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THIRTEEN PLAYS

An Introductory Anthology

Otto Reinert / Peter Arnott

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Preface

Any selection of plays for a book like this is arbitrary — up to a point. Ours seeks to represent the main ages, cultures, dramatic modes, and theater styles of Western drama from the Greeks till today. Not all the plays are "great," but some of them are, and we think all are worth knowing. Our selection has been guided by readers' responses to a series of earlier anthologies.

In order to accommodate different classroom needs, the book appears in two editions. The longer, *Twenty-Three Plays*, is intended for courses exclusively on drama; the shorter, *Thirteen Plays*, for courses that deal with other literary genres as well, courses on the history of the theater, and courses in which a core text is supplemented with the teacher's choice of plays in individual volumes.

Eleven of the plays in the longer edition and six in the shorter were included in Otto Reinert's *Classic Through Modern Drama*. We have kept some of the critical commentaries for those plays and revised and replaced others. As before, the commentaries follow the individual plays, but we have added Forewords that relate each play to its contemporary theater. The Introduction has been revised and expanded and includes a new section on "Illusion and Convention" and a new "Anatomy of a Scene." The biographical notes and the bibliographies in the Appendix (including listings of recordings and screen versions) have been updated. An Index of Dramatic Terms appears on the inside back cover.

In everything we say about drama here we make two basic assumptions: first, that it is *literature*, and, second, that its literary uniqueness is its po-

tential for becoming a *performance*. In our play analyses we have tried to be specific and inclusive without being intrusive and dogmatic — to suggest and not to pre-empt. Like drama itself, our book is, and in more than one sense, an effort of collaboration. The rest is up to our readers.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Introduction

A Definition of Drama

Drama is the least purely literary of the literary genres. As written words, it is literature; as words spoken in a spectacle, it is theater. Separate the two, and we no longer have drama. The literary part moves toward a closet play, a script not actable and not meant to be. The theater part moves toward pantomime or dance or opera or the mechanics of mere showmanship. As words in the theater, drama is an ambiguous art, a hybrid — at the same time speech and spectacle, poetry and show business, church and circus.

A novel or a poem is read (or listened to in recital). A play can be either read or performed, but performance affects its status as literature. Dialogue can be performed as written, actors speaking the lines set down for the characters they impersonate, but stage directions do not survive the transfer from script to stage. And the more "literary" they are, the more they lose in the transfer. Their referents in performance — speech manner, movement, costume, makeup, lighting, set — are creations of the theater. The only way an audience can register the "trepidation" in Linda Loman's voice as she calls out her husband's name at the beginning of *Death of a Salesman* and the "casual irritation" in his is through the timbre and inflection in the voices of the two performers. Only the actor's face can express Biff's "hopeless glance" at his brother near the end of the play. And the transparent walls of the Loman house are more believable as part of a symbolic but actual stage set than as something visualized in the imagination.

These distinctions can be misleading if they are taken to be absolute. Films generally subordinate words to photography, and yet film scripts have been published to be read. At what point of verbal artistry do they cease being scenario and production notes and become drama? Conversely, isn't some drama covered by the old definition of theater as "three boards and a passion"? Isn't there more to a dramatic character than the words he speaks? Is *Act Without Words*, Beckett's mime, not drama just because its words are acted out and not spoken? Couldn't it rather be said to be drama *because* its words are visible?

The ambiguity of drama keeps alive the old debate between literary people and people of the theater, each claiming that drama belongs to *them*. Arbitrating between them is a little like deciding whether the United States is a republic or a democracy. Does the drama make the theater or the theater the drama? On the one hand: Without the playwright's art of words, there would be no need for the arts of the theater. People talking is the basic dramatic action, and wordless activity — swordplay, love-making, silence — derives its significance from the talk it interrupts. On the other hand: The words were written to be performed. They don't fulfill their destiny till they have become subject to the opportunities, temptations, and limitations of the physical playhouse. And performance is a collaborative effort, the joint product of many arts. The images the dramatist works with make up, in Ronald Peacock's words, "a composite form, using different 'arts' to one end." What the dramatist writes is a performable script, and if the script fails on stage for other reasons than mere ineptness of staging, it probably fails as dramatic literature, too.

