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TYPES OF DRAMA

Plays and Essays

Fourth Edition



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SYLVAN BARNET

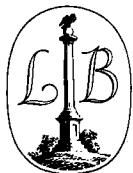
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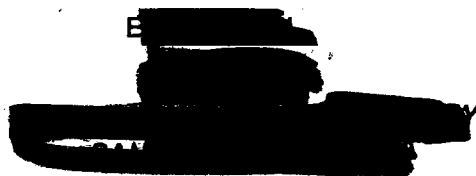
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PREFACE

In this edition of *Types of Drama* we have added five plays: Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Bernard Shaw's *Arms and the Man*, Susan Glaspell's *Trifles*, Athol Fugard's "MASTER HAROLD" . . . and the boys, and Marsha Norman's *'night, Mother*. We have also added a short essay by Eric Bentley as well as questions on each play. From the previous edition we have retained those plays and essays that instructors valued most highly, and we have also retained our commentaries on the plays, Peter Arnott's "The Script and the Stage" (which gives the reader an idea of how a director turns a script into a performance), and an essay of our own, "Writing about Drama," which — with the other editorial apparatus — helps students to write their own essays in courses. We have added material about writing a review of a performance and have included a sample review by a student.

The *plays*, apart from the first (*A Doll's House*, used to introduce students to "The Language of Drama"), are arranged chronologically within the categories of tragedy, comedy, and tragicomedy. They cover a range of years and types, but in no case were they chosen only to represent a period or a type. All were chosen because of their dramatic value. Those not written in English are represented in the best modern translations.

The *commentaries* are relatively short. They are not attempts to explicate the plays, but we think they contain some useful and relevant points that will also be helpful with other plays. For example, the commentary on *A Midsummer Night's Dream* includes comments on two traditions of comedy, "critical" comedy and "romantic" comedy, but most of this material is relevant to other plays in the book. Similarly, the discussion of pathos in the commentary on *Death of a Salesman* goes beyond the play in question. But even those of the commentaries that are sharply focused on a given play do not seek to utter the last word. On the contrary, they seek to provide material that will stimulate discussion in class or that may be the topic of a writing assignment. The questions that conclude each commentary are, of course, similarly designed. We also include, at the beginning of the book, a general introduction to basic concepts and critical terminology, and a brief analysis of the dramaturgy of

the first play, *A Doll's House*. Because the second play, Susan Glaspell's *Trifles*, is short and relatively uncomplicated, students can easily apply to it the critical techniques in the preceding discussion of *A Doll's House*.

The *essays* are not analyses of particular plays, though of course they do include some specific discussions; they are fairly general, and therefore any of the essays on tragedy, for example, can be profitably read in conjunction with any of the tragedies.

The *glossary* is a dictionary of two hundred basic critical and historical terms that are likely to come up in an introductory course. Some of these terms are discussed at length in the commentaries, but they are given again in the glossary itself.

Our ideas about drama have been shaped by many playwrights and many critics. Doubtless we are not aware of all the influences upon us, but we know we are much indebted to Gerald Else, Northrop Frye, Helen Gardner, Richmond Lattimore, Konrad Lorenz, Maynard Mack, D. H. Monroe, Reinhold Niebuhr, and L. J. Potts. If other critics find they have contributed to this book, we hope that they will be as charitable as lovers in a comedy, and will accept our apologies and our thanks.

We have been fortunate in getting permission to print important modern plays and distinguished modern translations of older plays, and we are grateful to the authors, translators, and publishers who have cooperated. Many teachers have given advice that helped us prepare this new edition: B. Blackmon, David J. Burt, Patrick Camel, Franklin Case, S. Cooter, Don Richard Cox, Joel Dailey, R. Darhan, Michael Endy, Leona M. Fisher, Roy S. Fluhrer, Charles Gaharan, Leslie Hinderyckx, Carolyn Hollman, C. P. Huggins, Jr., Jorge A. Hurta, James J. Kirachki, Allan Lefcowitz, Kevin M. Lynch, Charles E. Majure, Thomas E. Martinez, Vince Martonis, John P. Mastroni, Norman McMillan, Jasper Neel, Willem O'Reilly, P. T. Ostrow, Sarah Palmer, Daniel D. Peterson, Catherine M. Phelan, Mary Rhetten, Jodine Ryan, D. G. Schuder, J. G. Severns, Susan Snell, Arlene Stiebel, G. Swetman, Virginia Vart, Warren Wedin, Robert E. Wilkinson, and Paul Wood.

