DRAMA
CRITICISM

VOLUME
17

DRAMA
CRITICISM

Criticism of the Most Significant and Widely Studied
Dramatic Works from All the World's Literatures

VOLUME 17

Scott T. Darga
Editor

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Drama Criticism, Vol. 17

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Preface

Drama Criticism (*DC*) is principally intended for beginning students of literature and theater as well as the average playgoer. The series is therefore designed to introduce readers to the most frequently studied playwrights of all time periods and nationalities and to present discerning commentary on dramatic works of enduring interest. Furthermore, *DC* seeks to acquaint the reader with the uses and functions of criticism itself. Selected from a diverse body of commentary, the essays in *DC* offer insights into the authors and their works but do not require that the reader possess a wide background in literary studies. Where appropriate, reviews of important productions of the plays discussed are also included to give students a heightened awareness of drama as a dynamic art form, one that many claim is fully realized only in performance.

DC was created in response to suggestions by the staffs of high school, college, and public libraries. These librarians observed a need for a series that assembles critical commentary on the world's most renowned dramatists in the same manner as Gale's *Short Story Criticism* (*SSC*) and *Poetry Criticism* (*PC*), which present material on writers of short fiction and poetry. Although playwrights are covered in such Gale literary criticism series as *Contemporary Literary Criticism* (*CLC*), *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* (*TCLC*), *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism* (*NCLC*), *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800* (*LC*), and *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism* (*CMLC*), *DC* directs more concentrated attention on individual dramatists than is possible in the broader, survey-oriented entries in these Gale series. Commentary on the works of William Shakespeare may be found in *Shakespearean Criticism* (*SC*).

Scope of the Series

By collecting and organizing commentary on dramatists, *DC* assists students in their efforts to gain insight into literature, achieve better understanding of the texts, and formulate ideas for papers and assignments. A variety of interpretations and assessments is offered, allowing students to pursue their own interests and promoting awareness that literature is dynamic and responsive to many different opinions.

Approximately five to ten authors are included in each volume, and each entry presents a historical survey of the critical response to that playwright's work. The length of an entry is intended to reflect the amount of critical attention the author has received from critics writing in English and from foreign critics in translation. Every attempt has been made to identify and include the most significant essays on each author's work. In order to provide these important critical pieces, the editors sometimes reprint essays that have appeared elsewhere in Gale's literary criticism series. Such duplication, however, never exceeds twenty percent of a *DC* volume.

Organization of the Book

A *DC* entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** consists of the playwright's most commonly used name, followed by birth and death dates. If an author consistently wrote under a pseudonym, the pseudonym is listed in the author heading and the real name given in parentheses on the first line of the introduction. Also located at the beginning of the introduction are any name variations under which the dramatist wrote, including transliterated forms of the names of authors whose languages use nonroman alphabets.

- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author and the critical debates surrounding his or her work.

- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.

- The list of **Principal Works** is divided into two sections. The first section contains the author's dramatic pieces and is organized chronologically by date of first performance. If this has not been conclusively determined, the composition or publication date is used. The second section provides information on the author's major works in other genres.

- Essays offering **overviews and general studies of the dramatist's entire literary career** give the student broad perspectives on the writer's artistic development, themes, and concerns that recur in several of his or her works, the author's place in literary history, and other wide-ranging topics.

- **Criticism** of individual plays offers the reader in-depth discussions of a select number of the author's most important works. In some cases, the criticism is divided into two sections, each arranged chronologically. When a significant performance of a play can be identified (typically, the premier of a twentieth-century work), the first section of criticism will feature **production reviews** of this staging. Most entries include sections devoted to **critical commentary** that assesses the literary merit of the selected plays. When necessary, essays are carefully excerpted to focus on the work under consideration; often, however, essays and reviews are reprinted in their entirety. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.

- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.

- A complete **Bibliographic Citation,** designed to help the interested reader locate the original essay or book, precedes each piece of criticism.

- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

Cumulative Indexes

A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all of the authors that appear in a wide variety of reference sources published by the Gale Group, including *DC*. A complete list of these sources is found facing the first page of the Author Index. The index also includes birth and death dates and cross references between pseudonyms and actual names.

A **Cumulative Nationality Index** lists all authors featured in *DC* by nationality, followed by the number of the *DC* volume in which their entry appears.

A **Cumulative Title Index** lists in alphabetical order the individual plays discussed in the criticism contained in *DC*. Each title is followed by the author's last name and corresponding volume and page numbers where commentary on the work is located. English-language translations of original foreign-language titles are cross-referenced to the foreign titles so that all references to discussion of a work are combined in one listing.

Citing *Drama Criticism*

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume in *Drama Criticism* may use the following general formats to footnote reprinted criticism. The first example pertains to material drawn from periodicals, the second to materials reprinted from books.

Susan Sontag, "Going to the Theater, Etc.," *Partisan Review* XXXI, no. 3 (Summer 1964), 389-94; excerpted and reprinted in *Drama Criticism,* vol. 1, ed. Lawrence J. Trudeau (Detroit: Gale Research, 1991), 17-20.