Drama and Theater

Anthropologists trace the origin of theater and drama to wordless action: ritual dances and mimes performed by masked player-priests in fertility cults, ceremonies for the dead, and calls to the gods for good fortune in war and hunting. Children reenact those ancient beginnings when they "play at" being someone or something other than themselves. Aristotle (384–322 B.C.), the first theorist of drama, thought of art as the human response to a deep need to imitate experience and of drama as the most directly imitative (mimetic) of all the arts. He considered speech only one of its three media, more important than music and spectacle but no more basic. The word "drama" comes from a Greek verb, *dran*, meaning "to do" or "act" or "perform." "Theater" comes from the Greek *theatron*, "a place for viewing." There is nothing in either etymology about an art of words. Put them together, and we get a definition of drama as "doings in a place for viewing," or, more elegantly, "observed action."

Whether used about plays or about real-life events, the adjective 'dramatic' refers to a quality of action rather than of language: an urgent, exciting course of events moving through striking changes toward crisis and

resolution. The climax of a TV crime show, Oedipus's quest for Laius's slayer, the last days of Watergate — are all dramatic. A dramatic situation is one in which further action lies coiled like a tensed spring. It is Oedipus sending away for the old shepherd, Hamlet setting the mousetrap for the king, Helmer in *A Doll's House* reading Krogstad's letter, the family in *The Cherry Orchard* waiting for news about the auction. Drama, says Suzanne Langer, is "a complex of impending acts," a dynamic pattern in the process of being completed.

To the arguments from anthropology and dictionary can be added the argument from experience. One of the couplets in the prologue Samuel Johnson wrote for the opening of David Garrick's new theater in London in 1747 is as true now as it was then:

> The Drama's Laws the Drama's Patrons give,
> For we that live to please must please to live.

The fate of plays is decided in the theater and not in the study; successful playwrights get rich in the box office and not in the bookstore. Even the good reader of drama — *particularly* the good reader — knows how much he misses when he misses the performance, and he knows also that what he gains — time for thoughtful response — does not make up for it. However vivid and subtle his imagination, it can never match the theater's immediacy of spectacle and living voices. The stage is a place where fantasy becomes fact and fact fantasy, an imaginary place with real people in it, with life happening here and now. Take the drama out of the theater, and you take away our chance to enjoy good acting, good directing, good design, and the special communion good theater establishes among strangers sharing the same excitement. The drama is not complete till the personnel of the theater finishes what the playwright began. Words are the raw material for drama, but the drama itself is actors moving and speaking on a stage before an audience.

This is one view of drama. Giving the other won't settle the issue between the literary and the theatrical factions, but it may throw further light on drama's double nature.

There are concepts that common sense and practical experience cannot define adequately, and the origin of something does not necessarily determine its evolved nature. Even the definition of drama as an "art of words in the theater" implies that it is an art of words before it is anything else.

Not because performance presupposes something to be performed. So it does, but the theater's obvious retort to that is that the primitive ritual, the prescribed procedure, was preverbal, a choreographic rather than a literary "script." It is more to the point that for all practical purposes the history of drama begins with the earliest extant texts of Greek tragedies from the fifth century B.C. The ambiguity of word and action in those plays is apparent in what Aristotle writes about them; he is more concerned with their thought and expression than with their stagecraft. In his *Rhetoric* he aligns acting

and music as arts that must both be appreciated by the ear. And surely the ancient Greek spectator thought of himself as "hearing" as well as "seeing" the play. It is true that different cultures have made different balances. A cultivated Elizabethan spectator would have needed much convincing that a play could be considered literature. His French counterpart a century later would have needed no convincing at all. If Aristotle hinted to his century that the theater was largely for the ear, Gordon Craig, the British stage designer, and Elmer Rice, the American playwright, have told ours that it is largely for the eye. But the common view in most ages of western theater has been that spoken or chanted words are intrinsic to drama and that the history of drama, therefore, is part of the literary history of our culture. And for the last three hundred years or so, the word "drama" in common English usage has meant something like "a literary composition in dialogue form, actable before an audience."

"Actable," not "enacted." On that distinction rests the argument that the literary component in drama takes precedence over the theatrical component. We can have theater without drama; pantomime, ballet, and burlesque are all forms of theater that may be dramatic but are not drama. Spectator sports may be considered in the same category. And we can have drama without performance, as we do in a book like this. Stagecraft is the midwife of drama, not its mother. The play is no more the enactment than the symphony is the concert.