We are especially indebted to Jeanne Newlin of the Harvard Theatre Collection, Athan Anagnostopoulos, Arthur Friedman, and Seymour Simches for assistance in finding photographs. Oscar Brockett and Harry Ritchie generously answered queries, and Marcia Stubbs provided many helpful suggestions. Our thanks also go to David Giele, Carolyn Potts, Virginia Pye, Billie Ingram, and Elizabeth Schaaf of Little, Brown, who never let us get away with anything.

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DOCTOR FAUSTUS	_____	_____	_____	_____
THE TRAGEDY OF KING LEAR	_____	_____	_____	_____
RIDERS TO THE SEA	_____	_____	_____	_____
DEATH OF A SALESMAN	_____	_____	_____	_____
DUTCHMAN	_____	_____	_____	_____
EQUUS	_____	_____	_____	_____
LYSISTRATA	_____	_____	_____	_____
A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM	_____	_____	_____	_____
THE MISANTHROPE	_____	_____	_____	_____
THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST	_____	_____	_____	_____
ARMS AND THE MAN	_____	_____	_____	_____
THE CHERRY ORCHARD	_____	_____	_____	_____
SIX CHARACTERS IN SEARCH OF AN AUTHOR	_____	_____	_____	_____
WILD STRAWBERRIES	_____	_____	_____	_____
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THE DUMB WAITER	_____	_____	_____	_____
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'NIGHT, MOTHER	_____	_____	_____	_____

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THE NATURE OF DRAMA

1. Tragedy and Comedy

Whimsical assertions that all of us are Platonists or Aristotelians, or liberals or conservatives (“Nature wisely does contrive / That every boy and every gal / That’s born into the world alive / Is either a little Liberal / Or else a little Conservative”) reveal a tendency to divide things into two. Two is about right: peace and war, man and woman, day and night, life and death. There may be middle cases; there is the cold war, and Edmund Burke suggested that no one can point to the precise moment that divides day from night — but Burke also suggested that everyone can make the useful distinction between day and night. The distinction between comedy and tragedy may not always be easy to make, but until the twentieth century it was usually clear enough. *Hamlet*, which in Horatio’s words is concerned with “woe or wonder,” is a tragedy; *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, which in Puck’s words is concerned with things that pleasingly “befall preposterously,” is a comedy. The best plays of our century, however, are another thing, and discussion of these plays — somewhat desperately called tragicomedy — will be postponed until the end of this introduction.

What befalls — preposterous or not — is the *action of the play*. The gestures on the stage are, of course, “actions,” but they are not the action of the play in the sense of Aristotle’s use of *praxis* or “action” in *The Poetics*, a fragmentary treatise of the fourth century B.C. that remains the starting point for most discussions of drama. For Aristotle, drama is the imitation (i.e., representation, re-presentation, re-creation) by impersonators, of an action. In tragedy the action is serious and important, something that matters, done by people who count (e.g., King Oedipus’ discovery that he has killed his father and married his mother); in comedy (for Aristotle), the action is done by unimportant laughable people who make mistakes that do not cause us pain. Commonly the tragic action is a man’s perception of a great mistake he has made; he suffers intensely and perhaps dies, having exhausted all the possibilities of his life. The comic action often is the exposure of folly and the renewal rather than the exhaustion of human nature. Crabby parents, for example, find that they cannot keep young lovers apart, and so they join in the marriage festivities. Byron jocosely put the matter thus:

IMITATION
OF AN
ACTION

All tragedies are finished by a death,
All comedies are ended by a marriage.

All tragedies and all comedies do not in fact end thus, but the idea is right; tragedy has the solemnity, seriousness, and finality we often associate with death,¹ and comedy has the joy and fertility and suggestion of a new life we

¹ Shakespeare’s tragedies all end with the death of the tragic hero, but a good many Greek tragedies do not. In *Oedipus the King* the hero remains alive, but he is blind and banished and seems to have exhausted the possibilities of his life. Some other Greek tragedies have what can reasonably be called a happy ending; i.e., some sort of joyful reconcilia-

often associate with marriage. This concept of *an action* (i.e., an underlying motif, not merely gestures) in tragedy and in comedy makes clear that comedy is not a mere matter of jokes or funny bits of business. It also makes clear what the Greek comic playwright Menander meant when he told a friend that he had composed a play, and now had only to write the dialogue: he had worked out the happenings that would embody the action, and there remained only the slighter task of providing the spirited words. The same idea is implicit in Ibsen's comment that the drafts of his plays differed "very much from each other in characterization, not in action." The action or happening dramatized in a tragedy or a comedy may be conceived of as a single course or train of events manifested on the stage by a diversity of activities. Think of such expressions as "the closing of the frontier," or "the revival of learning"; each might be said to denote an action, though such action is seen only in its innumerable manifestations. *The Iliad* announces its action in the first line: "Sing, goddess, of the wrath of Achilles." The "action" is not, of course, always explicitly announced in a literary work. Among Ibsen's preliminary notes as he worked toward *Hedda Gabler* we find such entries as "They [i.e., women] all have a leaning towards sensuality, but are afraid of the scandal," "Men and women don't belong to the same century," and "The play is to be about 'the insuperable' — the longing and striving to defy convention, to defy what people accept (including Hedda)." Clearly, Ibsen was trying to get hold of his central point and then develop a plot that would reveal it.