Eugene M. Waith, *The Herculean Hero in Marlowe, Chapman, Shakespeare and Dryden* (Chatto & Windus, 1962); excerpted and reprinted in *Drama Criticism,* vol. 1, ed. Lawrence J. Trudeau (Detroit: Gale Research, 1991), 237-47.

Suggestions are Welcome

Readers who wish to suggest new features, topics, or authors to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions or comments are cordially invited to call, write, or fax the Project Editor:

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Jean Cocteau
1889-1963

(Born Jean Maurice Eugène Clément Cocteau) French playwright, poet, novelist, filmmaker, scriptwriter, critic, essayist, librettist, and autobiographer.

INTRODUCTION

Among the most versatile, innovative, and prolific literary figures of the twentieth century, Cocteau is best known for his dramas and films in which he utilized myth and tragedy in modern contexts to shock and surprise his audiences. Identifying himself as a poet and referring to virtually all of his works as poetry, Cocteau rejected naturalism in favor of lyrical fantasy, through which he sought to create a "poetry of the theatre" consisting not of words but of such stage devices as ballet, music, and pantomime. The fantastic, or *le merveilleux,* is made manifest in Cocteau's plays through inanimate objects and symbolic characters, which embellish one's understanding of "reality" by making the impossible possible.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

In 1889 Cocteau was born into a wealthy Parisian family. Although he briefly attended the Lycée Condorcet in Paris, he detested school and left to pursue a writing career. His early poetry and novels attracted the attention of critics and intellectuals. Toward the end of World War I, Cocteau became associated with the avant-garde movement at Montparnasse, which included such poets as Guillaume Apollinaire and Blaise Cendrars. Despite his involvement with these central artistic figures, Cocteau never allied himself with any school or movement. The death of his mentor and lover, Raymond Radiguet, in 1923 devastated Cocteau; grief-stricken, he turned to opium, an addiction that plagued him all of his life and was the subject of many of his writings. While hospitalized for opium poisoning in 1929, Cocteau met the Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain. Maritain's influence prompted Cocteau to turn briefly to religion. In the 1940s Cocteau became involved in filmmaking, adapting several of his plays to film. He was elected to the prestigious Académie Française in 1956. He died on October 11, 1963 in Milly-la-Foret, Essone, France.

MAJOR WORKS

Cocteau's early ballets, *Parade* (1917) and *Le Dieu bleu* (1912), were inspired by Serge de Diaghilev and his Ballet Russes and featured music by Eric Satie and set designs and costumes by Pablo Picasso. *Parade* depicts a festival

and its bizarre promoters, who attempt to entice an on-stage audience to enter a mysterious tent; the ballet ends without the spectators having entered the tent, implying that Cocteau's interest is not in the event itself but in the visual occurrences that surround it. Although a complete failure at its first production, *Parade* is generally regarded as one of the twentieth century's most innovative ballets. *Les Mariés de la tour Eiffel* (1924; *The Eiffel Tower Wedding Party*), an irreverent satire of bourgeois values, centers on a banal wedding party at the base of the Eiffel Tower. In *Antigone* (1922), Cocteau adapted Sophocles's tragedy to what he called "the rhythm of our times," thus initiating a lifelong preoccupation with contemporizing Greek mythologies. *Orphée* (1926; *Orpheus*) is among Cocteau's most innovative adaptations, focusing on the poet as interpreter of the supernatural and the poet's relationship to the source of inspiration. In this drama,

objects, animals, and characters become symbols of ritual and acquire startling new associations Cocteau also attempted several adaptations of the Oedipal myth during his career The first, *Oedipus-Rex* (1926), is an opera-oratorio on which he collaborated with composer Igor Stravinsky *Oedipe Roi* (1928), a free adaptation that Cocteau revised in 1962 as an attempt at "total theatre," combines virtually all the performing arts to evoke lyric tragedy Cocteau's best-regarded reworking of the Oedipal myth is *La machine infernale* (1934; *The Infernal Machine*), a drama exploring the relationship between free will and determinism that makes use of modern vernacular and musical forms.

Of his original dramas, *La voix humaine* (1930; *The Human Voice*) is probably Cocteau's most often-performed work Written as a "monodrama," a one-act lay for a single character, the drama consists entirely of a woman's one-sided conversation with a boyfriend who has abandoned her. *Les parents terribles* (1938; *Intimate Relations*), a drama about family conflict, jealousy, and manipulation, reveals the influence of Greek tragedy but derives its form from Parisian boulevard theater. Cocteau's plays of the 1940s are generally considered less successful than his earlier works. *L'aigle à deux têtes* (1946; *The Eagle Has Two Heads*), his best-known work of this period, is a melodrama in which a young poet, allegorically representing the angel of death, falls in love with a puppet empress and with tragic results attempts to help her regain her power.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Evaluations of Cocteau's career often touch on the variety of his work and his prolific creative output Critics have offered mixed assessments of his oeuvre: some reviewers assert that his efforts were inconsistent and that he was too preoccupied with producing avant-garde works; others maintain that his failures outnumber his successes Moreover, Cocteau's detractors often questioned his importance as an original and innovative artist. Critics note that alienation is a defining thematic concern in Cocteau's work; other subjects for critical commentary have been his focus on the origin of artistic creation and inspiration, the limitations of free will, and the relationships between such opposing forces as adolescence and adulthood, illusion and reality, and order and disorder Despite the lack of critical consensus on his work, critics generally agree that Cocteau made a valuable contribution to twentieth-century theatre, particularly with his adaptations of ancient Greek dramas