Like symphonies, most plays have been written to be performed, but the potential performance is complete in the playwright's words, just as the melody, harmony, rhythm, tempo, and orchestration "are" in the composer's written score. The only difference is that for most of us it is easier to "see" and "hear" the play in our imagination as we read the script than it is to "hear" the music in our imagination as we read the score. Both symphonies and plays are forever-possible-but-never-to-be-realized performances, "ideal" performances in the philosophical sense, inherent in the score or script and independent of the artists who perform them. They all invite performance, and many deserve it, but any performance, however faithful or inspired, is inevitably different from — both more and less than — the work itself. Scores and scripts may be altered by the performing artists, but that does not prove they were not autonomous works of art to begin with. Some people will argue anything, but to say that *Hamlet* is not a play till it is acted seems as unreasonable as to say that it is not literature till it is read. The imagination can do anything the stage can do. It does things differently; some things it does better. In adaptability and resourcefulness the theater in the mind rivals any real theater.

Such comparisons don't matter when we attend a good performance of a good play. Then we no longer feel the tension between the art of words and the arts of the theater — between the intellectual and the sensory elements in drama — as conflict or division, but as complementarity. And

when that happens, the whole controversy over what drama "really" is comes to seem rather silly.

Drama and Literature

Plays and movies based on prose fiction prove that performability is not unique to drama. But, at least in theory, the art of poet and novelist goes beyond dialogue and description of stageables. The lyric poet explores his own inner world of feeling and sensation, a subjective world different in kind from the externalized, objective world of drama. The novelist or the epic poet can suspend action indefinitely, do without dialogue and events and physical setting altogether ("epics of the mind"), and discourse on any kind and any number of subjects in slow or quick sequence. He can judge and analyze his characters in authorial comment, enter at will into their hearts and minds, and just as easily exit back into straight narrative. And if he never uses any of these freedoms, he is in effect a playwright, whether he calls his work a play or not.

For if the novelist has the option of being an all-knowing, all-managing god of the world he creates, the dramatist must be content to be a god shut out from his. His play shows and tells itself; his characters speak for themselves. If they are not credible, self-motivating human fictions, what is before us is hardly a play at all but a lecture or a polemic or a confession or an act of exhibitionism. The dramatist's voice and vision are multiple. Drama is his medium because it is open options, changing tensions, dialectics in motion. As dramatist, he is incapable of single-mindedness. He is skeptical of "Truth" but loves the process by which truths are born. He'll rather observe than interpret. Obsessed with morality, he will not moralize. He is Keats's man of "negative capability," "capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason." In another letter, Keats says of the "poetical Character" that it "has no self — it is every thing and nothing. . . . It has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen. What shocks the virtuous philosopher delights the chameleon Poet." Keats's "Poet" here has the soul and the instincts of a *dramatist*. Drama is the dramatist's act of self-transcendence. His art is a public art, unlike the private arts of the lyric poet and the fiction writer. His sense of life is too large and disinterested for mere self-expression to be enough for it, and when we understand his play it is because we make the right inferences.

For he couldn't intrude himself into his play even if he wanted to. It offers itself, directly, as "life," not as somebody's presentation of life. Its integrity is absolute. To paraphrase S. W. Dawson: Whatever the *significance* of the drama, it has no *reference* to anything outside of itself; everything in it is relevant, and nothing relevant is not in it.

