer had already made comic use of this medical theory; but later Ben Jonson saw its dramatic possibilities, and made it the corner-stone of his dramatic creed. From that arose the *Comedy of Humors*. The result might be funny, but that was only incidental. To Ben Jonson, comedy which aimed merely at making people laugh was a poor and feeble thing; and down to Congreve’s time, his creed was accepted, if with reservations, by the major comic writers. Jonson defined comedy as designed “to show an image of the times, and sport with human follies, not with crimes.” In our own time, Shaw and Maugham in different ways are both adherents of Jonsonian comedy.

The comic impetus may work itself out through dialogue, character, and situation. But these three elements are capable of as many combinations as the four elements in the medieval *humor* theory were of producing different kinds of men. Some playwrights lean heavily on one or the other: Oscar Wilde leaned on dialogue, Noel Coward leans on situation, Priestley on character. When we think of a comedy by Lonsdale or

Dodie Smith, we think first of something that *happened* in it: the family in *Dear Octopus*, for instance, gathered over the paint-box. In the plays of Priestley or William Saroyan, we think first of the people they create: Saroyan calls one of his plays *The Beautiful People*—the pictures which rise in our mind are Agnes and her mice, or the boy making poems out of one word. With Wilde or Shaw or Hart and Kaufman we begin to quote: "The truth is rarely pure, and never simple"; "Those who can, do; those who cannot, teach"; we are impressed by a dazzling display of verbal fireworks. We could go on pigeon-holing writers into these three comic categories: Schnitzler into the first (do you remember the arm coming round the screen in *Anatol*?); Tom Robertson into the second; Congreve into the third ("I may by degrees dwindle into a wife"). Yet if we go on, we shall once more become uneasy. Just as it is impossible to segregate comedy and farce, satire and nonsense, wit and buffoonery, so it is impossible to segregate the comedy of situation from the comedy of character, or either from the comedy of wit. Between the verbal tennis-matches of Lady Brute and Belinda in Vanbrugh's *The Provok'd Wife*, Sir John Brute and his drunken friends are at their antics: Sir John in a parson's gown, pursued by the watch. The polish of Sheridan's dialogue in *The School for Scandal* is interrupted by the falling of the screen which conceals Lady Teazle. Let us beware of being pontifical about comedy, and conclude our study with a more detailed examination of some examples.

We propose to discuss a comedy and a farce by the same writer, W. Somerset Maugham: *Our Betters* and *Home and Beauty*;<sup>1</sup> and to compare them with older examples of the same forms: Congreve's *Way of the World* and Douglas Jerrold's *Bubbles of the Day*.

### **W. S. Maugham's "Our Betters" and Congreve's "The Way of the World"**

There is much of the traditional Comedy of Manners about *Our Betters*, and we cannot show better the persistence of certain themes in comedy than by comparing passages. There

<sup>1</sup> Heinemann, 1932 (in collected edn.; the plays written 1915 and 1918).

is, for example, the assumption that husbands and wives have lost all interest in each other, if they ever had any—

*Witwoud.* Fainall, how does your lady? . . . I beg pardon that I should ask a man of pleasure and the town, a question at once so foreign and domestic. But I talk like an old maid at a marriage; I don't know what I say. . . .

(*Way of the World*, I, 2.)

*Clay.* In this house, sooner or later, you'll meet every remarkable man in England except one. That is George Grayston. And he's only remarkable because he's her husband.

(*Our Betters*, I, p. 15.)

There is the same contempt which the people of the town have for the "boors" of the country—

*Witwoud.* I tell you 'tis not modish to know relations in town: you think you're in the country, where great lubberly brothers slabber and kiss one another when they meet, like a call of serjeants—'tis not the fashion here. . . .

(*The Way of the World*, III, 3.)

*Clay.* I found out that the Duchess had a widowed sister who lived in the country with her two daughters. Lady Helen Blair. My dear, she was a very stuffy, dowdy woman of fifty-five, and her two daughters were stuffier and dowdier still, and if possible, older. . . .

(*Our Betters*, II, p. 47.)

There are the set patterns of intrigue—the places of assignation: the Mall or the Green Walk in St. James's in Restoration Comedy; the National Gallery in Maugham—

*Fainall (to Mrs. Marwood).* . . . 'Sdeath, they come, hide your face, your tears;—you have a mask, wear it a moment. This way, this way,—be persuaded.

(*As they go out one way, enter Mrs. Fainall and Mirabell from another walk*)

*Mrs. Fainall.* They are here yet.

*Mirabell.* They are turning into the other walk.

*Mrs. Fainall.* While I only hated my husband, I could bear to see him; but since I have despised him, he's too offensive.

(*The Way of the World*, end of II, 1 and beginning of II, 2.)

*Duchesse.* I think it's more likely that you had an assignation. I've always heard it's a wonderful place for that. You never meet any of your friends, and if you do they're there for the same purpose, and pretend not to see you.

(*Our Betters*, II, p. 46.)

But not all the fun is at the expense of husbands and wives. Both plays make a point of the sensual itch of ageing women. Lady Wishfort lays herself open to the plots of the conspirators by her readiness to accept the servant Waitwell as the pretended rich Sir Rowland—

*Lady Wishfort.* Well, Sir Rowland, you have the way—you are no novice in the labyrinth of love—you have the clue.—But as I am a person, Sir Rowland, you must not attribute my yielding to any sinister appetite, or indigestion of widowhood; nor impute my complacency to any lethargy of continence—I hope you do not think me prone to any iteration of nuptials.

(*The Way of the World*, iv, 2.)

*Princess.* . . . It distressed me to see you on those terms with a boy like that. You're well rid of him.

*Duchesse.* My dear, you needn't tell me that. He's a thorough wrong 'un, and that's all there is about it. He hasn't even had the decency to try and excuse himself. He hasn't even made an attempt to see me.

*Princess.* After all, he never really cared for you. Anyone could see that.

*Duchesse.* Oh, don't say that, Flora. I couldn't bear it. He loved me. Until that woman came between us I know he loved me. . . .

(*Our Betters*, iii, p. 84.)

The reader may pursue the comparison for himself. But the contrasts between the plays are equally instructive. The *parvenu* was well-known in Congreve's world. Ever since the Middle Ages the English nobility had kept up links with the world of commerce; cadets of noble houses had "gone into trade" and rich plebeians had been ennobled. In Tudor times this process had been accelerated; Henry VII and Henry VIII had broken the power of the old nobility, and given Church lands to the "new rich." But the old nobility kept enough vitality to impose its standards on the new; they were absorbed and made into "gentlemen" in two or three generations. The "gentlemen" of Congreve's day were the sons of those who had taken a tremendous beating from the Puritan middle class; but all the more on that account, their standards of conduct were important to them.

The only man whom Congreve's people would have recognized as a "gentleman" in Maugham's play is a character who does not appear: the unseen baronet husband of Pearl, the hostess—Sir George Grayston; and no doubt he, if he ventured into *The Way of the World*, would be "smoked"



(teased) as fiercely as Sir Wilfull Witwoud, the country squire from Shropshire.

"Our Betters"—note the irony of the title—are two groups of parvenus: the native and the transatlantic. What "dates" the play is that wealthy Americans no longer care to buy their way into European families of title; America has become chauvinist and Europe has lost its prestige. But the situation was true when the play was written; there were plenty of people like the Duchesse de Surennes—

She was a Miss Hodgson. Chicago people. Of course, they're nobody in America, but that doesn't matter over here. . . ."

(Act I, p. 13.)

and no doubt many of them ended in the same way—

They've got too much money and too few responsibilities. English women in our station have duties that are part of their birthright, but we, strangers in a strange land, have nothing to do but enjoy ourselves.

(Act III, p. 81.)

"Enjoy ourselves!" The whole play is a comment on the quality of that enjoyment. It is this savage irony which makes Maugham a comic writer of the school of Jonson. At heart he is much sterner a moralist than Congreve.

In the workmanship of the two plays there are interesting contrasts, too. Maugham's play is much better constructed (although the censor intervened to have the second act altered). Congreve's plot, as a plot, is shocking. It is so bewilderingly complicated that it almost demands a programme synopsis, and the last act, in which legal documents are produced at will out of the hat to unravel the tangles, is a disgrace. Congreve and his contemporaries just didn't care, so long as they were provided with situations they could play on. Among details in the skill with which Maugham uses his material may be noted his use of the telephone at the end of Act I, to bring a character who is at a distance on to the stage; the Greek device of having the big scene at the beginning of Act III played off-stage, and narrated by a messenger (Thornton Clay); the irony of the servant who knows so much and says so little (Pole); the shape given by such parallels as the early opinion of Pearl on Flora ("She's one of my greatest friends. She bores me a little") (p. 13)

capped (p. 83) by the opinion of Minnie on Pearl ("My dear, she's been my greatest friend for fifteen years . . . and I tell you she hasn't a redeeming quality"); but above all, by the subtlety of the play's movement. Each act, if examined, will be seen to consist of an alternation between scenes involving a number of characters, and duologues when the stage is left to two people alone. Any one who thinks it is easy to move characters about like chessmen should try to do it!

Congreve's preoccupation (as his preface reveals) was quite different. He wanted to make each character speak wittily, and yet in a representative way. He thought of himself as a *poet*, and describes himself still as a poet when he writes in prose. He was not concerned that his situations should be "realistic," but he wanted his dialogue to be both real and beautiful—

If it has happened in any part of this comedy, that I have gained a turn of style or expression more correct, or at least more corrigible, than in those which I have formerly written, I must . . . ascribe it to your Lordship's admitting me into your conversation, and that of a society where everybody else was so well worthy of you, in your retirement last summer from the town. . . .

(Dedication of *The Way of the World*  
to the Earl of Montague.)

It would be a mistake to consider this merely polite flattery. Dialogue like Congreve's did grow out of the actuality of polite conversation; and Lord Montague's country house party must have had real pleasures, in contrast to the feigned and forced ones of Pearl Grayston's at Abbot's Kenton.

### **W. S. Maugham's "Home and Beauty" and Douglas Jerrold's "Bubbles of the Day"**

What happens when a comedian writes a farce? In order to answer this, we may set Maugham's *Home and Beauty* beside *Our Betters*. We notice, first, that it is more irresponsible. It is written with gusto, not with the icy control of the comedy. That is possible because the implications of the plot are not to be taken seriously. Maugham tells us that critics at the time of its production (1919) called it cruel and heartless. So it would be if we took it seriously, for it concerns the situation

of a man who returns from war after being posted as missing to find that his wife has married his best friend. When the play was produced, wives and husbands were facing such situations. But surely the tone of the play insists on treating it as a joke which no one could take as offensively personal. It is rollicking.

The characters are not carefully studied like those of *Our Betters*. There is no hero or heroine to engage our sympathy or provoke our hatred. The play is *fun*. Its skill is the juggler's skill of doing something unexpected and continuing to keep his coloured balls in the air when he seems bound to drop them. Its truth is the truth of farce—exaggerated and caricatured, but valid according to the rules of farce. If you were Victoria, and had lamented so dramatically the heroic death of your husband, Bill, wouldn't you be a little taken aback to see him walk in alive and well? And if you were Freddie, and had married the seductive Victoria without realizing what a trial she was, wouldn't you be a little relieved to see the missing Bill reappear? Wouldn't you hide his only pair of boots to make sure he didn't get away again; and wouldn't you be ready to make the great sacrifice, to fade out quietly and never be heard of any more? Wouldn't both the husbands be delighted to find that Victoria is indifferent to both of them, and that her ambitions lead her into the arms of the war profiteer, Mr. Leicester Paton?

It is interesting to see that, in *Our Betters*, the prevailing comedy turns to farce at the beginning of Act III, with the unavailing efforts of the outraged guests to escape from the isolation of the country house. On the other hand, the farce of *Home and Beauty* turns to comedy at the beginning of Act III when the divorce proceedings are touched with satiric comment and etched in with an acid portrait of an English "gentlewoman" of uncertain years and unattractive appearance, who takes rigid precautions to protect her virtue when she spends the night with gentlemen who require a divorce.

Finally, if we compare Maugham's farce with a classic nineteenth-century farce by Douglas Jerrold, we shall again find a difference of emphasis and technical device. Jerrold's *Bubbles of the Day* is more exuberant than Maugham's play,

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and much less tidy. It profits from the same kinds of surprise (for example, the servants who dabble in the stock market; just as Victoria's mother unexpectedly encourages her in her designs on the profiteer). It cares much less about a pretence of probability, is lavish with asides, makes people almost criminally indifferent to what is happening in the same room. What distinguishes it is a poetic quality alien to Maugham's art; a warm, endearing poetry. Among the financial schemes mooted is this one—

. . . to give an air of maiden beauty to a most venerable institution; to exercise a renovating taste at a most inconsiderable outlay; to call up as it were the snowy purity of Greece in the coal-smoke atmosphere of London; in a word, my lord—but as yet 'tis a profound secret—it is to paint St. Paul's!

