

The Bedford Introduction to Drama

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### Acknowledgments

#### Greek Drama

Figure 1. Theater at Epidaurus from The Theatre of Dionysus in Athens by Arthur Wallace Pickard-Cambridge. Reprinted by permission of Oxford University Press.

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## Preface for Instructors

The Bedford Introduction to Drama is, first and foremost, a collection of thirty-one important plays that have shaped dramatic literature from the time of the early Greek dramatists to the present. The book incorporates a number of features that distinguish it from other introductions to drama. Most notably, it presents five major playwrights in greater than usual depth. Sophocles, Shakespeare, Ibsen, Chekhov, and Beckett are each represented by two full-length plays. Commentaries — by the playwrights themselves and by other playwrights, directors, actors, and critics — about the playwrights and their works, together with the book's thorough biographical and critical introductions and photographs from recent important stage productions, offer beginning drama students a unique opportunity for studying (and writing about) these major figures in the development of drama.

Another distinctive feature of *The Bedford Introduction to Drama* is its strong representation of contemporary drama. Important plays by Sam Shepard, Athol Fugard, Martin Sherman, Caryl Churchill, Marsha Norman, and August Wilson, together with commentaries by and about these playwrights — including interviews and critical studies — give students an exposure to contemporary drama unavailable in any other introductory text. Moreover, the collection includes a broader range of plays by minority and women playwrights than most other introductory texts, including Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls*, Marsha Norman's *'night*, *Mother*, Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, Lady Gregory's *The Rising of the Moon*, and August Wilson's *Fences*.

The Bedford Introduction to Drama is also a succinct but thorough history of Western drama. Even when it appears most timeless, all drama (like, of course, all literature) is a product of a language, an era, and a complex range of political, social, and ethnic influences. The Bedford Introduction highlights such influences. A general introduction gives an overview of the great ages of drama, the major genres and elements, and the cultural value of drama. Throughout the book, introductions

to significant periods of drama, the playwrights, and the plays focus on the cultural contexts of the plays and on their stage history.

Finally, *The Bedford Introduction to Drama* is a complete resource book for the beginning student of drama. In the general introduction a discussion of the elements of drama defines important terms and concepts and demonstrates these concepts in action, drawing its examples from Lady Gregory's brief one-act play *The Rising of the Moon*.

Writing About Drama, a useful appendix, shows students possible approaches to commenting on dramatic literature and points the way to developing ideas that can result in probing essays. From prewriting to drafting and outlining, the process of writing about drama is illustrated by reference to Lady Gregory's play, and a sample essay on the play provides one example of drama criticism.

A second appendix, the Glossary of Dramatic Terms, defines concepts and terms clearly and concisely. When these terms are first introduced and defined in the text, they appear in small capital letters.

The Selected Bibliography, a third appendix, includes a list of reference works for the major periods of drama, the playwrights, and the plays by the five playwrights treated in depth. The cited general references, histories, biographies, critical studies, journal articles, reviews, and collections of plays will be especially useful for research in drama.

While the book emphasizes the plays as texts to be read, a fourth appendix, the Selected List of Films, Videos, and Recordings of the Plays, ensures that the element of performance is not ignored. This list, accompanied by a list of film, video, and record distributors, can help instructors and students find an illuminating treatment of the plays in performance.

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Approaches to Criticism

# Introduction: Thinking About Drama

### What Is Drama?

Drama is the art of make-believe. It captivates children and adults from all societies and all walks of life. Make-believe consists in part of acting out events that happened or that we imagine happening. DRAMA consists of representing those actions for the pleasure of others. The primary ingredients of drama are characters, represented by players; action, described by gestures and movement; thought, implied by dialogue and action; spectacle, represented by scenery and costume; and, finally, audiences, who respond to this complex mixture.

Even when reading a play, we are encouraged to imagine actors speaking lines and to visualize a setting in which those lines are spoken. When we are in the theater, we see the actors, hear the lines, are aware of the setting, and sense the theatrical community of which we are a part. Drama is an experience in which we participate on many levels simultaneously. On one level, we may believe that what we see is really happening; on another level, we know it is only make-believe. On one level we may be amused, but on another level we realize that serious statements about our society are being made. Drama is like most other literature in that it both entertains and instructs.

When Aristotle wrote about drama in the *Poetics*, a work providing one of the earliest and most influential theories of drama, he began by explaining it as the IMITATION of an action. Those analyzing his work have interpreted this statement in several ways. One interpretation is that drama imitates life. On the surface, such an observation may seem simple, even obvious. But on reflection, we begin to find complex significance in his comment. The drama of the Greeks, for example, with its intense mythic structure, its formidable speeches, and its profound

actions, often seems larger than life or other than life. Yet we recognize characters saying words that we ourselves are capable of saying, doing things that we ourselves might do. The great Greek tragedies are certainly lifelike and certainly offer literary mirrors in which we can examine human nature. And the same is true of Greek comedies.

The relationship between drama and life has always been subtle and complex. In some plays, such as Luigi Pirandello's Six Characters in Search of an Author, it is one of the central issues. We begin our reading or viewing of most plays knowing that the dramatic experience is not absolutely real in the sense that, for example, the actor playing Hamlet does not truly die or truly see a ghost or truly frighten his mother. The play imitates those imagined actions, but when done properly it is realistic enough to make us fear, if only for a moment, that they could be real.

We are concerned for Hamlet as a person. We see significance in the actions he imitates; his actions help us live our own lives more deeply, more intensely, because they give us insight into the possibilities of life. We are all restricted to living this life as ourselves; drama is one art form that helps us realize the potentiality of life, for both the good and the bad. In an important sense, we can share the experience of a character such as Hamlet when he soliloquizes over the question of whether it is better to die than to live in a world filled with sin and crime. And we may find ourselves empathizing with a character like Faustus when he explains how unsatisfied he is with the worldly knowledge he has acquired and how much more meaningful the forbidden knowledge of the heavens would be to him were he only to have it at his bidding.

#### Drama and Ritual

Such imaginative participation is only a part of what we derive from drama. In its origins, drama probably evolved from ancient Egyptian and Greek rituals, ceremonies that were performed the same way again and again and were thought to have a propitious effect on the relationship between the people and their gods.

In ancient Egypt some religious rituals evolved into repeated passion plays, such as those celebrating Isis and Osiris at the festivals in Abydos some three thousand years ago. Greek drama was first performed during yearly religious celebrations to the god Dionysus. The early Greek playwrights, such as Sophocles in *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone*, emphasized the will of the gods, pitting the truths of men and women against the truths of the gods. Such an emphasis suggests a high seriousness and perhaps a religious mission in the Greek tragedies.

The rebirth of drama in the Middle Ages — after the fall of Rome and the loss of classical artistic traditions — took place in the great cathedrals of Europe. It evolved from medieval religious ceremonies that fed the needs of the faithful to know more about their own moral predicament. *Everyman*, a late play in the medieval theater (it was