A chorus or some other framing character — even when acted by the

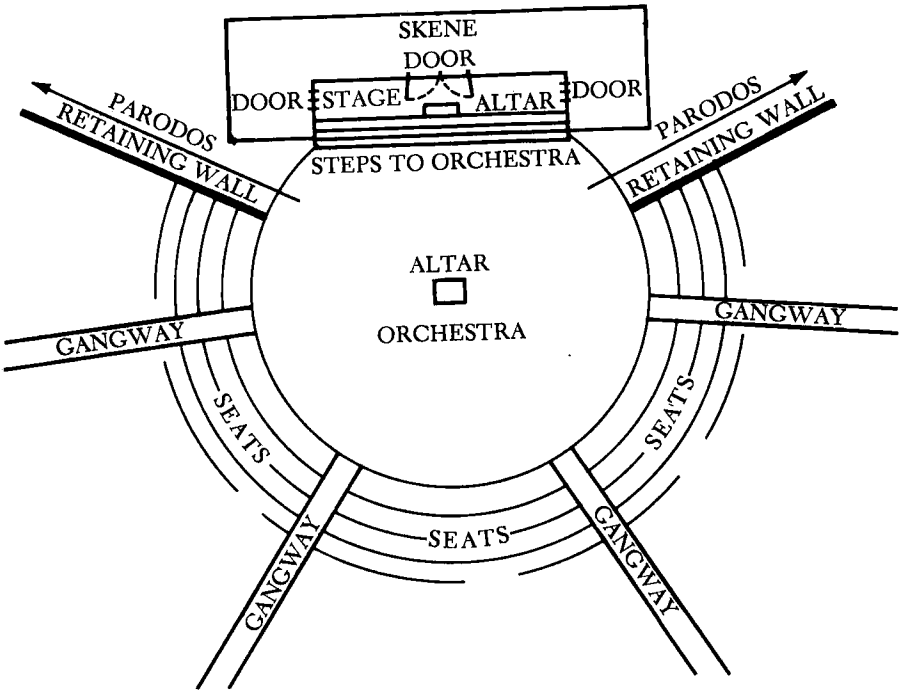
playwright himself — who interprets the action for us is still a part of the audible spectacle of on-going life on stage — *in* the play, not *outside* it. Because of the special nature of the functions a chorus can serve (whether a single character or a group), its status as a dramatic device has often been conspicuously misinterpreted. It can save time. It can cover a great deal of expository material in a single direct address to the audience, allowing the author to get more quickly to what the play is about. It can offer pithy summaries that reduce the risk that we miss important points. It can draw morals and relate the immediate action to a wider frame of reference. (The Chorus in *Oedipus the King* does this.) But it is still part of the play. It can serve as a bridge between the play's world and the world of the audience, but it belongs to the play, not to the world it connects the play with. It is a dramatic device. Critics have referred to the chorus as "the ideal spectator." This makes sense if it means simply that the chorus is a character or a group of characters in the play who are interested in and perhaps affected by the action but not participating in that action. The statement does *not* make sense — in fact, confuses the whole issue — if it is taken to mean that the chorus is an objective authority standing outside of the play and telling us what the play is about. Even the most cursory reading of the script of any play using a chorus shows that the chorus is not *that*. Consider, for example, the way the members of the Chorus in *Oedipus the King* flounder in the dark, through most of the play, about matters on which we are far better informed than they. Or the way they hail the news of Oedipus' discovery on Mount Cithairon with almost hysterical glee — glee which will shortly turn out to be disastrously ill-founded.

But our recognition of the chorus as part of the play doesn't prevent us from making the relevant distinctions between it and the other characters. Such a distinction is crucial in Pirandello's *Six Characters*, where the Manager and his company of actors and actresses serve as a kind of "chorus," philistine and skeptical, vis à vis the six characters. In contrast, every character in *Hamlet* belongs to the same court world at Elsinore. None of them stands outside the action and comments on it.

But if even presenter or commentator figures are part of the dramatic fiction rather than stand-ins for the dramatist, there is obviously no sense in trying to look for the dramatist in disguise in any of his characters of the more common kind. Sophocles is no more Oedipus than he is Teiresias or Jocasta or the Chorus. Nora Helmer's confusion and distress are not Ibsen's. In *Hamlet*, Polonius' words of advice to his departing son,

> Neither a borrower nor a lender be,
>
> . . .
>
> This above all, to thine own self be true,
>
> . . .

sound wiser out of context than in. Hamlet's advice to the players on the art of acting may or may not be close to Shakespeare's own thoughts about



The open-air Greek theater was virtually "theater in the round." Its most distinctive feature was the orchestra *(literally, "dancing-place"), a circular, stone-paved floor on which the chorus went through its complex evolutions.* A parodos *("entryway") right and left allowed for processional entrances and exits. The audience — 15,000 or more — sat on steeply tiered seats built into the surrounding hillside. On the rim of the orchestra stood the* skene *(literally, "hut" or "tent") which provided dressing-room space for the actors, doors for their entrances, and a simple, formal, architectural background for them to play against. There was no scenery in the modern sense of the word. A low platform gave the actors prominence and set them apart from the chorus.*

his first profession, but the issue is irrelevant to understanding either Prince or play. Confusing playwright and character is just about the worst possible of all sins in drama criticism.

Nor does a playwright (or anyone else) have any business telling us what his characters are like. In fact, in any strict sense he can't. Laurence Olivier's announcement over the soundtrack at the beginning of his 1948 movie of *Hamlet*, "This is the story of a man who could not make up his mind," is a novelist's kind of statement, not a dramatist's. Fortunately, the movie itself went on to prove how inadequate a description of Hamlet the announcement is. It isn't even a stage direction, for it cannot be staged. A sentence like "She is a woman who has lost all hope" isn't a stage direction, either, but, unlike Olivier's laying bare Hamlet's mystery, it is at least