Jerrold exploits what Maugham has no occasion for—theatrical parody: the charming Byronic wolf, Lord Skinflint; the innocent heroine, Pamela, who has her eyes (in reality) wide open; a last act in which everyone turns out to be everyone else's long-lost relation. The reader who imagines that the Victorians were always earnest would profit from reading Douglas Jerrold; and the stage would certainly profit from the revival of some of his plays.

## CHAPTER XI

### CUTTING AND REVISION

CUTTING and revision are best studied by looking over the playwright's shoulder and watching him at the task. We have chosen examples from Ben Jonson and Anton Chekhov. The reader would profit from making a similar study of one of Ibsen's plays with the aid of William Archer's translation of the early drafts in *From Ibsen's Workshop*.

Cutting and revision are the processes by which the pace and timing of the play are established and its point made clear. Almost any playwright as he makes his first draft is seduced by the creative process into asides. He lets a character grow out of proportion, develops a situation too far, or indulges an exuberance of dialogue. In a novel such things are less important; the reader may tolerate and even enjoy them, but a play must be economical because it is short.

The final stage of cutting has to be left for production. (Even Shakespeare has to submit to this!) Sometimes an actor can make nothing of certain speeches; while others become unexpectedly telling. Sometimes the play must be shortened by the exigencies of the situation; or a producer may use cutting to emphasize a certain conception of the play.

The writer's object in cutting, however, is to ensure that the pitch and timing are never allowed to sag, that everything is relevant and "tells."

#### **Ben Jonson's "Every Man in His Humour"**

In 1598, William Shakespeare persuaded the Lord Chamberlain's Company to stage a new comedy by the young playwright, Ben Jonson. He was twenty-six years old, and was already known as the author of one or two comedies, and some tragedies (which later he thought unworthy, and refused to publish). This was something different—so different that the company received it much as the Russian actors received Chekhov's first plays: they were dubious, puzzled, not at all

sure if it was funny or not, though it seemed clever—full of pretty writing and all that. It was a play all about men—true, there were three women's parts in it of sorts, but they were so shadowy they scarcely counted. It had a jealousy theme, without any obvious reason for any jealousy; and though there were hints at a love story, there wasn't any love. It was full of satirical portraits, and seemed to be saying clever things at the expense of nearly everybody—and the actors' impulse was to ask, as Claudius asked Hamlet: "Is there no offence in it?" And then the comics! True, there was a rascally servant who offered some scope, but there were no puns, not much chance of gags, and the rest were—well, something a bit out of the ordinary. But if Shakespeare thought it was all right that was good enough, for it wasn't a bit like the things he wrote himself. So they put it on, and Shakespeare headed the company in it.

In 1616, Jonson published his plays in folio. In preparation for this volume, Jonson took a copy of his old play *Every Man in his Humour*, which had been printed separately in 1601, and went through it thoroughly. It is this process of revision with which we are concerned.

The play, as first written, had the fashionable Italian setting familiar to us in Shakespeare's early plays; and a classical plot (so much plot as there was, which was very little), not directly copied from Plautus, but with a look of Plautus about it. A pair of elderly citizens, deceived by a pair of lively young men; a mischievous servant, Musco, quick at disguise, appearing now as a broken-down soldier, now as a justice's clerk, helping the young men (when it suits him) and playing his own game on the side; a braggart Captain, Bobadilla, very seedy, living by his wits and living very poorly. One of the old citizens, Lorenzo di Pazzi, is full of good advice, proverbial, sententious. His son, young Lorenzo, is addicted to poetry and to pastime with good company. The other old citizen, Thorello, is a man of business, miserly and jealous. He dare not leave his wife alone with so many young sparks around, though the reason why they haunt his house is not, as he thinks, to seduce his wife, Bianca, but to win her sister Hesperida for young Lorenzo—and, of course, to have lots

of fun. Then there are the silly young country boy, Stephano, and the silly young town boy, Matheo; contrasted with the honest country squire, Giuliano, and the honest water-carrier of the town, Cob. Finally, there is the "mad" old Justice, Doctor Clement. He is both "an excellent rare civilian and a great scholler" and also "the onely mad merry old fellow in Europe"; he enters into everything with huge gusto, threatens Cob with prison for disparaging tobacco, threatens to cut off Musco's legs for arresting Giuliano without a warrant, parodies Matheo's bad verses—yet in the end shrewdly distributes rewards and punishments.

The first version of the play is full of clever writing of the sort that clever young men in any period admire, and in the particular Elizabethan dress of far-fetched vocabulary ("ink-horn terms"), Latin tags, similes, and metaphors. It is written under the influence of several theories: especially the classical theories of the Unities, though Jonson has worked out his own version of these. He meticulously lays out the action to cover twelve hours, from early morning at old Lorenzo's: the opening line is—

Now trust me, here's a goodly day toward  
through Cob's

God be with you, sir, it's sixe a clocke  
(I, 3)

and Bianca's

Sweete hart will you come in to breakfast  
(I, 4)

the scene in the counting house (III, 1):

*Thorello.* Why, what's a clocke?

*Piso.* New stricken ten.

down at last to supper at Doctor Clement's, when he punningly calls for torches to see the point of Matheo's bad poem—

*Clement.* Fetch me a couple of torches, sirha, I may see the conceite:  
quickly, its very darke!

The Unity of Place he follows approximately, setting the play in and about Florence. As to the Unity of Action, Jonson

long deliberated. As an Elizabethan, he loved profusion; and he wanted to show *every* man in his humour; to do this he was bound to set several intrigues in motion—but was this a breach of the Unities? He concluded not—

As a house, consisting of divers materialls, becomes one structure, and one dwelling; so an Action, compos'd of diverse parts, may become one Fable Epicke, or Dramaticke.<sup>1</sup>

Jonson was even more concerned about unity of *tone*. For him, and a number of his contemporaries, comedy was intended to chasten morals with ridicule—to make people better rather than to make them laugh. When he revised the play, one of the chief things Jonson had in mind was to improve the unity of tone: he felt, for instance, that young Lorenzo's passionate denunciation of the enemies of poetry, and that the punishment of Bobadilla and Matheo by condemning them to exposure in motley were out of key.

But his principal aim in revising was to increase the truth of the play to life. This, though akin to realism in intention, was not realistic in our sense of the word. What Jonson was primarily concerned about was the *typical* errors of humanity—the universal truths. His characters must be flat, because if they were drawn in the round they would be exceptional, individuals differing in their oddity from everyone else. As Sidney said, comedy must be an "imitation of the *common* errors of our life."

Accordingly, when he revised *Every Man in his Humour* in his late thirties, he left the incidents and plot structure alone, but he removed the setting from Florence to London. All the swarming life of the capital which he knew so well and loved so much entered the play: details of places and people, public figures, inns, streets, conduits, mannerisms, habits and customs. Instead of—

I am sent for by a private gentleman . . . to come to him to Florence  
this morning

the Folio reads—

I am sent for, this morning, by a friend i' the old Jewrie, to come to  
him; it's but crossing over the fields to More-gate

<sup>1</sup> *Discoveries*, in *Works by Ben Jonson*, ed. Herford and Simpson, Vol. VIII, p. 648.



and instead of—

Ile neere drawe my sworde in the sight of man againe while I live,  
 Ile ne'er draw my sword in the sight of Fleet-street again while I live.

Of course, this removal of setting also involves changing the names of the characters. In the first draft Cob and his wife Tib had English names, like Bully Bottom in the city of Athens ("Cob" was the nickname for all water-carriers in Elizabethan London). They, and Clement—now Justice Clement—remain, and Bobadilla loses his final vowel to become Cap. Bobadill, a Paules-man; that is, one of those who lingered about the old Cathedral to see what they could pick up. Matheo becomes Matthew the fishmonger's son; and Stephano becomes Stephen the country cousin. The fair Hesperida turns into homely English Bridget, and her married sister Bianca becomes plain dame Kitely. The two old citizens are now Kitely (mean and jealous) and Knowell (sententious) while young Lorenzo, the son addicted to poetry, is now Ed Knowell. Finally, the servants are also transformed: the chief intriguer becomes Brain-worm (or rather Brayne-worme) instead of Musco; the mean old merchant's man is Cash, and the Justice's Clerk, Roger Formall. The smart young man-about-town is not Prospero but Well-Bred. Jonson recurs to the practice which was to persist into the nineteenth century of naming his characters with label-names.

Having made these changes, Jonson sets about a thorough revision of the dialogue of the play. Like any man in his late thirties, he can no longer bear what he once thought so clever in the work of his twenties. Most of the Latin phrases, the harsh, far-fetched, bookish terms, the specially chosen metaphors, the rhetoric, are slashed. The only places he retains and adds to them are in the parts of Bobadill and Matthew, where they are used for comic effect. Bobadill now finds his opponents "opposite *in diameter*" instead of merely opposite, Matthew adds to "very rare skill" a new phrase: "un-in-one-breath-utterable skill." But the rest lose their frills—"sublated" becomes "removed," "zanies" become "hang-bys," "If he should prove *rimarum plenus*" becomes "should he have a chinke in him."

Of course, Jonson, like any other man entering middle age, was unfair to his own youth. There are lovely things in the Quarto. Young Lorenzo defended his beloved poetry in impassioned utterance—

. . . view her in her glorious ornaments,  
Attired in the majestie of arte,  
Set high in spirite with the precious taste  
Of sweete philosophie, and which is most,  
Crownd with the rich traditions of a soule  
That hates to have her dignity prophand,  
With any relish of an earthly thought:  
O then how proud a presence doth she beare. . . .

(Act V, Sc. 3.)

but in the Folio, Ed Knowell is only allowed to get a word in edgeways between the speeches of Justice Clement: "Sir, you have sav'd me the labour of a defence." That's all. Of course, it is the last minute of the play, and Jonson as a practised playwright knows that you mustn't dally at that point. Besides, you don't expect the London burghers to appreciate beauty. Old Lorenzo of Florence could open his son's letter because he wanted to enjoy the pretty phrases. Thorello in spite of his money-bags knew the force of beauty—

Oh beauty is a Project of some power,  
Chiefly when oportunitie attends her:  
She will infuse true motion in a stone,  
Put glowing fire in an Icie soule,  
Stuff peasants bosoms with proud Caesar's spleene  
Powre rich device into an empty braine. . . .

(Act III, Sc. 1.)

but we can't expect old Kitley to go on like that; instead of *projects* he talks of *carats*, instead of *Caesar* he talks of *porters*—

No, beautie, no; you are of too good caract,  
To be left so, without a guard, or open!  
Your lustre too'll enflame, at any distance,  
Draw courtship to you, as a jet doth strawes,  
Put motion in a stone, strike fire from ice,  
Nay, make a porter leap you, with his burden!

(Act III, Sc. 3.)

Yet in spite of our regrets, there is no questioning the dramatic superiority of the Folio text. Take the moment when Musco,

disguised as a soldier, tries to sell a useless sword to Stephano who is walking into town with young Lorenzo—

*Musco.* . . . it's a most pure Toledo.

*Stephano.* I had rather it were a Spaniard: but tell me, what shal I give you for it? and it had a silver hilt—

*Lorenzo.* Come, come, you shall not buy it; hold there's a shilling friend, take thy Rapier.

*Stephano.* Why but I will buy it now, because you say so: what shall I go without a rapier?

*Lorenzo.* You may buy one in the citie.

*Stephano.* Tut, ile buy this, so I will; tell me your lowest price.

*Lorenzo.* You shall not I say.

*Stephano.* By Gods lid, but I will, though I give more then 'tis worth.

*Lorenzo.* Come away, you are a foole.

*Stephano.* Friend, ile have it for that word: follow me.

*Musco.* At your service Signior.

(Act II, Sc. 1.)

In the revised version, the oaths are modified to comply with the law. Otherwise the first speeches are identical until Ed Knowell (Lorenzo) tries to give the man his sword back. It then continues—

*Stephen.* Why, but I will buy it now, because you say so, and there's another shilling, fellow. I scorn to be outbidden. What, shall I walk with a cudgel, like Higgin-Bottom? and may have a rapier for money?

*Ed. Knowell.* You may buy one in the citie.

*Stephen.* Tut, Ile buy this i' the field, so I will, I have a mind to't, because 'tis a field rapier. Tell me your lowest price.

*Ed. Knowell.* You shall not buy it, I say.

*Stephen.* By this money, but I will, though I give more for it then 'tis worth.