HAPPENINGS
AND
HAPPENINGS

Tragic playwrights take some happening, from history (for example, the assassination of Julius Caesar), or from fiction (Shakespeare derived Othello from an Italian short story), or from their own imagination, and they make or shape or arrange episodes that clarify the action. They make (in common terminology) a *plot* that embodies the action or spiritual content. Even when playwrights draw on history, they make their own plot because they select and rearrange the available historical facts. A re-enactment of everything that Julius Caesar did during his last days or hours would not be a play with an action, for drama is not so much concerned with what in fact *happened* as with some sort of typical and coherent or unified thing that *happens*, a significant action. Sometimes, of course, history provides substantial material for drama, but even Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* takes frequent liberties with the facts as Shakespeare knew them, and Shakespeare's source, the biographer Plutarch, doubtless had already assimilated the facts to a literary form. At most we can say that history provided Shakespeare with a man whose life lent itself well to an established literary form. Not every life does lend itself thus. We are told that Aeschylus, the earliest tragic playwright who has left us any complete plays, was killed when an eagle mistook his bald head for a

tion. For example, in Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, the weapon which has been taken from the sick Philoctetes is returned to him, and Heracles, a messenger from Zeus, announces that Philoctetes will be healed. But these tragedies with happy endings, like those with unhappy endings, deal with "important" people, and they are about "serious" things. If there is finally joy, it is a solemn joy.

rock and dropped a turtle on it to break the shell. Aeschylus' death was a great loss, but it did not have the unified significant action required of tragedy. By chance an eagle that had captured a turtle was near to Aeschylus, and Aeschylus by chance (or rather by his chemistry) was bald. There is no relation between these two circumstances; Aeschylus' death (allegedly) happened this way, and we can account for it, but the event has no intelligible unity. (A sentence from Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* comes to mind: if one is contemplating suicide, "jumping from a high bridge is not recommended even if you cannot swim, for wind and water abound in weird contingencies, and tragedy ought not to culminate in a record dive or a policeman's promotion.") In tragedy things cohere. The hero normally does some deed and suffers as a consequence. Actions have consequences in the moral world no less than in the materialistic world of the laboratory. The tragic playwright's solemn presentation of "the remorseless working of things," Alfred North Whitehead pointed out (in his *Science and the Modern World*, 1925), is "the vision possessed by science," and it cannot be accidental that the two great periods of tragic drama, fifth-century B.C. Athens and England around 1600, are periods of scientific inquiry.

UNITY

This emphasis on causality means that the episodes are related, connected, and not merely contiguous. Generally the formula is to show the tragic hero moving toward committing some deed that will cause great unintended suffering, committing it, and then, by seeing the consequences, learning the true nature of his deed. The plot, that is, involves a credible character whose doings are related to his nature. For Aristotle, in the best sort of tragedy the tragic hero is an important person, almost pre-eminently virtuous, who makes some sort of great mistake that entails great suffering. Calamity does not descend upon him from above, does not happen to him, nor does he consciously will a destructive act; he merely makes a great mistake. The mistake is Aristotle's *hamartia*, sometimes translated as "error," sometimes as "flaw." Probably Aristotle did not mean by *hamartia* a trait, such as rashness or ambition, which the translation "flaw" implies, but simply meant an action based on a mental error, a sort of false step. Oedipus, erroneously thinking that Polybus and Meropé are his parents, flees from them when he hears that he will kill his father and sleep with his mother. His action is commendable, but it happens to be a great mistake because it brings him to his real parents. Nevertheless, despite the scholarly elucidations of Aristotle, we can sometimes feel that the erring action proceeds from a particular kind of character, that a person with different traits would not have acted in the same way. The Oedipus that we see in the play, for example, is a self-assured quick-tempered man — almost a rash man, we might say — who might well have neglected to check the facts before he fled from Corinth. There are at least times, even when reading *Oedipus the King*, when one feels with George Meredith (1828–1909) that

THE
TRAGIC
HERO

HAMARTIA

in tragic life, God wot,
No villain need be! Passions spin the plot:
We are betrayed by what is false within.