

DRAMA



THE HEATH INTRODUCTION TO
 DRAMA

Third Edition

with a Preface on Drama and Introductory Notes by

Jordan Y. Miller

University of Rhode Island

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 FOREWORD

As in the past, the *Preface—On Drama*, introductory notes, and *Select Bibliography* are the work of Jordan Y. Miller. In this third edition Professor Miller has also written extensive explanatory footnotes for one of the new plays, Congreve's *The Way of the World*. Also new are Brecht's *The Good Woman of Setzuan* and Shaw's complete *Preface to Major Barbara*.

In response to many requests, reference line numbers have been added to *Oedipus Rex*, *Lysistrata*, *Hamlet*, and *The Misanthrope*. For this and other helpful suggestions, we are grateful to many devoted users of *The Heath Introduction to Drama*. Special thanks are owed the following teachers for their questionnaire responses: Janice Anderson, Scott Community College; Merle Fifield, Ball State University; Thomas Gay, Youngstown State University; Thomas Holbrook, Youngstown State University; James Hunt, University of Illinois; Maude M. Jennings, Ball State University; William Lindblad, Ball State University; and T. Patrick Lynch, S.J., St. Peter's College.

“And now to patient judgments we appeal”

H. HOLTON JOHNSON, SENIOR EDITOR

D. C. Heath and Company

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PREFACE—ON DRAMA

Concerning the Drama, the Theatre, and the Play

To Perform Is to Entertain

Ever since Og returned to the cave and, for the benefit of Zog and his friends, elaborated on the size of the saber-tooth tiger that got away, the human animal has delighted in putting on a show. While we may not possess Og's complete script, we do know from such surviving evidence as Europe's cave paintings and various artifacts of primitive masks, wigs, and costumes that men and women since prehistory have possessed a keen sense of the beauties and emotional stimulation of man and beast in motion. The essence of theatre has been with us in tribal dance or religious ecstasy from far back in human time, whether we have shaken the rattle and sung the songs ourselves, or have witnessed the proceedings in awed fear or happy delight in the give and take which is the fundamental nature of the art.

Everything that follows in this volume is a direct descendant of the show that Og probably put on for Zog. The fact that, in a comparative instant of history, we have developed the ability to put it all down in the scratchings we call written language and have come to possess thereby what we call a "body of dramatic literature" does

not alter the basic primitive formula. Every major culture has, at one time or another, possessed a highly developed tradition of theatre. The survival of this tradition in the form of the written word, in considerable quantity in Western culture, less so in others, has provided unique insights into those cultures available in no other form of art.

The reading of "dramatic literature" is a dismally poor alternative to the theatrical experience itself. There is no way to substitute for the interrelationship that exists between those who *do* and those who *watch*. The only reason Og told Zog about that tiger was to create a reaction in his listener that he hoped would approach his own emotion. The drama, that is, the story, be it literal truth or fantastic embellishment as Og may have related it, simultaneously demands that the interpreter bring it to life as theatre and that the audience react appreciatively. In that manner the full impact of the art has been manifested. But for all practical purposes we have no alternative to reading the written words, strictly second best as that choice may be. Doing so can be made most rewarding by a constant awareness of the Og-Zog relationship. Every written piece in this book was designed first and foremost for *performance*.

Furthermore, every work contained here is a great piece of *entertainment*. Whatever sophisticated social or religious theme, whatever erudite subject, propagandistic motive, or moral didacticism that may be apparent in any single play does not alter the fact that to witness a theatrical performance in a Greek amphitheatre holding 15,000 spectators or in a tiny converted night club with room for fewer than 200 is to be entertained. This does not imply mere passing amusement, an aspect of theatre valid enough in its own right. It does, however, imply that we who watch expect to experience some form of emotional pleasure. We can be excited, mystified, intrigued, challenged, frightened, or horrified, and we can be driven to tears or laughter, concurrently, consecutively, or entirely independently, but one thing is sure: we will have enjoyed the experience that has been offered to us, for we have, in short, been entertained.

How It Is Said

The drama, the theatre, and the play are so closely related in their broad connotations as to be, on occasion, interchangeable. For our purposes here, however, they will be separately identified in order to establish a sharper distinction among their meanings. Each element demands a different appreciation, and each performs a distinct

function. We shall restrict the term *drama* to the written form, the creation of the *dramatist*,¹ who starts on square one with a clean sheet of paper and typewriter—or these days probably word processor—at the ready. But unlike the creative artistry of other writers, it does not end on the paper. Once the pages are filled, the novelist, the poet, or the essayist has, to all intents and purposes, concluded his effort. The dramatist, on the other hand, has just begun his ordeal. Before it's all over there looms ahead the intervention of all elements of *theatre* and the transformation of the entire effort into the production of the *play*. The trip will not be smooth.