*Ed. Knowell.* Come away, you are a foole.

*Stephen.* Friend, I am a fool, that's granted: but Ile have it, for that word's sake. Follow me for your money.

*Brayneworme.* At your service, sir.

(Act II, Sc. 4.)

Tiny alterations, perhaps, but how lively—and the cumulative effect of them, page by page, is the difference between goodness and excellence.

### **Anton Chekhov's "Uncle Vanya"**

In 1888, eight years after he had published his first story, and four years after he had taken his degree as doctor of medicine,

Anton Chekhov began discussing with his friend Souvorin, editor of the Petersburg daily newspaper *Novoye Vremya*, the plot of a play which they were to write together. Chekhov had written one full-length play (*Ivanov*) as well as one-act plays; but his reputation had been gained as an author of funny short stories. As a young man from the south of Russia, coming to the capital to study medicine, and compelled to support his family (for his father had failed in business) Chekhov had turned to writing stories from pure necessity; the first were quite light and unpretentious. It was only just before he wrote *The Wood Demon* (the first draft of *Uncle Vanya*) that Chekhov had begun to evolve the new kind of story which we think of as characteristically his: apparently shapeless, yet beautifully controlled, shot through with poetry and pity. Now he began to bring the same originality to the theatre.

In England, we are accustomed to think of Chekhov as a tragic writer—we weep over the fate of the Cherry Orchard and the Three Sisters who will never get to Moscow. But to the Russians he is still pre-eminently a comic writer—someone side-splittingly funny. There is truth in both views. Are not all the great clowns pathetic, and is not human weakness amusing as well as touching? But between *The Wood Demon* (completed in 1889) and the revised *Uncle Vanya* (produced in the provinces in 1898, and in Moscow by the Art Theatre in 1899) we can see the comic Chekhov evolving into the tragic one. No one could fail to laugh at *The Wood Demon*; but we laugh at *Uncle Vanya* “on the other side of our face” as the English phrase goes.

The original scheme for *The Wood Demon*, as Chekhov discussed it by letter with Souvorin, made the central character an old Professor (conceived apparently by Souvorin) who must, as Chekhov said, have a double effect on the audience—

of an intelligent man with the gout and a grievance, and of a tedious piece of music which has been playing for hours.<sup>1</sup>

The Professor (called at first Blagosvietlov, but in both versions of the play Serebryakov) must, says Chekhov, “feel that he

<sup>1</sup> Passages from letters and from *The Wood Demon* are quoted from the *Everyman Plays and Stories by Tchekov*, translated by S. S. Koteliansky (Dent, 1937).

is surrounded by a lot of cranks." The cranks are to be the Professor's son Boris, who "invariably talks nonsense," who used to think himself a Social Revolutionary and dress like a peasant; he does very little work, spends a lot of money, is always in love, and plays the piano—besides writing plays in secret. Then there is the old man, Anouchin, soft, oily, and indolent, who recommends to everyone public confession and repentance as the secret of happiness; for he has felt happy ever since, ten years ago, he had to make a public apology to everyone at the District Council. There is an old pilgrim, Feodossyi, eighty years old, who lives by begging, has sent 300,000 roubles to the Mount Athos monastery, and says what he likes. There is the old Frenchwoman, Mademoiselle Emily, a family retainer who mixes up French and Russian, and nurses the Professor through his gout. Finally, chief of all the cranks who surround the Professor is the Wood Demon himself (called Korovin in the draft, Khrousov in *The Wood Demon*, and Astrov in *Uncle Vanya*), a young squire about thirty who loves nature and especially forests. From the first moment, Chekhov had seized the idea of this character to which he stuck all the way through—

Once, when he was a schoolboy, he planted a little birch tree. When it grew green and began to shake in the wind, when it began to whisper and give a little shade, his soul filled with pride. He had helped God to create a new birch tree (p. 104).

All the women, of course, even the old Frenchwoman, are crazy about the Wood Demon; but especially the Professor's daughter, Nastya ("Don't call her Sasha, please. Since *Ivanov* I'm tired of that name." In the end she was called Sonya).<sup>1</sup>

He pleases Nastya, not with his idea, which is alien to her, but with his talent, his passion, the wide range of his thought. . . . When he comes running up to her father, sobbing and with tears, and implores him not to sell his forest to be cut down, she laughs for ecstasy and happiness: at last she has met the man. She has never believed in him before, when she saw him in her dreams, or read of him in books.

In another place, Chekhov says of her, with more prejudice

<sup>1</sup> Souvorin's children were called Boris and Nastya, and so, by a characteristic piece of tender teasing, Chekhov gave the professor's children in the play the same names. ("We'll erect an everlasting monument to Boris and Nastya.")

than he is usually capable of against any human being, let alone one of his own characters—

she surrenders herself wholly to passion, to the uttermost lengths—hysterics and silly, senseless giggling. The powder, made damp by the Petersburg marshes, dries in the sun and explodes with terrific force. . . . I've thought out an extraordinary declaration of love for her (p. 103).

This prejudice against her persisted, and came out in the ugliness which characterized Sonya in *Uncle Vanya*—though not in *The Wood Demon*.

In this first scheme there are some notable gaps. First of all there is no mention of the Professor's second wife. It is she, the beautiful young Elena, who married the Professor because she thought it romantic to be wooed by a learned and famous savant, who becomes a mainspring of the plot. Second, there is a minor character, Volkov, a brother of the professor's late wife, who manages his estate, is sorry he hasn't embezzled any of the money, drinks Vichy water and grumbles. This minor character is the germ of Uncle Vanya himself. In the first draft, he has a daughter who is very domestic, wears her fingers to the bone, and lectures everyone but the Professor of whom she is afraid. She appears in *The Wood Demon* as Julie, though she is no longer Uncle Vanya's daughter. In the final version of the play she disappears.

Having settled the scheme of their characters, the two collaborators Souvorin and Chekhov got no further. Both were very busy people; to write a play you have to get together and get down to it—they didn't find the chance. But at the end of 1889 Chekhov received an urgent appeal from an actor who had appeared in *Ivanov*, and who had now started a company of his own—Solovzov. He desperately wanted a funny play for the Christmas season. In twelve days, for a thousand roubles, Chekhov wrote *The Wood Demon*, with his brother beside him copying the acts to go to the censor. The play was a flop. Chekhov put it back in the drawer (he got the thousand roubles) and kept it there for nearly ten years. Then he took it out, reconstructed it, trimmed and tidied it, and made it into *Uncle Vanya*. To read the two versions together is almost to read all that had happened to Chekhov during those ten years. Something has been gained—power

has been gained, knowledge of the theatre and of people. *Uncle Vanya* is neater, tighter, more economical, more convincing, perhaps, than *The Wood Demon*. But the earlier play is fresh, spontaneous, gay, brimming over with fun and tenderness as well as sadness. In point of technique, which is our concern here, much has been lost as well.

In *The Wood Demon*, we open with mirror characters. The scene is the terrace just outside the manor house of young Leonid Zheltoukhin's estate. It is his birthday, and a number of guests are expected; his young sister Julie who keeps house for him is in a flurry of preparations. A few at a time the guests arrive—Voynitsky (Uncle Vanya to be) and an old landowner called Orlovsky; then the miller Dyadin, nicknamed Waffle, who adores culture, and is always there when he isn't wanted; then Orlovsky's sentimental flirtatious son Fyodor, in his imitation peasant blouse made of the finest cloth (he began life, you remember, as the Professor's son Boris; and, alas, in the revised *Uncle Vanya* he was liquidated altogether). This gradual arrival of the guests allows a leisurely exposition; they joke, dawdle over food, discuss the chief guests whom we impatiently expect—the Professor, his wife and mother-in-law; and the Wood Demon. At last these arrive. The professor is hypochondriac, valetudinarian, learned and boring—as Chekhov intended. The Wood Demon comes in like a whirlwind, delivers his panegyric on the forests, his condemnation of a civilization that wastes and destroys, erodes and denudes. The professor's beautiful wife is courted by Fyodor (because it's his nature to court) and by Uncle George Voynitsky (in earnest). On his desperate pleading the curtain of the first act falls.

Now that is all very casual, slapdash, artless if you will. When you turn to *Uncle Vanya*,<sup>1</sup> you will find it all tidied up. Young Julie and her brother have been cut; and their manor house and its garden, with the tables full of zakouski<sup>2</sup> have disappeared. We are now bound by the unity of place—the whole play takes place in the Professor's house. The Wood

<sup>1</sup> *The Cherry Orchard and Other Plays*, translated by Constance Garnett (Chatto and Windus, 1923).

<sup>2</sup> *Hors d'œuvre à la russe*.

Demon, now Dr. Astrov, opens the play with the old servant, Marina, a sort of reincarnation of Mademoiselle Emily of the original draft, crossed with the old pilgrim Feodosyi. But this is not the original Wood Demon; he is ten years older. We always knew that he was a doctor, but in the first play it wasn't important. Now (like Doctor Chekhov) he is bowed with the weight of all that sickness, all the malnutrition, the lack of hygiene, the epidemics among the peasantry. He has taken to drink, he keeps thinking of the railwayman who died under chloroform. He has come to the house to attend the Professor, who won't see him. Instead of his bursting in with his ideas about the forests, we have to hear Sonya tell us about them first, which destroys the electrifying effect of it. Waffle isn't a miller any more—he's a hanger-on, a scrounging lounge, which is less original as a conception and makes his jokes sound rather ashy in the mouth. As Dyadin he was one of Nature's naturals—a fool to whom our hearts warmed. We can't warm to him as Telyegin. The dashing sentimental Fyodor has gone too. And somehow we don't discuss the Professor and his wife with the same freedom under their own roof as we did round young Julie's table, eating her zakouski, and hearing about the young turkeys which had died because they were left out in the dew.

In the second act there aren't so many changes. It is night; the Professor is having one of his attacks of gout and every one is kept up and keeps popping in with offers of help—mostly useless and some resented. There is a thunderstorm; Fyodor is drunk; George is still courting the Professor's wife; Dr. Khrouschov arrives during the storm, and after failing to do much for the patient is given refreshments by Sonya. Sonya attacks him as people do attack those they love—

these forests of yours, this peat of yours, your embroidered blouse—all this is an affectation, play-acting, a falsehood and nothing else.

(*The Wood Demon*, II, 9, p. 136.)

and when he resents her attack she bursts out—

Just to spite you . . . I do love you! I love, and it pains me, it pains me! Leave me alone! Go away, I implore . . . don't come to our house. . . .



The act ends with a scene of reconciliation between Elena, the Professor's wife, and her step-daughter, Sonya—a reconciliation beneath the surface of which many things are stirring; hysteria on Sonya's part, jealousy on Elena's.

The final version follows the same scheme. But now there is no Fyodor, and it is the Doctor himself who is drunk. The old nurse, Marina, brings in homeliness, tenderness, and nostalgia. The one great change is in Sonya. In the first version the Wood Demon was inclined to be in love with her; and she was awakened by him, awakened into fierce denunciation and avowal. Now in the revised version she is plain and repressed. She says nothing to the Demon while she plies him with sandwiches, except to beg him not to make Uncle Vanya drunk. The comedy of a conventional girl swept off her feet into sensuality and hysterics which have something positive and even noble about them has turned into a tragedy of passivity and frustration, of the invisible chains of personality.

We are to see this change developed in Act III. The climax of this act, in *The Wood Demon*, is that Uncle George shoots himself; and the consequence of his action is the culmination of a process which drives Elena from home. But in *Uncle Vanya*, Vanya tries to shoot the Professor—and misses. The tragedy is tragic because no tragedy is achieved. They don't even send for the police.

Because of these different outcomes, the last acts of the two plays are entirely different. In *The Wood Demon*, Elena takes refuge with Dyadin the miller, and while she hides in his house, the rest arrive for a picnic. Chekhov disposes of them all with something of the slapdash mood of Shakespeare at the end of one of the early comedies: Elena goes home to the Professor, Julie pairs off with Fyodor, and Sonya gets her Wood Demon. It is said that Chekhov was upset when the audience roared with laughter at the glow of a forest fire in the sky. But what else can we do? It is farce mixed with wisdom, in which we are never sure when Chekhov is being serious and when he's teasing. Everything wavers, as in a dream—there's a flavour of Alice in Wonderland. Personally, I don't care if the play got a happy ending for the benefit of

Solovzov's audience, or if Chekhov paired them off so as to get the play to the censor in time. I like that. I agree with Chekhov's fan, Prince Urusov, who protested at the alterations—

You have cut all the meat off it, reduced it to a conspectus and defaced it . . . the suicide in Act III, the night-scene by the river, at the mill, with the tea-table in Act IV, and the wife's return to the professor—all these were more novel, more daring, more interesting, than the present end (p. 107).

What have we in the place of all this exuberant life, in *Uncle Vanya*? Merely a mournful diminuendo of farewell. Sonya and Uncle Vanya are left to go on living, "through a long chain of days and weary evenings," after Dr. Astrov has taken from Vanya the morphia with which he might have ended it all, and said good-bye to Elena. *Finita la commedia*. All that is done better in *The Three Sisters* and *The Cherry Orchard*. But when shall we find again Waffle's description of himself as "a pock-marked Paris," or hear Julie collecting up half a jar of medlar jam, or Fyodor offering himself to her "I am thirty-five, and have no status except that of lieutenant in the Serbian army and non-com. in the Russian reserve"? Where shall we hear the phrase with which Elena returns to her husband: "Well, take me, you statue of the commander, and go to blazes with me in your twenty-six dismal rooms"? Only in *The Wood Demon*. It is only in *The Wood Demon* that the Wood Demon finds them all out—

There sits a demon in me, I am petty, without talent, blind; but you too professor, are no eagle! And yet the whole district, all the women see in me a hero, an advanced man, and you are famous all over Russia. And if such as I are seriously taken as heroes, and if such as you are seriously famous, it means only that for lack of better men Jack is a nobleman, that there are no real heroes, no talents, no men who might lead us out of this dark forest, who might repair what we are spoiling; that there are no real eagles who might by right enjoy honourable fame . . . (IV, 9, p. 166).

## CHAPTER XII

### FINGERING: THE MASTERY OF STAGECRAFT

**D**URING the First Great War an Italian writer who had long been known among his own countrymen as a successful novelist and poet began to write plays. He was not young—he was fifty before he was established as a dramatist. At the beginning of the nineteen-twenties his name began to be heard abroad; in 1921 the production of *Six Characters in Search of an Author* created a riot in Rome; in 1922 it was followed by *Henry IV*,<sup>1</sup> and in a year or two his plays were being produced all over the world.

Luigi Pirandello was born a Sicilian and educated as a philosopher at Rome and Bonn. Before he was twenty his poems and stories began to be published, while he supported himself by tutorial work in Rome. But, although he became a popular novelist, the critics did not see anything wonderful in him. He was considered a realist in the school of Zola; his plots were generally violent and melodramatic, and his characters were chosen from the lower middle class: they lived in drab boarding houses, worked in provincial offices, or taught in schools. When Pirandello began to write plays, he carried over into the drama his love of melodrama and often, his grey, tired, characters. But he also began to emphasize what was present though unperceived in his novels—his preoccupation with philosophy. This did not come merely from his training in German nineteenth-century Hegelian thought, or from his study of Croce; it was part of his Sicilian inheritance. Sicily was colonized by Greeks before the age of Pericles; it remained Greek all through Roman times and into the Middle Ages; it was the birthplace of rhetoric and the idyll. Theocritus was a Sicilian; Aeschylus died there; and two thousand years before Pirandello the sophist Gorgias of Leontini was asking the questions that perplexed his

<sup>1</sup> In *Three Plays*, translated by E. Storer and A. Livingston, edited by A. Livingston (Dent, 1922).

fellow-countryman: Does anything exist? If it existed, could we know what it was? If we knew what it was, could we communicate the knowledge to each other? To all these questions both Gorgias and Pirandello were inclined to answer no.

### Pirandello's "Henry IV"

In *Henry IV*, Pirandello found a fable perfectly suited to his gifts and intentions—melodramatic, poetic, philosophic, and ironic. "Henry IV" is a wealthy madman who lives in an Italian villa attended by four "privy counsellors," part servants, part keepers. His mania—which takes the form of believing himself the eleventh-century German Emperor who struggled with Pope Gregory VII for the leadership of Europe—was occasioned by a fall from his horse at a pageant in which, twenty years before, he had played the part of the Emperor. During these twenty years time has stood still for him; meanwhile the sister who loved and cared for him has died, leaving him in the charge of her son, the young Marquis Charles de Nolli. The woman he had loved and who disdained him has grown into middle age, and now comes at last to visit him, accompanied by her cavalier, the Baron Tito Belcredi, and her daughter Frida, who has already reached the age which was her mother's at the time of the pageant. They bring with them the last of a series of doctors who have attempted to treat the patient, for his recovery has never been despaired of. Between these principal actors, with the four "counsellors" and the faithful old servant John, the drama is played out to its tragic end.

The play is like a Hall of Mirrors in which we see the characters reflected in endless perspective. "Henry IV" is first of all Mr. John Gielgud (let us say)—the actor who plays the part. He is, second, a portion of the imagination of Luigi Pirandello. He is a wealthy madman of our own day. He is the eleventh-century Emperor. He is the image of these things in the minds of the members of the audience. Yet even that is not the end of it. Before the play has proceeded very far we realize that "Henry IV" is "Only mad nor' nor' west; when the wind is southerly he knows a hawk from a handsaw."

The quotation is apposite, for the situation suggests the same doubts as Hamlet. "Henry IV" ~~wears his madness as a mask~~; he has long been "sane," yet has preferred to continue his character rather than to step back into the life of every day. He recognizes his visitors and knows their purpose. Yet is it "sane" to behave like that?

We are confronted with a series of "turns" whose virtue is not merely that they surprise us when we first meet them but that they continue to enthrall us when we know the play thoroughly.

For these turns, Pirandello relies on a controlling emotion and a simple piece of mechanism. The controlling emotion is fear; through fear the madman controls the sane; he has chosen his attitude to life—they have not. The mechanism is a pair of life-size modern portraits which incongruously find their place in the "throne-room," furnished except for them in eleventh-century style.

There are two opening scenes; the first between the valets, the second between the visitors. A new "privy counsellor" has just joined the staff in the place of Tito, who is dead. The newcomer, Berthold, has been produced in response to the insistent demands of the madman: "I want Berthold."

This opening scene fulfils more than one function. It sets the pace—a rollicking, tearing pace gay with incongruities which will allow the dramatist later on all the contrast he wishes. It establishes the important minimum of historical knowledge: for we, like Berthold, may not be sure who Henry IV is. It places the central character before he appears. But beyond all these things it hints at the central problems of the play: What is reality? What is sanity? Berthold asks the question which is in all our minds about the portraits: "Two modern paintings in the midst of all this respectable antiquity"—

*Landolph.* They would certainly be out of place if they really were paintings!

*Berthold.* What are they, if they aren't paintings?

*Landolph.* Go and touch them! Pictures all right . . . but for him . . . who never touches them. . . .

*Berthold.* No? What are they for him?

*Landolph.* Well, I'm only supposing, you know; but I imagine I'm about right. They're images such as . . . well—such as a mirror might throw back . . . it's as if there were two mirrors there, which cast back living images into the midst of a world which, as you will see when you have lived with us, comes to life too.

*Berthold.* I say, look here. . . . I've no particular desire to go mad here.

*Harold.* Go mad, be hanged! You'll have a fine time.

(Act I, p. 80.)

The first scene is succeeded by a second, in which we learn though only yet in part, of the relationships between Donna Matilda and her escort, Tito; between her and her daughter, Frida, and Frida's fiancé, Charles de Nolli; between all of them and "Henry IV." These people are bound to the past, too, but it is not the distant past of the eleventh century: it is that nightmare moment twenty years ago when "Henry IV," recovering consciousness after his concussion, had reappeared among the carnival party as the Emperor himself. Tito had suggested the pageant, Matilda had chosen the role of the Duchess Matilda of Tuscany which had led the man whose love she ridiculed to assume the part of the Duchess's bitter enemy, Henry IV. The young people are also involved—Frida by her subservience to her beautiful, forceful mother; Charles by his love for Frida and by the promise he made to his dying mother that he would look after "Henry IV."

Once more the portraits play their part—

*Matilda* (*glancing round for her portrait, discovers it and goes up close to it*).

Ah! Here it is. Yes . . . yes. . . . (*calls Frida*).

*Frida.* Ah, your portrait!

*Matilda.* No, no . . . look again; it's you, not I, there!

*de Nolli.* Yes, it's quite true. I told you so, I . . .

*Matilda.* But I would never have believed it! (*Shaking as if with a chill*.)

What a strange feeling it gives one. Frida, what's the matter? Come, don't you see yourself there?

(Act I, p. 86.)

At last, at the end of the act, comes the *scène à faire* for which we have been waiting: the madman confronts them. It is not a long scene—about ten minutes in playing time—and it consists of a long monologue from the Emperor, broken only by interruptions from the others. By means of the historical façade, he makes them dance to his tune like

marionettes; and every now and then, half dropping the mask, a face looks out at them full of malice and irony—

However, Monsignor, while you keep yourself in order, holding on with both your hands to your holy habit, there slips down from your sleeves, there peels off from you like . . . like a serpent . . . something you don't notice: life, Monsignor! . . . . (*to Matilda*)

I am speaking only of the memory you wish to fix in yourself of your fair complexion one day when it pleased you—or of your dark complexion, if you were dark: the fading image of your youth!

Well, Monsignor, my Lady, my torment is really this: that whether here or there (*pointing to his portrait almost in fear*) I can't free myself from this magic . . . a man can't always be twenty-six, my Lady. . . .

(Act I, pp. 105-9.)

And with this series of stabs he leaves them, stupefied.

The second act is even simpler in construction than the first. The visitors are partly aware of the game that has been played with them. The doctor is hopeful; he has his learned explanation in "the peculiar psychology of madmen"—

They observe things and can, for instance, easily detect people who are disguised; can in fact recognize the disguise and yet believe in it; just as children do, for whom disguise is both play and reality

(Act II, p. 111.)

or he might have added, just as an audience does. Donna Matilda trembles. She had assumed for the first act, not the character of the Countess Matilda which she had played in the pageant—that would have been too disturbing. Instead, she had been habited as the Duchess Adelaide, mother of the Empress Bertha, from whom (in history) Henry IV was separated.

*Matilda.* . . . he recognized me.

*Belcredi.* But he was talking of your daughter.

*Matilda.* That's not true! He was talking of me, of me! . . . by my daughter, stupid, he meant me—as I was then!

*Belcredi.* Oh, this is catching, this is catching, this madness.

(Act II, p. 112.)

The confusion between the real daughter (Frida) and the historical daughter (the Empress Bertha) is intentional, and the plot develops it. The Doctor decides to try "shock treatment" in the hope of completing the recovery of the patient, who shows signs of dawning sanity. He decides that

the visitors shall pretend to go away; that Matilda shall then reappear as the Countess of Tuscany, while Frida, in the original pageant dress, shall assume the same role. The plot is already in action—Frida has gone with Charles in the car to get the clothes; she appears in costume, looking exactly like the portrait. Henry is to see the double image: of Matilda as she was, and as she is, with her dyed hair.

But the plotters are too late—the double image is already in Henry's mind. It reverberates through the little scene in which he bids farewell to the "Duchess Adelaide" and the "monks" who attend her. As they leave, irony gives place to pathos; Henry stands on the brink of a revelation—

I am always afraid when, at night time, I see disordered images before me. Sometimes I am even afraid of my own blood pulsing loudly in my arteries in the silence of night, like the sound of a distant step in a lonely corridor. . . .  
(Act II, p. 126.)

When they have gone, Henry bursts out to the "counsellors." In spite of himself, the visitors have touched the dormant life in him. He is jealous and angry—

What shall I say of those people who've just gone away? That one is a whore, another a libertine, another a swindler? . . . And why are they terrified? . . . Of course you can't believe what madmen say—yet, at the same time, they stand there with their eyes wide open with terror!—Why? . . .

Do you know what it means to find yourself face to face with a madman—with one who shakes the foundations of all you have built up in yourselves, your logic, the logic of your constructions! . . .

(Act II, pp. 129-30.)

But the visitors go on with their scheme, not knowing of this new development. At the beginning of Act III we are back in the throne-room, but the portraits have been replaced by living people: Frida as the Marchioness, Charles as Henry IV. As Henry crosses the dark throne-room with his little lamp, the portrait of Matilda calls to him. The ruse has quite a different effect from the one expected. Henry is terrified, filled with the suspicion that he is really mad. Frida, too, is terrified, shouts hysterically, and then collapses. A fearful rage is born in Henry's heart. He begins to strip them and himself in a series of revelations. He tells of the



events of the pageant, of "those who, behind my back, pricked my saddled horse till it bled," of the years that passed in a dream, of the mending of his mind—

All by itself, who knows how, one day the trouble here mended. Little by little, I open my eyes, and at first I don't know whether I am asleep or awake. Then I know I am awake. I touch this and that, I see clearly again. . . . Ah! then, as he says, away, away with this masquerade, this incubus! Let's open the windows, breathe life once again! Let's run out. But where? and to do what?