Regardless of the eventual metamorphosis in the theatre, what appears in performance is essentially the artistic creation of the dramatist, who comes up with the *idea* in the first place. The source of the idea may be religion and its faith and morals, whence all Western drama originated, or it may be a sociological problem, a philosophical question, a political viewpoint, or, indeed, almost anything that strikes the artist's fancy. Closely related to idea is *theme*, the fabric that holds the idea together. Idea and theme can sometimes be very close to the same thing, but generally speaking the development of an idea is planned along specific thematic lines such as the family, the state, and various human relationships, or the more abstract concepts of cowardice and heroism, good and evil, right and wrong.

The *type* of the drama remains the prerogative of the dramatist, and this choice now begins to place him in a somewhat different creative area from other writers. For the novelist or short story writer there are choices as well, whether to be serious or comic, to create pure fiction, re-create history, and so on. The poet, too, chooses whether to write a lyric, a sonnet, a narrative epic, or something in between. But the dramatist is creating for that special medium, the theatre, and while he is not necessarily prevented from developing along any lines he may wish, he is restrained by certain limitations of the medium and its long traditions which, as we shall see, convey specialized artistic meaning to such terms as tragedy or comedy and which, of course, assume a number of physical restrictions. Then, when the dramatist makes his choice of *style*, the manner in which his creation is to be staged, he finds himself with far more problems than his other literary colleagues. While they, of course, may ma-

¹ If you prefer the term *playwright*—maker of plays—well and good, although we're going to regard the *play* as the entire finished product put on before an audience.

nipulate their language to suggest anything from literal transcription of contemporary speech to the most imaginative stream-of-consciousness, or may choose to describe the most vivid photographic detail or expand into the realms of utter fantasy, the dramatist must conceive of his style far beyond the printed page and into the live and visible arena of the stage where not only what is said but how it is delivered to and visualized by the audience in both sight and sound become primary considerations. As in the choice of *type*, so in the choice of *style* the dramatist must face the realities of his medium and be prepared to function within the strict limitations it presents.

What Is to Be Said

As Aristotle pointed out some 2300 years ago in writing that first great piece of dramatic criticism, *The Poetics*, in the fourth century B.C., the most important element of tragedy (to him all serious drama was tragedy) is the *fable*, or more colloquially, the *story*. Some people call it plot, but whatever you want to call it there can be little argument with Aristotle that what goes on and the way it happens is the single most important consideration for the dramatist in putting across his idea and his theme. This fable, says Aristotle, has to have a beginning, a middle, and an end. Ridiculously self-evident as this statement may seem, Aristotle is emphasizing a basic dramatic tenet which insists that the dramatist begin his creation at a clearly defined point, proceed in a logical fashion to develop it, and arrive at a conclusion which follows equally logically upon what has happened. The many convolutions into which a novelist may enter in the course of telling his tale in whatever length he pleases are not the privilege of the dramatist, upon whom is imposed an absolute limit that other literary artists never have to worry about: *time*.

The conventional Western dramatist, following the traditions that have existed since the ancient Greeks, must hold the telling of his story to the constraints of a very few hours of time upon the stage. Further, within that time, he must do it all at once. Those who watch cannot put his story down, pick it up tomorrow, and go back to Chapter One to remind themselves of what has happened. Moreover, there is a limit to the physical endurance of the audience who must sit or stand, or even crouch, within that entire length of time. The dramatist places heavy demands of concentration upon his audience, but it, in turn, puts strict demands on him. If he must repeat too much to make a point, he will quickly bore and lose the audience. If he leaps too many gaps and assumes an ability to compre-

hend beyond normal capacity, he will leave his audience muddled, confused, and disappointed. Within the strict confines of time the dramatist must arrive at what he has to say in a linear progression that keeps his audience constantly with him, and that's all that Aristotle was really saying.

Who Says It

The consideration which comes next, regarded as second in importance by Aristotle as well, is *character*. It is interesting that a more literal translation of the word is *indicant*—the one who indicates what is going on. Who relates the story? Who goes through the action? The limitations placed upon the dramatist continue to be unique in literature, for he must carefully consider not only the restrictions of physical space in which his characters move but also the ever-present time factor. The dramatist must be careful not to clutter the stage with crowds and complicated action which can become an impossible logistics problem. The alarums and excursions of Shakespeare's battle scenes, properly handled, are far more effective with a handful of participants than any try at verisimilitude could ever be. But probably more important to the dramatist is how many principal characters, the ones on whom the audience's interest centers, can be accommodated within the time allotted for proper identification and establishment of relationships.