(Act III, p. 141.)

For, while the madman dreamed, life has gone by. The woman who repulsed him has married, borne a daughter, left her husband whom she did not love, taken a lover whom she does not love either, whom she despises—

I was terrified because I understood at once that not only had my hair gone grey, but that I was grey inside; that everything had fallen to pieces, that everything was finished; and that I was going to arrive, hungry as a wolf, at a banquet which had already been cleared away. . . .

(Act III, p. 141.)

In a last gesture, the madman claims his dream—Frida. As they advance to tear her from him, he takes a sword and runs Belcredi through. Then, as the curtain falls, he gathers the valets round him—

Ah now . . . yes now . . . inevitably . . . here together . . . here together . . . for ever . . . and ever.

(Act III, p. 146.)

It will be seen that, in spite of the complexities of philosophy, this is really a very simple play—with the simplicity of greatness, a simplicity quite compatible with profundity; a play which is classical without pedantry, wears the unities with ease, is realistic without photography, and poetic without pretentiousness. Like the few greatest masterpieces, it is typical of its time and of its author without being confined by either.

### Synge's "Playboy of the Western World"

In 1896 Yeats discovered Synge stagnating in Paris, and persuaded him to return to Ireland. There, inspired by the life of the Aran Islands and the mainland peasantry, and by the opportunity afforded by the Abbey Theatre, Synge

wrote before he died a little handful of plays, mostly short. When he was dead, Yeats wrote his epitaph in a stanza<sup>1</sup>—

And that enquiring man John Synge comes next  
That dying chose the living world for text  
And never could have rested in the tomb  
But that, long travelling, he had come  
Towards nightfall upon certain set apart  
In a most desolate stony place,  
Towards nightfall upon a race  
Passionate and simple like his heart.

Synge himself illustrates this attitude in his preface to *The Playboy of the Western World*.<sup>2</sup>

When I was writing *The Shadow of the Glen*, some years ago, I got more aid than any learning could have given me from a chink in the floor of the old Wicklow house where I was staying, that let me hear what was being said by the servant girls in the kitchen. This matter, I think, is of importance, for in countries where the imagination of the people, and the language they use, is rich and living, it is possible for a writer to be rich and copious in his words, and at the same time to give the reality, which is the root of all poetry, in a comprehensive and natural form.

In the modern literature of towns, however, richness is found only in sonnets, or prose poems, or in one or two elaborate books that are far away from the profound and common interests of life. One has, on one side, Mallarmé and Huysmans producing this literature; and on the other, Ibsen and Zola dealing with the reality of life in joyless and pallid words. On the stage one must have reality and one must have joy; and that is why the intellectual modern drama has failed, and people have grown sick of the false joy of the musical comedy, that has been given them in place of the rich joy found only in what is superb and wild in reality. In a good play every speech should be as fully flavoured as a nut or an apple, and such speeches cannot be written by anyone who works among people who have shut their lips on poetry.

*The Playboy of the Western World* illustrates, therefore, a number of the conditions needed to produce a great play. It proves the inaccuracy of the old optimistic judgment that genius will come to the top whatever happens; that nothing can prevent a great work of art from coming into existence. Synge depended on the Abbey Theatre and the goading of

<sup>1</sup> From "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory," *Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, Macmillan, 1933. Quoted by permission of Mrs. W. B. Yeats and Messrs. Macmillan & Co., Ltd.

<sup>2</sup> Allen & Unwin, 1907 (page references below are to *Collected Plays*, 1924).

Yeats; as Chekhov, having failed in the theatre once, depended on the Moscow Art Theatre and the goading of Stanislavsky; as Obey depended on the Compagnie des Quinze and the goading of Saint-Denis; as Racine, having renounced the theatre, depended on the goading of Madame de Maintenon and the young ladies of Saint-Cyr to produce *Esther* and his masterpiece, *Athalie*.

*The Playboy of the Western World* was also born in rebellion—the rebellion of Irish nationalism against English political domination; of the provinces against the capital. A critic, Cyril Connolly, denounced this as the rebellion of the uneducated against the educated, and described “Yeats and Synge filling their notebooks with scraps of tinker’s dialogue which could only be used in plays, and only in plays about tinkers.”<sup>1</sup> There is truth in this criticism: Synge founded no school. But there is also snobbery—a play about tinkers, if it is a good enough play, is just as valuable as a play about Roman senators.

The play is too well known to need describing; I propose merely to make some comments upon it. The best reply to the charge of provincialism is the universal response which the play has received; and in particular the violent animosity which it provoked among Irish audiences in Dublin and America. For, if Synge was a good enough Irishman to want to write an Irish play, he was also (like most good patriots) a sharp critic of his countrymen’s failings; and they were intelligent enough to recognize the point of his satire. It is part of the play that it recognizes the limits of its world—

*Pegeen.* It’s a wonder, Shaneen, the Holy Father’d be taking notice of the likes of you; for if I was him I wouldn’t bother with this place where you’ll meet none but Red Linahan, has a squint in his eye, and Patcheen is lame in his heel, or the mad Mulrannies were driven from California and they lost in their wits. We’re a queer lot these times to go troubling the Holy Father on his sacred seat.

(Act I, p. 189.)

Indeed, this feeling is the mainspring of the action; for having no hero, Pegeen and the girls, Sara Tansey, Susan Brady and

<sup>1</sup> Cyril Connolly, *Enemies of Promise* (Routledge, 1938), pp. 26, 37.

Honor Blake, to say nothing of the Widow Quin, are driven to invent one, in the person of the fugitive Christy—

*Christy.* I killed my father, Tuesday was a week, for doing the like of that.

*Pegeen.* Is it killed your father?

*Christy.* With the help of God, I did, surely. . . .

*Philly.* There's a daring fellow.

*Jimmy.* Oh, glory be to God!

*Michael (with great respect).* That was a hanging crime, mister honey.

You should have had good reason for doing the like of that.

*Christy.* He was a dirty man, God forgive him, and he getting old and crusty, the way I couldn't put up with him at all. . . . I just riz the loy and let fall the edge of it on the ridge of his skull, and he went down at my feet like an empty sack, and never let a grunt or groan from him at all.

(Act I, p. 202.)

Every patriotic Irishman at that time, like every patriotic Greek, Frenchman, or Norwegian in 1942, was an enemy of the law—for the law was the enemy's law—the instrument of oppression. To the natural sympathy which everyone has for the fugitive or the prisoner in the dock was added, therefore, the natural antipathy which every Irishman had for the "peelers." It was a romantic sympathy. When, towards the end of the play, Christy tried to recreate his waning popularity by repeating under their very eyes the murder of his father which had brought him such fame, he found that it was received very differently—

*Pegeen.* I'll say, a strange man is a marvel, with his mighty talk; but what's a squabble in your back-yard, and the blow of a loy, have taught me that there's a great gap between a gallous story and a dirty deed. (*To the men.*) Take him on from this, or the lot of us will be likely put on trial for his deed to-day.

(Act III, p. 288.)

As Miss Ellis-Fermor has pointed out, the play is built on a contrast in the lives of the peasantry—

Inside the bar are the drunken peasant farmers with their dreary lives and their starved but inflammable imaginations. The desolation of the countryside has crushed their enterprise; its beauty has kept their imaginations living. Out of the conflict comes their capacity for intoxication.<sup>1</sup>

Although Synge has kept faithfully to the Unities of Time, Place, and Action, never taking us outside the shebeen, and

<sup>1</sup> Una Ellis-Fermor, *Frontiers of Drama*, p. 83 (Methuen, 1945).

carrying us steadily through the few hours—from the evening of Kate Cassidy's wake and Christy's bedraggled arrival, to his departure with his father the following afternoon—and never allowing a detail from outside to obtrude on the directness of the narrative; yet all the same he has found a means to draw the contrast for us. Through the imagery we are perpetually reminded of the world outside—the fields and hills of Ireland and the traditions of Christendom. Hardly a page goes by without their being recalled—

It's then yourself and me should be pacing Neifin in the dews of night,  
the times sweet smells do be rising, and you'd see a little, shiny new moon,  
maybe, sinking on the hills. (Act III, p. 270.)

I'll quit the lot of you, and live from this out, like the mad men of Keel,  
eating muck and green weeds on the faces of the cliffs. (Act III, p. 288.)

One or two remind us of the culture, arts, and sciences of the world outside—

Did you never hear tell of the skulls they have in the city of Dublin,  
ranged out like blue jugs in a cabin of Connaught? (Act III, p. 257.)

If the mitred bishops seen you that time, they'd be the like of the holy  
prophets, I'm thinking, do be straining the bars of Paradise to set eyes  
on the lady Helen of Troy, and she abroad, pacing backward and  
forward, with a nosegay in her golden shawl. (Act III, p. 271.)

It is the double setting of the play that is its great originality; and the perpetual liveliness of the narrative that gives it its grip in the theatre. We are constantly being surprised without ever being able to complain that the surprise has been forced. Synge has solved one of the major difficulties of three-act play construction by the double buttress of Old Mahon's appearance with his bandaged head, followed by the return of the party from the wake. So there is no flagging when the crisis is reached. Nor is the peripeteia employed merely as a theatrical trick; it is the very point of the play that Christy, encouraged by his reception, should reach the point of grandeur where he is loved by all the girls and wins all the races—only to be thrown down from this eminence in a few minutes by bad luck and bad judgment, until we see him bound with the rope, cowering on the kitchen floor, while Pegeen (whom he

had so recently been courting in immortal poetry) burns his shins with a peat to make him unclasp them from the table. It is equally inevitable that this treatment should re-unite the divided Mahon clan against "the villainy of Mayo," and that father and son should go on their way together, leaving Pegeen to lament too late her lost Playboy of the Western World.

### Strindberg's "The Dream Play"

Strindberg is still best known internationally as a writer of "strong" realistic drama; but it is his symbolist plays: *The Spook Sonata*, *To Damascus*, *The Dance of Death*, and *The Dream Play* which, intrinsically and historically, deserve more attention. Intrinsically, because they are good plays of a new kind; historically, because from them descend Expressionism and most modern experimental developments in the theatre.

Symbolism was, of course, a European movement in art, with its centre in Paris—but with ramifications as far away as Hungary and Russia; it began in poetry with the theories of Edgar Allan Poe as adapted by Baudelaire and developed by Mallarmé; and it spread its influence through the other arts of literature, even into music and painting.

Strindberg left Sweden in 1883 and lived abroad for six years; part of this time was spent in Paris at the very moment when Symbolism was being most ardently debated; but for the time his work showed no immediate reaction to its influence—the plays he was writing at that time were strongly realistic. It was after the breakdown of his second marriage, and the accompanying breakdown of mental health (for he was an extremely unstable and often an unhappy person) that Strindberg turned to Symbolism as a means of expression: the first two parts of *To Damascus* (written in 1898) were the first fruits of this mood, followed by *Easter* and *The Dance of Death* (1901), *The Dream Play* (1902),<sup>1</sup> and *The Spook Sonata* (1907). Strindberg was thus one of a group of playwrights, including the Belgian Maeterlinck, the Russian Andreyev,

<sup>1</sup> *The Dream Play*, translated by E. Björkman (Duckworth, 1912).

the German Hauptmann, the Frenchman Lenormand, and the Irishman Yeats, who sought to apply the doctrines of Symbolism to the theatre. Many of these writers were not exclusively symbolists or even exclusively playwrights, any more than Strindberg himself. They were like the American pioneers of the gold-rush days—out to make a strike in new territory, misfits driven by the lust of adventure or their inner preoccupations.

The Symbolist movement was fundamentally mystical. Its quarrel with realism was that realism was a study of surfaces, a sort of artistic materialism. Truth, according to the realists, was to be found by studying with scientific fidelity the life we live every day, putting in everything, pleasant or unpleasant, that could be observed, fixing it with the fidelity of a photograph. The Symbolists knew from their own experience that there are other truths besides those of the surface; they knew the tortures of Inferno, but they believed also—in part through their experience of evil—that there is an ideal world of beauty more real than that of matter perceived by the senses. They endeavoured to express their vision of this invisible world in visible form, and to do so they were driven to the use of symbols. But whereas, for the older religious poets of the pagan and Christian world, there were the symbols of national myth or the Church, these new rebel mystics had to make a personal symbolism for themselves. Sometimes they could adapt symbols borrowed from elsewhere—as Strindberg in *The Dream Play* borrowed the Daughter of Indra (the heroine) from Indian religious myth, or as Yeats used Irish myth in his early plays and poems. But their art has the air of a secret, it is intensely personal, it avoids public and political themes—the sort of themes that had occupied Ibsen in his middle period, or those of Shaw (and later, Galsworthy) in England. The title which one of them, Nicolas Evreinof, chose for a play might be the general title of all: it was *The Theatre of the Soul*. Lenormand wrote plays called *The Dream Doctor* and *Man and his Phantoms*; Maeterlinck *The Cloud that Lifted*, *The Blue Bird*, and *The Power of the Dead*, Andreyev *The Life of Man*, *The Seven who were Hanged*, *Day of Wrath*, and *The Black Maskers*, as well as a

number that embody Christian symbolism in their titles: *Judas Iscariot*, *Lazarus*, *Son of Man*. These titles are a clue to the attitude of the whole school.

The secrets of the soul are hard to impart and difficult to interpret. This set the symbolist dramatists some hard problems. You can go over a poem again and again; if it is a good poem you *want* to go over it again; and the music of its sound, the magic of its phrase, its incantatory power will carry you along until the key of its logic is turned and the door opens. But a play is not a poem; still less is it a piece of music, although Wagner (the idol of the Symbolists) tried to unite music and drama in his operas (which he preferred to call music-dramas). A play must pass before the spectator in time; it cannot stay to be questioned.

Moreover, many of the experiences most dear to the Symbolists were experiences of solitude, of ecstasy, ineffable, beatific. The ideal of Mallarmé was "*l'absence*," "the silence which is more musical than any song."<sup>1</sup> Such experiences are among the hardest to convey in terms of the theatre because they are static, lonely, evanescent, above conflict. The struggle of the Symbolist playwright was therefore only rarely successful. He had to find *dramatic* symbols which really lived in the theatre, without distorting his vision and making it commonplace on one hand or incomprehensible on the other. Many of the Symbolist plays now seem to us hollow shells, inferior morality plays or fantastic whimsies, falsely fey or obvious. But when they succeed they have an extraordinary power and beauty. In all the arts, the true symbol is one which appeals at various levels. If we are to use *rose* as a symbol, for instance, it must be loved as a rose with petals and fragrance growing in the earth of an actual garden, as well as being the beauty of the beloved, or more widely still, all human or all earthly beauty lovely and fragrant for a day, but fragile and perishing.

The success of *The Dream Play* is Strindberg's success in finding symbols which are rich and dramatically true. He set himself to follow the form of a dream, and this vestige of realism gave him an anchor. He liberated the

<sup>1</sup> C. M. Bowra, *The Heritage of Symbolism*, p. 11.



world of the unconscious which has been so fruitful in all modern art.

The author has tried to imitate the disconnected but seemingly logical form of the dream. Anything may happen; everything is possible and probable. Time and space do not exist. On an insignificant background of reality, imagination designs and embroiders novel patterns: a medley of memories, experiences, free fancies, absurdities, and improvisations.

The characters split, double, multiply, vanish, solidify, blur, clarify. But one consciousness reigns above them all—that of the dreamer: and before it there are no secrets, no incongruities, no scruples, no laws. There is neither judgment nor exoneration, but merely narration. And as the dream is mostly painful, rarely pleasant, a note of melancholy and of pity for all living things runs through. . . .

The play is full of personal symbols, some of which we know, and others we surmise, to have been drawn from Strindberg's own experience. In one episode, the Officer finds himself back at school trying in vain by the processes of logic to prove that twice two are two—

Listen!—once one makes one; consequently twice two must make two. For what applies in one case must also apply in the other.

This experience of nightmare is familiar enough to everyone, but it had a special poignancy for Strindberg, who carried nightmare into the world of every day: when he returned to Stockholm from the University at Upsala, where he had been too poor even to buy wood to heat his garret, he was forced to teach in the elementary school where he had spent the most unhappy years of his childhood.

*Teacher.* It is dreadful that such a big boy lacks ambition—

*Officer.* Big boy—yes, I am big—bigger than all these others—I am full-grown, I am done with school—(*as if waking up*) I have graduated—why then am I sitting here? Have I not received my doctor's degree?

Strindberg knew intuitively what the theorists have since proved—the indelible impression made by the formative experiences of childhood. One of the recurrent symbols of the play is a door with an air-hole shaped like a four-leaved clover; this door, which the Officer is always trying to have opened, and which no one has ever seen open, may be taken to represent the mystery of life; the Theologian, the Philosopher, the Scientist, and the Jurist dispute and actually

come to blows over the question of opening it. The source of this symbol again seems to be directly autobiographical—

*Officer.* It looks like a pantry door which I saw once when I was only four years old and went visiting with the maid on a Sunday afternoon. We called at several houses—on other maids—but I did not get beyond the kitchen anywhere, and I had to sit between the water barrel and the salt-box. I have seen so many kitchens in my days, and the pantry was always just outside, with small round holes bored in the door, and one big hole like a clover-leaf.—But there cannot be any pantry in the opera-house as they have no kitchen.

So the door is a material door; it is also a door with a special significance for Strindberg; yet it is a door which we all know—who has not brooded over that door and what may lie beyond it?

The incidents of the play are held together by the central character—the daughter of Indra, whom we have seen in a verse prologue descending to the close and sultry air of earth; she finds three mates, the Officer, the Lawyer, the Poet—or, if you will, Body, Mind, and Heart. Yet it is better not to dessicate the symbols by abstracting them; they are not factors in an equation, and it is doubtful whether Strindberg himself thought of them in this way. They, and the Daughter of Indra herself, are all segments of his own experience. There have been many descriptions in literature of what poverty means; some have seen it as beautiful, some as pitiful, some as criminal; but there is no description more authentic than that of Strindberg, who recreates in his play the poverty that has seen better days, the poverty that destroys youth and ambition—

*The Daughter.* Dearest, I die in this air, in this room, with its backyard view, with its baby cries and endless hours of sleeplessness, with those people out there, and their whinings, and bickerings, and incriminations.

*The Lawyer.* My poor little flower, that has no light and no air—

*The Daughter.* And you say that people exist who are still worse off?

*The Lawyer.* I belong with the envied ones in this locality.

*The Daughter.* Everything else might be borne if I could only have some beauty in my home.

*The Lawyer.* I know you are thinking of flowers—and especially of heliotropes—but a plant costs half a dollar, which will buy us six quarts of milk or a peck of potatoes.

Equally authentic—terrifyingly real in their dream frame—are the quarrels—

*The Daughter.* Beware of the short accents, Axel.

*The Lawyer.* They were not short.

*The Daughter.* Yes, they were.

*The Lawyer.* Well, I'll be——

*The Daughter.* What kind of language is that?

*The Lawyer.* Pardon me, Agnes! But I have suffered as much from your lack of orderliness as you have suffered from dirt.

It would be a great mistake, however, to give the impression that the play is sordid. On the contrary, there is no play more tender and more full of lyrical beauty. Several scenes are set outside the stage-door of the Opera House where the Officer waits and waits for Miss Victoria (Happiness), whom he is to marry; the carriage is waiting, the table is set, the wine is on ice; once we hear her singing, and at the very end of the play she passes across the stage with a single enigmatic remark. But while they wait, Agnes goes into the Stage Doorkeeper's box, takes her place, and gathers the Portress's shawl about her, to learn something more divine than happiness itself—sympathy—

*The Portress.* I can tell you what is harder than all drudging and keeping awake nights, harder to bear than draught and cold and dampness—it is to receive the confidences of all the unhappy people up there—they all come to me. Why? Perhaps they read in the wrinkles of my face some runes that are graved by suffering and that invite confessions.—In that shawl, dear, lie hidden thirty years of my own and other people's agonies.

*The Daughter.* It is heavy, and it burns like nettles.

Here in the Portress's shawl is an example of the truly dramatic symbol, valid on all levels; for it is true that the Stage Doorkeeper knows more of people's lives almost than the Doctor or the Priest; and that there are women like the Portress, lined with trouble and learned in nothing but their own living, to whom we turn in our distress.

A great part of the beauty of *The Dream Play* lies in the use it makes of setting and music. It was one of the most serious reproaches that could be made against realism that it deprived the writer of most of the power that he could draw from the kindred arts; it banished music and imaginative painting.

Symbolism released them. In *The Dream Play* we begin with a forest of gigantic hollyhocks in flower; behind them stands a castle topped with a bud resembling a crown—which at the very end of the play opens into a great chrysanthemum flower. We pass through the rooms of the castle, and find ourselves in the passage outside the stagedoor of the Opera House, beside it a small lime-tree with a few pale green leaves, and in a sunlit space a tremendous blue monk's-hood. Autumn comes, the flower withers, the tree loses its leaves. Then there is a sudden transformation: we are in a lawyer's office; the linden has become a hat-stand, the door with the clover leaf belongs to a document chest. Later the office becomes a Church, with the linden hat-stand as a candelabrum. In the second act, the Lawyer's room opens out to vistas of Fairhaven and Foulstrand—

In the centre of the middle distance, a pier with white sailboats tied to it, and flagpoles with hoisted flags. In the strait is anchored a naval vessel, brig-rigged, with gun ports.

The brig sails away, and by way of the Mediterranean we find ourselves in Fingal's Cave; and so at last we return to the passage outside the Opera House, and the Growing Castle. These changes are all "practical changes" which the playwright has worked out with ingenuity, so that they are capable of being realized in the theatre.

Equally remarkable is his use of music: the grand-operatic coloratura of Victoria, the Chorus from *Aida*, the organ music and church anthem which introduce *Fingal's Cave*, the lyric sung by the lovers on the way to Fairhaven, with "tender chords from harps and violins," the Toccata and Fugue by Bach which Plain Edith plays against the waltzers, until at last they sink to silence; the Kyrie of the drowning sailors; the closing music which accompanies the burning castle as it bursts into flower—here is a legitimate use of music far from Wagner's conception of music drama, but equally dramatic. Fertile as Strindberg's influence has been, it cannot be said that justice has yet been done to him, either in stage presentation or by historians of the theatre. The reader may, perhaps, therefore excuse the present writer, if an enthusiasm long and warmly held betrays itself in too great a stridency of tone.

### J. B. Priestley's "The Linden Tree"

The last example I have chosen for this detailed study of the craft of playwriting is a very recent and very topical play. It would be idle to pretend that anything so recent and so controversial can be discussed with the same detachment as Aeschylus or even Pirandello; yet it is the test of judgment whether we can apply what we have learnt from the past to our own occasions.

*The Linden Tree* follows two current fashions. It is a family play; and it is written in strict observance of the unities.

The significance of family plays such as *Whiteoaks*, *The Banbury Nose*, *Dear Octopus*, *The Family Reunion*, must be due to various factors. The family is the oldest social unit, and it is a microcosm. In the family, the daunting problems of the wider world are reflected—or perhaps a better word would be embodied; yet they seem easier to study and observe in the family than on the vast scale of international politics, where there are so many imponderables and incommensurables. The family is the readiest symbol of the church ("the fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man") the world ("the family of nations") and the nation ("we are all one family" . . . "nor Scot, Colonial, Celt are we, but Britons one and all").

On another plane, the family play solves that old dilemma of the theatre—to show us something like ourselves, or something quite different from ourselves? Every family play does both. We are absorbed to find that in the stage family, as in our own, there are tantrums, unaccountable reserves, family customs, a ritual of birthday and festival, a secret language against the outside world, but also secrets from each other. Yet every family is also its own world; our curiosity about it is easily aroused and easily satisfied. All these things are to be found in Priestley's play. Father's birthday, the case of pipes, the game of "Black Sam" (in which Rex always wins, by cheating), the holidays in Cumberland, the down-at-heel family retainer—Mrs. Cotton, the arguments and quarrels of Jean and Marion: all these we recognize and respond to.

Yet the play also offers itself as a symbol. Its musical

*motif* is that Edwardian masterpiece, Sir Edward Elgar's violoncello concerto, and the music is richly underlined with comment from Professor Linden, Mrs. Linden, Dinah (who shares with Casals and the B.B.C. Symphony Orchestra the playing of passages from the work offstage)—and even Mrs. Cotton. There is a rich vein of nostalgia—all the better for being unashamed, and quite happily reconciled to Mr. Priestley's bluff matter-of-factness. Mr. Priestley is a Yorkshireman—scratch a Yorkshireman and find a moralist—his play is a play with a message. It is a message on the plane of art; and before we can decide whether it satisfies us we must consider the play a little further as a work of art.