Unlike the novelist, who can take any amount of time to inform his solitary reader about who is who (plus that constant advantage of checking Chapter One), the dramatist must do everything relatively quickly, and he must do it clearly. The audience left at final curtain trying to figure out who all those people were and what they were doing will depart unsatisfied, and the play will fail. Everyone knows from reading Shakespeare how closely one must keep track of the many dukes, lords, and ladies who come and go with such rapidity, but one also notices that it doesn't take Shakespeare long to make clear who's getting the focus of attention. The dramatist does have one distinct advantage over the novelist, for he has the privilege of instant visibility. Once a character has made his entrance and established who or what he is, he is going to be recognized promptly the next time around.

Because of the visual element and the fact that his story is being told by live bodies, moving and speaking, the dramatist must maintain a constant awareness of the physical appearance and capabilities of his characters. How will they look together? What variations are desirable and possible? Is there need for some kind of character-

istic that costume or makeup can't convey, such as a dwarf or a very young child? Will the character need to fly, like Peter Pan? Will there perhaps be an animal, like Harvey, the giant rabbit, who *never* appears,² or like the birds in Aristophanes' ancient Greek comedy of that name, who do? Within the closely limited time will the characters age? or get younger? or become something else, in the frog-into-prince or Beauty-and-the-Beast tradition? Will the audience accept it, or be turned off? The novelist can do anything he wants in this regard, but the dramatist must plan with extreme care what every single character, living and breathing on a stage, will be, whether human, divine, supernatural, or four-legged.

The Method of Saying It

Everything now comes down to the end-all and be-all of what we are pursuing in the study of dramatic literature, the *dialogue*. Aristotle says that what is said (*thought*) and how it is said (*diction*) are next in importance after character, and they obviously combine in what we call dialogue. Without it, we would have nothing, and dramatic literature would not exist.

Dialogue isn't, literally, everything, for there are exceedingly fine plays in our literature in which the importance of theme, plot, or character transcend pedestrian writing. The total artistic creation, however, does rely ultimately on the strength of the dialogue which, even when less than grand, must carry everything along. The dramatist who creates it must have that innate, undefinable consciousness of what will work on stage; he must have a *sense of theatre* or he will be in trouble. This sense is virtually impossible to define, and many a writer of successful fiction has found he does not have it. Such was the case of the American writer, Henry James, one of the great novelists of all time, who was fascinated by the theatre and tried play after play, only to fail so badly as to be hooted off the stage. He did not realize that he possessed no sense of theatre in relating his story through dialogue alone. Instead of holding his audience, as he held his readers, he succeeded only in being boring, turgid, and deadily dull. Ironically, many of the stories he wrote, placed in the hands of good dramatists, became critical successes and popular theatre pieces.

² In the very early tryout days of Mary Chase's phenomenally successful farce in 1944 *Harvey*, who gave the play its title, was fully visible, but an actor in a six-foot rabbit suit could not make the fantasy work and the idea was dropped.

The dramatist must be aware of what he is doing and how he is doing it through the single medium of making his characters speak all the time. From opening curtain to final exit everything that goes on must be revealed through what people say to each other. During some periods of theatre history audiences relied on dialogue to convey almost everything, including the scenery and the time of day, as when Horatio in the opening of *Hamlet* tells the spectators, standing in broad daylight, that dawn is breaking. But more importantly, dialogue exists as the only means by which characters may develop and establish relationships. In all manner of speeches from long poetic soliloquies to contemporary gutter language, the only way we can learn what characters think of themselves and each other is the way they talk.

Dialogue presents a paradox in the theatre. Because it keeps up incessantly throughout the drama, it becomes essentially unreal. On the other hand, even in blank verse or heroic couplets, the dialogue must still *appear* real. The fact that nobody really talks that way is totally irrelevant. It must *seem* that they talk that way, no matter how they say it. The quality of the dialogue, the words that the dramatist puts on paper for his characters to say and for us to read, is what makes the difference between the merely *literate* drama and true *dramatic literature*. All drama is, of course, *literate*, but it is the exceptional drama that survives as great literature. The Greeks and the Elizabethans wrote mostly in verse, and today we write almost entirely in prose (which at times can be highly poetic), but however it is written, effective dialogue must have a sense of the rhythms and patterns of speech that are appropriate to the speaker and the particular dramatic situation in which he is placed. Characters in the great dramas do not just talk; they speak a highly *literate* dramatic dialogue. It holds the audience, it tells the story, it reveals the character, and it exposes the theme and idea. The quality of what everybody says to everybody else is what finally comes through as the essence of great dramatic literature.

Where It Is Said

Unless, in the manner of Browning or Shelley or one or two others, the dramatist wants to end it all here and publish a "closet" drama, meant only to be read, there is still a long road before him. The drama, as written, contains within it the dramatic situations conceived by the dramatist, including everything we've talked about so far, but however brilliant the concept it will go nowhere until it is put in motion. What happens from here on out is *theatre*, the visual and the audible within the three-dimensional physical structure that holds the performance. Now the time arrives when the dramatist needs every bit of faith in

himself, because he will witness the awful truth of what takes place when his vision comes to life. Although it may please and delight, the far greater chance is for shock and dismay, and there is probably no dramatist who ever lived who at one time or another has not suffered the horrifying trauma of one who witnesses the sacrificial slaughter of a loved one. There were, at one time, those who wrote, produced, and acted, and even owned the theatre together with the company that played in it, so they could hold the drama they created reasonably close to their initial concepts. In the contemporary theatre this kind of impresario has all but disappeared, and a great army of individuals charged with putting on the production subject the dramatist's work to their wills and their skills in order to place it in front of the audience for which it was originally designed.

We are now in the realm of *spectacle*, the theatrical consideration which Aristotle places far down the list, for he was correctly aware, even in his time, that the dramatist who focussed primarily on the showy aspects was bound to write inferior pieces. Moreover, the decor, including setting and costumes, the whole picture which we lump together with lighting under the term *mise-en-scène*, is meant not to dominate the drama but to serve it.

The prime mover among the many who will eventually place their stamp upon the drama in the playhouse, producing that "spectacle," is the *director*. He alone has the final say on what appears. Unheard of until this century, the director has achieved such prominence in the modern theatre that he may receive billing and pay equal to, and perhaps even above, the dramatist or the star. The final production is his. He may succeed in driving the audience out of the theatre, the play out the window, and the dramatist off the roof by the time it is all over, but what he says goes. Under his guidance all others function. In order to provide the appropriate area in which the characters move, he approves the setting, conceived by the scene designer, who can be a highly accomplished professional artist in his own right, and built by the stage technician and his crew. So that everybody is fully visible (or invisible, if so demanded), the director must approve the lighting, designed and supervised by another skilled artist whose conceptions are carried out by the electrician and *his* crew. Costumes, created by yet another artist (who can be and frequently is the scene designer as well), and constructed by still another crew, must also receive the director's approval. And so with sound or any other special effects. Everybody and everything must function flawlessly together, all under the eye and ear of the director.

In addition to all those aspects of the spectacle, there happens to

be a very important element that remains the director's primary responsibility and *raison d'être*. He must choose the actors, and he must move them around the stage to project as best he can everything that the dramatist has to say. If the writer is living and available, the director may consult him or even have him present from day one to opening night. More than one dramatist has been forced to watch the characters he created, interpreted by the actors chosen by and under the guidance of the director, become something quite apart from his first conception. Lighting, setting, sound, even costumes, are one thing, but the living and thinking actors, under a living and thinking director, observed by the living and thinking dramatist who thought everything up can be quite another. If the writer witnesses precisely what he had in mind, he's lucky. If he runs screaming into the street, denying all, he isn't. It's all a part of the game of theatre, and the dramatist knows, whatever the pleasures and pains, that he must play it if he is to survive at all.

Who Hears It Said

Unlike all other art forms, the drama demands a very special participant for its full effect and enjoyment: the *audience*. It is the group of people out front which finally turns everything that has been accomplished up to now into the mutual experience of the *play*. No artist outside the theatre is concerned with pleasing numbers of people simultaneously. Outside of the theatre the admiration of a work of art is a very personal thing, experienced on a one-to-one basis. The painter, the composer, or almost any artist you can name, other than the dramatist, conceives of his audience, broad-based and numerous as he may hope for, as encountering and reacting to his work as a single individual, unrelated to the crowd around him. To enjoy a great symphony or to admire the beauties of the graceful intricacies of ballet does not depend upon whether or not others are watching at the same time. In no other art form is there anything comparable to the instantaneous and continuing action and reaction between the performers and the spectators who form a unit, a living entity, that reacts entirely independently from the separate psyches which make up the individual human components. The sense of mass participation in spectator sports, where the individual identity becomes melded into and altered by the "mob" psychology, is well known, but in art only the theatre expects and receives that same participation.

The psychology of the theatre, functioning on this basis of simultaneous mass experience, does not differentiate among the sizes of