The play observes the unities. The compactness of a family makes this treatment feasible and natural; you have only to choose a suitable occasion for the uniting of the family. The occasion is Professor Linden's sixty-fifth birthday—the day on which he is eligible to retire from his post as Professor of History at a drab and minor University. The family is united not merely to celebrate his birthday, but to make sure that he does retire. There is every reason why he should: his substantial endowment policy has matured; his children are all (except the youngest) well launched into the world; his students are dull; he doesn't get on with his new principal; and, above all, his wife who has always hated the life of the provinces, has been longing for the day of release. Yet it is doubtful if he will go—that is the issue of the play; and it is worked out between the afternoon and evening of one day in his study in the city of Burmanley.

Burmanley. Priestley has followed the Victorian novelists in giving his city a portmanteau name which suggests several, yet can be identified with none—like his own earlier Bruddersford, Hardy's Casterbridge, or Trollope's Barchester. But here, tradition is a bad guide. We set ourselves to identify the place ("Is he thinking of Birmingham? Or is it Hanley?") just as critics used to write books on "Hardy's Wessex." Our need to identify the place distracts us from the play, and is all the more urgent because the city is not created dramatically *in* the play. We ought to be conscious of the drab life, the uninviting vistas of the city, as Ibsen makes us feel the village

and the fiord in *Little Eyolf*, or as Chekhov makes us feel the ravaged forests and the midnight thunderstorm in *The Wood Demon*. The market square with the Renaissance City Hall at one end, the passing trams, the gas-works and the Hippodrome, the endless, dim-lighted platforms of the Railway Station—these should be as real to us as Professor Linden's study: because the city is a character in the play. Priestley repeated the mistake he made in *They Came to a City*. There he failed to create for us the city of the future—the goal of our desires. Here he fails to create the city of the present—the enemy we fight. No one who has seen the care with which Jonson, Ibsen, and Chekhov named their characters will feel that the name of the city is unimportant. Every time we hear it the careful realism of the setting is destroyed as surely as if a twig had been drawn through a spider's web: there ain't no sich place as Burmanley. The Lindens are real people, but they live in a vacuum.

For ten days or so, while I worked at the play, they were almost my only company and the people I seemed to know best,

Mr. Priestley tells us in his dedication, and we believe him on the evidence of the play. Yet ought he to have conceived his family quite so tidily—the two who live by instinct (Rex and Dinah) against the two who live by principle (Marion and Jean); the Catholic Marion against the Communist Jean; Rex the “wide guy,” connoisseur of the Stock Exchange and the Black Market, against young Dinah whom the world's wickedness will never touch? And if the only people from the outside world whom we are to see are two students and the University Secretary, ought they to be so dim as Edith Westmore and Bernard Fawcett, or as much a rubber stamp as Alfred Lockhart? Even in Burmanley there is sometimes a bright student, the one in a hundred who rewards the patience and integrity of a Professor Linden with a gleam of intelligence; or one, less bright, out of the remaining ninety-nine who shows at least a consciousness of a world existing on the other side of the gas-works and the City Hall. If all that Professor Linden has been able to produce is Westmores and Fawcetts, Dr. Lidley is in the right to demand his resignation.

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We need not even see the better specimens, so long as we are assured that they exist.

These things threaten the delicate fabric of the play. For there is in it, after all, very little movement or development. We know from the opening scene between Mrs. Linden and Lockhart that the Vice-Chancellor wants Linden to go, and that Linden proposes to make a fight of it, with most of his family as Quislings in the civil war. A dramatic theme does not suffer from being simple; but if it is simple it must be massive. We must never be allowed to feel that Linden is an obstinate old man. Sir Lewis Casson's sincere and sympathetic playing may have prevented us from feeling so while we watched the play; yet in cold blood we wondered—if Linden deserted Burmanley to write the historical masterpiece which sends Dinah to sleep at the end of the play, would the world be the poorer?



## SUMMARY, BIBLIOGRAPHY, AND QUESTIONS

### Summary

No stereotyped "good beginning" can be laid down for a play. The orthodox *exposition* provides us with information about the situation and main characters through minor ones. But this information may be successfully given direct to the audience through a main character (Richard III); or we may already be familiar with the situation (Greek tragedy) and need at most a reminder; or the author may distribute his exposition piecemeal through the play (Chekhov, Pirandello); or give it through recapitulation (Ibsen); or plunge directly into the action (Andreyev).

The nature of the "middle" of the play depends also on various factors. A single plot may have one *crisis*; a double or multiple plot will usually have more; some dramatists choose themes which demand a "show-down" (big scene, *scène à faire*); others prefer a series of contrasted scenes, none of which can be said to be supremely important; drama and tragedy are more likely on the whole to demand a big scene; comedy may get its effect through changes of speed. The fourth act of a five-act play; the beginning of the third act in a three-act play; these are the points of greatest technical difficulty, after the crisis is over, when tension must be relaxed. To overcome this, playwrights often introduce a new character or bring a minor character into prominence; or develop a subsidiary theme; or change comedy into farce or tragedy into melodrama at this point in the play.

The end of a play or an act may be a "twist" or the straightforward development of the theme; a "good curtain" or the avoidance of a curtain; a rhymed couplet (Elizabethan style) followed by an epilogue (Elizabethan and Restoration) or a tableau (Victorian). Pace must usually increase at the end of the play; we cannot dally over side-issues. The ending must have appropriate strength, tone, firmness; it must convince us that it is an "end."

The tools of the playwright are: *speech* and *silence*—silence as important as speech. *Music, scenery and costume, dancing*, if and as required. *Kinds of speech*: verse and prose (lots of kinds of each); short and long speech (quite different in effect); soliloquy and aside; repetitive phrase acquiring ironic, comic, or dramatic force; imagery; narration. *Actors*, portraying *character in action* (traditional types, created character, observed character; "flat" characters and "round," characters who change and develop, those who remain set, but are exhibited in perpetually changing circumstances). *Objects*: the "planted" object to which the audience's attention is subtly directed; the object which attains symbolical importance as a portmanteau in which is packed the meaning of the play.

The common ground of comedy and tragedy: both based on incongruity. Difference between the comic and the tragic hero. Detachment of comedy. Devices of comic plot and character. High comedy, Broad

comedy, Light comedy, Farce, Nonsense, Satire, Wit. The history of the term "humour." Comedy of dialogue, character, situation.

Methods of revision, and illustrations of individual mastery: "Fingering."

### Bibliography

There are few new books to add to those listed under Parts I and II. William Archer's *Playmaking* is by far the most valuable for this section, with Elizabeth Drew's *Discovering Drama* and Una Ellis-Fermor's *The Frontiers of Drama* next in order of importance.

May I repeat that I mention only books which I have used personally? I have not attempted to make a comprehensive Bibliography; students who require such a list should consult the *Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature*, the National Book League book-list on Drama, or the catalogue of the British Drama League's Library (*The Playgoer's Library*).

### Questions

(On the plays specially studied)

(1) Do the characters in *The Way of the World* seem more "real" than those in *Our Betters*—or the opposite? Describe how they differ.

(2) Would it be possible to write the same kind of comedy about Fulham as about Mayfair? What changes would be necessary?

(3) Describe the changes (a) in the world of fashion, and (b) in the technique of prose comedy between Congreve and Maugham.

(4) If *Mourning becomes Electra* came to you without a date (like many Elizabethan plays), how would you be able to fix the date of it to within ten years?

(5) Mr. J. B. Priestley has rebuked Mr. T. S. Eliot for his slight knowledge of stagecraft. On the evidence of *The Family Reunion*, would you agree with this criticism?

(6) Are you satisfied with the end of *The Family Reunion*?

(7) Cleopatra in Shakespeare's play was originally acted by a boy. Do you think the author's conception of the part was affected by this?

(8) Dryden and Shaw have said what they think about Shakespeare. Imagine Shakespeare, in Elysium, given the opportunity to reply and say what he thinks about Dryden and Shaw.

(9) *Antony and Cleopatra* is not commonly rated with the four "great" Shakespearean tragedies. Do you think this is justified?

(10) Hofmannsthal made a modern German version of *Everyman* for the contemporary stage; it has been played regularly at the Salzburg Festival. What changes would you make if you were writing such a version? If you can, compare your suggestions with Hofmannsthal's text.

(11) If you were producing *Dr. Faustus* what would be your chief difficulties, and how would you face them?

(12) Compare *Masses and Man* with some other Expressionist play (for instance by Georg Kaiser or Elmer Rice).

(13) Discuss the "Unities" in *Every Man in His Humour*.

(14) Ben Jonson was set by his contemporaries beside Shakespeare. Does he deserve this eminence?

(15) Outline and illustrate Jonson's conception of comic character.

(16) Do you prefer *Uncle Vanya* to *The Wood Demon*?

(17) How does Chekhov suggest what is going on off-stage?

(18) Discuss allegory in *The Linden Tree*.

(19) Is *The Linden Tree* helped by its strictly realistic form? To help you to decide, rewrite a scene as if it had been written by Ernst Toller or T. S. Eliot.

(20) Rewrite a passage of *The Playboy of the Western World* in standard English. Compare your "translation" with the original.

(21) The first performances of *The Playboy of the Western World* in Ireland and America caused riots. Why?

(22) How far is *A Dream Play* autobiographical? Is it helped or hindered by this, as a play? Has the author succeeded in finding dramatic symbols for his preoccupations? Has the play a truly dramatic shape?

(23) Pirandello's *Henry IV* makes great demands of the audience in attention and intelligence. Is this reasonable? How has the author helped the audience to follow the events and philosophy of the play?

(24) What devices of farce are used in Maugham's *Home and Beauty*?

# INDEX

(Titles of plays referred to are listed under PLAYS)

## AESCHYLUS—

- an innovator, 31
- Oresteia*, 99 ff.
- Persae*, 24
- Agon, anagnorisis*, 54
- Appia, Adolphe, 35
- Archer, William, v
  - classical version of *Hamlet*, 21
  - endings, 148
  - "flat" scenery, 82 n.
  - Ibsen's drafts, 172
  - Mrs. Dane's Defence*, 14
  - "obligatory scene," 146
  - on *Richard III*, 143
- Architecture and drama, 23
- Aristotle, 53
- Ascham, Roger, 65, 70
- Audience—
  - Elizabethan, 74
  - ultimate authority, 29 ff.
- Authority (external), 24

## BEAUMARCHAIS, P. A. Caron de, 52

- Benavente, Jacinto, 87
- Bethell, S. L., 77
- Blake, William, 98, 151
- Blank verse—
  - classical origin, 69
  - function, 17, 18
- Bowra, C. M., 84, 199
- Box-set, 82
- Boy actors, 74
- Bradbrook, Miss M. C., 3, 52
- Bridie, James, 148
- Burbage, John—
  - achievement, 73
  - Richard, 38, 74, 77
  - The Theatre, 32
- Busby, O. M., 50, 63, 74 n.

## CAPEK, Karel, 154

- Censorship, 24 ff.
  - Shaw on, 28
- Chamberlain, The Lord, 26
- Chapman, George, 25
- Characterization, 21
- Chekhov, Anton—
  - Cherry Orchard, The*, 146
  - "musical structure," 23
  - Uncle Vanya*, 178 ff.

## Chorus—

- Greek plays, 54
- modern plays, 55, 154
- Comedy—
  - of Humours, 164
  - of Manners, 163 ff.
  - prestige, definitions, 56
  - Restoration, 79
- Commedia dell' arte*, 62 ff.
- Confrérie de la Passion*, 59 ff.
- Congreve, William—
  - dialogue, 165
  - views on humour, 163
  - Way of the World, The*, 30, 162, 165 ff.
- Conventions, 52
  - Elizabethan, 75
- Copeau, Jacques, 38
  - Vieux Colombier Theatre, 90
- Corneille, Pierre—
  - Le Cid*, 45
  - Unities, 71
- Corpus Christi Festival, 57
- Covent Garden Theatre, 80
- Coward, Noel—
  - Hay Fever*, 3, 164
- Cowley, Richard, 38, 74
- Craft of Comedy, The*, 159
- Craig, E. Gordon, 36
- Cremorne Gardens, 80
- Crisis in Greek drama, 56
- Custom and the playwright, 24

## DÉNOUEMENT of a play, 148

- Dialogue—
  - comedy, 21
  - kinds of prose dialogue, 19-20
  - period speech and dialect, 13
  - verse or prose, 16
- Dixon, R. W., 10
- Dogberry and Verges, 38, 74
- Drury Lane Theatre, 80
- Dryden, John, v
  - All for Love*, 110, 117 ff.
  - views of French drama, 69
- Ducis, 21
- Dumas, Alexandre (fils), 146
- ELIOT, T. S., 17, 22
  - Family Reunion, The*, 103 ff.
- Elizabethan playhouses, 32-3
- Ellis-Fermor, Una, 55, 98

*Epiphany*, 54  
*Episode*, in Greek drama, 54  
 Euripides—  
   innovations, 77  
   *Trojan Women*, 142  
   use of the chorus, 55  
 Expressionism, 88

"FAMILY" plays, 204  
 Fielding, Henry—  
   *Great Mogul* company, 27  
   retirement, 28  
   *Tom Jones*, 77  
 Fingering, 16, 186 ff.  
 Flaubert, Gustave, 20  
 Flecker, James Elroy, 19  
 Fool in the theatre, 49, 62  
 Forster, E. M., 150

GARRICK, David—  
   *Hamlet*, 77  
   *Macbeth*, 81  
   style, 78  
*Giselle*, 82  
 Gorki, Maxim, 83  
 Granville-Barker, Harley, vi  
   influence on production, 32  
   retirement, 49  
 Greek Theatre, The, 54  
 Grein, J. T., 86  
 Grimald, Nicholas, 70

HARDY, Alexandre, 60, 71  
 Hare, Robertson, 163  
 Harrison, Jane, 30  
 Hero—  
   comic, 161  
   tragic, 71, 160  
 Heroic Couplet in the theatre, v, 17  
 Hopkins, Gerard Manley, 10  
*Hubris*, in Greek drama, 54

IBSEN, Henrik—  
   architectural nature of drama, 23  
   *Hedda Gabler*, 145, 156  
   *Peer Gynt* and *Hedda Gabler*, 4-6  
   training, 87  
   work at Bergen, 84  
 "Illegitimate" theatres, 27  
 Incorporated Stage Society, 86  
 Irish Literary Theatre, 84

JERROLD, Douglas, 170  
 Jones, Henry Arthur, 12, 14-15, 87  
 Jonson, Ben—  
   imprisonment, 25  
   *Discoveries*, 175  
   views on comedy, 56  
   *Volpone*, 158,

KEAN, Charles, 81  
 Keats, John, 159  
 Kemp, Will, 38, 74  
 Kenney, Horace, 160  
 Kyd, Thomas—  
   blank verse, 17  
   *Hamlet*, 8

LAW and the playwright, 25  
 "Lazzi," 64  
 Lighting—  
    Garrick's experiments, 34  
   modern, 34-5, 80  
 Lillo, George, 79  
 Louthembourg, G. de, 34  
 Lowin, John, 74  
 Lytton, Lord, 83

MACREADY, W. C., 34  
 Madame Tussaud's Waxworks, 80  
 Maddermarket Theatre, Norwich, 90  
 Mairer, P., 60, 71  
 Marlowe, Christopher, vi  
   *Dr. Faustus*, 136 ff., 159  
 Masque, the Jacobean, 80  
 Master of the Revels, 25  
 Maugham, W. Somerset—  
   *Home and Beauty*, 169  
   *Our Betters*, 3, 164, 165 ff.  
 Medwall, Henry, 61  
 Meyerhold, V., 38  
 Miracle plays, 57 ff.  
 Molière, J. B. Poquelin de—  
   influence of Italian Comedy, 64  
   *Les Précieuses Ridicules*, 46  
 Monck, Nugent, 90  
 Morality plays, 60 ff.  
 Mulcaster, Richard, 66  
 Murray, Gilbert, 52, 141  
 Music and drama compared, 23

NARRATIVE in dramatic construction, 5  
 "Naturalism" in the theatre, 77 ff.  
 North, Sir Thomas, 112  
 Novel and play compared, 17  
 Novels adapted to the stage, 14

O'CASEY, Sean—  
   *Juno and the Paycock*, 21, 147  
   *Red Roses for Me*, 4  
   *Star Turns Red, The*, 4  
   *Within the Gates*, 4  
 O'Neill, Eugene—  
   master of silence, 155  
   *Mourning becomes Electra*, 100  
   *Strange Interlude*, 151  
   style, 20

"PAGEANTS" in Miracle plays, 57

Pantomime in Goldoni, Galsworthy,  
 Saroyan, 155  
 Patents granted by Charles II, 27  
 Pater, Walter, 23  
 Pathos in Greek drama, 54, 160  
 Peripeteia—  
   Greek drama, 54  
   *Playboy of the Western World, The*, 157,  
     196  
 Phelps, Samuel, 81  
 Pinero, Sir A. W., 87, 145  
 Pirandello, Luigi, vi, 146, 158  
 Planché, J. B., 81  
 Plautus, Titus Maccius, 45, 66, 70 n.  
 Plays (casual references omitted)—  
   *Agamemnon* (Aeschylus), 99  
   *A Hundred Years Old* (S. and J.  
     Quintero), 145  
   *All for Love* (Dryden), 117 ff.  
   *Antony and Cleopatra* (Shakespeare),  
     111 ff., 142, 157  
   *Aristocrats* (Pogodin), 89  
   *Beautiful People, The* (Saroyan), 165  
   *Beggar's Opera, The* (Gay), 152, 154  
   *Cæsar and Cleopatra* (Shaw), 124 ff.  
   *Cherry Orchard, The* (Chekhov), 146  
   *Choephoraæ, The* (Aeschylus), 99  
   *Dangerous Corner* (Priestley), 3  
   *Doctor Faustus* (Marlowe), 136 ff.  
   *Doctor's Dilemma, The* (Shaw), 145  
   *Dog beneath the Skin, The* (Auden and  
     Isherwood), 154  
   *Dream Play, The* (Strindberg), 197 ff.  
   *Everyman* (Anon), 130 ff. 154  
   *Every Man in His Humour* (Jonson), 172  
   *Family Reunion, The* (Eliot), 103 ff.  
   *French without Tears* (Rattigan), 3  
   *Hamlet* (Shakespeare), 8, 21  
   *Hassan* (Flecker), 19  
   *Hedda Gabler* (Ibsen), 4 ff., 145-6  
   *Henry IV* (Pirandello), 146, 158,  
     187 ff.  
   *Henry IV, Part 1* (Shakespeare), 153  
   *Henry IV, Part 2* (Shakespeare), 38  
   *Henry V* (Shakespeare), 74  
   *Home and Beauty* (Maugham), 169  
   *Importance of Being Earnest, The*  
     (Wilde), 21  
   *Insect Play, The* (Capek), 154  
   *Johnson over Jordan* (Priestley), 4  
   *Juno and the Paycock* (O'Casey), 21, 147  
   *King Lear* (Shakespeare), 34, 76  
   *Knight of the Burning Pestle, The*  
     (Beaumont and Fletcher), 154  
   *Linden Tree, The* (Priestley), 19-20,  
     204 ff.  
   *Long Mirror, The* (Priestley), 90, 145  
   *Lower Depths, The* (Gorki), 83

Plays—(contd.)

*Masses and Man* (Toller), 131 ff.  
*Midsummer Night's Dream* (Shake-  
 speare), 162  
*More, The Boke of Sir Thomas* (anon), 26  
*Mourning Becomes Electra* (O'Neill),  
 100 ff., 157  
*Mrs. Dane's Defence* (H. A. Jones), 14  
*Oedipus Rex* (Sophocles), 142  
*On Approval* (Lonsdale), 157  
*Othello* (Shakespeare), 6  
*Our Betters* (Maugham), 161, 165 ff.  
*Our Town* (Wilder), 89, 154  
*Peer Gynt* (Ibsen), 4-6  
*Pericles* (Shakespeare), 81  
*Pilgrimage to Parnassus, The* (anon), 74  
*Playboy of the Western World, The*  
 (Synge), 192 ff.  
*Power of Darkness, The* (Tolstoy), 83  
*Promos and Cassandra* (Whetstone), 75  
*Ralph Roister Doister* (Udall), 66  
*Red Roses for Me* (O'Casey), 4  
*Richard II* (Shakespeare), 26, 81  
*Road to Ruin, The* (Holcroft), 161  
*Second Mrs. Tanqueray, The* (Pinero),  
 145  
*Star Turns Red, The* (O'Casey), 4  
*Strange Interlude* (O'Neill), 151  
*Taming of the Shrew, The* (Shake-  
 speare), 154  
*Tempest, The* (Shakespeare), 69  
*They Came to a City* (Priestley), 4  
*Time of Your Life, The* (Saroyan),  
 19-20, 91, 155  
*Trojan Women, The* (Euripides), 142  
*Twelfth Night* (Shakespeare), 147  
*Uncle Vanya* (Chekhov), 178 ff.  
*Volpone* (Jonson), 153  
*Way of the World, The* (Congreve),  
 30, 162  
*Winslow Boy, The* (Rattigan), 12, 15  
*Within the Gates* (O'Casey), 4  
*Wood Demon, The* (Chekhov), 162,  
 179 ff.

Plot—

dramatic construction, 5 ff.  
 invented or stolen, 9  
 musical or architectural, 23  
 single or multiple, 16  
 "wooden work," 11

Plutarch, 112 ff.

Poetry, 18

Priestley, J. B.—

*Dangerous Corner*, 3  
*Johnson over Jordan*, 4  
*Linden Tree, The*, 19-20, 204  
*Long Mirror, The*, 90, 145  
*They Came to a City*, 4

Prologue, in Greek drama, 54, 142  
 Proscenium, introduction of, 33, 67, 80

RACINE, Jean, 45  
 Rastell, William, 61  
 Rattigan, Terence—  
     *French Without Tears*, 3  
     use of the Archer-Shee case, 15  
     views on plot, 12  
 "Realism" in the theatre, 77 ff.  
 "Revenge," Elizabethan drama of, 8  
 Rhetoric, 18, 21  
 Robertson, Madge, 87  
 Robertson, Tom, 85, 87  
 Royal Institution, 80

SADLER's Wells Theatre, 80  
 Saroyan, William—  
     *Beautiful People, The*, 165  
     opinion on experiment, 91  
     *Time of Your Life, The*, 19-20, 91, 155  
 Scaramouche, 64  
 Seneca (Roman playwright), 45, 66  
 "Sentences" (*Sententiæ*) in Elizabethan plays, 74

Shakespeare, William—  
     *Antony and Cleopatra*, 111 ff., 142  
     attitude to sources, 13  
     *Hamlet*, 8, 21  
     *Henry IV, Part 1*, 153  
     *Henry IV, Part 2*, 38  
     *Henry V*, 74  
     *King Lear*, 34, 76  
     *Midsummer Night's Dream*, 162  
     *Othello*, 6  
     *Pericles*, 81  
     *Richard II*, 26, 81  
     *Richard III*, 143  
     *Sir Thomas More*, 26  
     style, 158  
     *Taming of the Shrew*, 154  
     *Tempest, The*, 69  
     *Twelfth Night*, 147

Shaw, George Bernard—  
     *Cæsar and Cleopatra*, 124 ff.  
     *Comedy of Humors*, 164  
     *Doctor's Dilemma*, 145  
     *Three Plays for Puritans*, 110  
     views on censorship, 28  
     views on plot, 11

Siddons, Mrs. Sarah, 159  
 Sidney, Sir Philip, 68  
 Sinkler, John, 38  
 Sophocles—  
     *Oedipus Rex*, 142  
     use of chorus, 55

Sprat, Bishop, 18  
 St. Denis, Michel, 38  
 Stanfield, Clarkson, 35  
 Stanislavski, Constantin—  
     company, 38, 83  
     Moscow Art Theatre, 86  
*Stichomythia*—  
     Greek drama, 55  
     Shakespeare, 142  
 Strindberg, A., 197 ff.  
 Style—  
     choice of, 4  
     Flaubert, 20  
     many actors or few, etc., 16  
 Sunday Play-Producing Societies, 27  
 Symbolism, 197 ff.  
 Synge, J. M.—  
     *Riders to the Sea*, 19

TAIROV, 38  
 Terence, 45, 66  
 "Textor," 68  
 Theatre, kinds of building, 31  
 Toller, Ernst—  
     *Masses and Man*, 131 ff.  
 Tolstoy, Count Leo, 83  
 Tragedy, fate of verse, 79  
 Trilogy, in Greek drama, 54  
 Trollope, Frances, 9  
 Tropes, 57

UDALL, Nicolas, 66  
*Uncle Remus*, 75  
 Unities—  
     Ben Jonson, 174-5  
     French, 71 ff.  
     modern stage, 84  
     Pirandello, 192  
     Priestley, 205  
     Synge, 195-6  
     The Three, 4, 67  
 Ustinov, Peter, 148

VANBRUGH, Sir John, 50  
 Vauxhall Gardens, 80  
 Verse in modern plays, 16-18  
 Vieux Colombier Theatre, 90  
 Voltaire, F. M. Arouet de, 8

WELCH, James, 159  
 Wever, R., 61  
 Wilde, Oscar—  
     action in, 156  
     *Importance of Being Earnest, The*, 21  
     literary verdict on his plays, 50  
 Wilder, Thornton, 89  
 Wyld's Model of the Globe, 81