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Plays

Le Portrait surnaturel de Dorian Gray [*The Portrait of Dorian Gray*] 1909

Le Patience de Pénélope 1910
Le Boeuf sur le toit 1920
Le Gendarme incompris 1921
Paul et Virginie 1921
Antigone 1922
Les Mariés de la tour Eiffel [*The Eiffel Tower Wedding Party*] 1924
Roméo et Juliette 1924
Oedipus-Rex 1926
Orphée [*Orpheus A Tragedy in One Act*] 1926
Oedipe Roi 1928
La voix humaine [*The Human Voice*] 1930
La machine infernale [*The Infernal Machine*] 1934
Les Chevaliers de la table ronde 1937
L'Impromtu d'Alice 1937
L'Impromptu des Bouffes-Parisiens 1938
Les parents terribles [*Intimate Relations*] 1938
Les Monstres sacrés 1940
La machine à écrire [*The Typewriter*] 1941
Renaud et Armide 1943
L'aigle à deux têtes [*The Eagle Has Two Heads*] 1946
Un Tramway nommé Déresir 1949
Bacchus 1951
L'Impromptu du Palais-Royal 1962

Screenplays

Le sang d'un poete [*Blood of a Poet*] 1930
Le belle et la bête 1945
La voix humaine 1947
L'aigle á deux têtes 1947
Orphée 1951
Le testament d'Orphée 1959

Other Major Works

Le Dieu bleu (ballet) 1912
Parade (ballet) 1917
Le grand écart [*The Grand Ecart*] (novel) 1923
Thomas l'imposteur [*Tomas the Impostor*] (novel) 1923
Opera: Oeuvres poetiques, 1925-1927 (poetry) 1927
Les enfants terribles [*The Children of the Game*] (novel) 1929
Opium: Journal d'une desintoxication [*Opium The diary of an Addict*] (nonfiction) 1930
The Journals of Jean Cocteau (nonfiction) 1956

GENERAL COMMENTARY

Laura Doyle Gates (essay date November 1988)

SOURCE: Gates, Laura Doyle. "Jean Cocteau and 'La Poésie du Théâtre'" *Romance Quarterly* 35, no 4 (November 1988)· 435-41

[*In the following essay, Gates considers Cocteau's attitude toward poetry and the physical aspects of theatre, particularly in three of his plays· Parade, Le Boeuf sur le toit, and Les Mariés de la tour Eiffel.*]

In his earliest dramatic works, Jean Cocteau concerned himself almost exclusively with plastic and architectural aspects of the theatre as opposed to literary or psychological ones. The importance of the *mise-en-scène* cannot be overestimated for *Parade, Le Boeuf sur le toit,* and *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel.* From the beginning, Cocteau classified all of his great variety of work as "poésie." He considered these three theatrical experiments to be poetry as well, although overwhelming emphasis was placed on the physical elements of the sets. For Cocteau during this early period poetry was created by all the plastic elements of the *mise-en-scène,* not only by characters' speech. He envisaged in these three plays what he termed "une poésie du théâtre," which he described in the Preface to *Les Mariés* of 1922: "L'action de ma pièce est imagée tandis que le texte ne l'est pas. J'essaie donc de substituer une "poésie du théâtre" à la "poésie au théâtre". La poésie au théâtre est une dentelle délicate, impossible à voir de loin. La poésie du théâtre serait une grosse dentelle; une dentelle en cordages, un navire sur la mer. *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel* peuvent avoir l'aspect terrible d'une goutte de poésie au microscope. Les scènes s'emboîtent comme les mots d'un poème."[1] Cocteau was reacting against the "poésie au théâtre," the verbal poetic theatre of playwrights such as Claudel and Rostand. In his view, such theatre was just an excuse for dramatized poetry. Consequently, it was a misuse of the physical properties of the stage, or rather, a waste of the great potential they contained for becoming poetic too. Poetry "in the theatre" is an excessively subtle lace, small and delicate, associated with literature. Cocteau wanted to overwhelm the spectator not with words but with image-filled, poetic architecture and action, a poetry "of the theatre." The metaphors would be active, dynamic, dramatized—not simply spoken to the audience, but shown to the audience.[2]

Thus, for Cocteau, the term "poésie" had wide application, not necessarily corresponding to a traditional conception of poetry. The process of creating "poésie du théâtre" entailed a new alliance among all the elements of the *mise-en-scène.* The role of the actor as a human diminished and that of the set and stage objects increased until a veritable exchange of roles took place. Actor, stage, decor, costume, music, speech, and gesture functioned in an esthetically unified ensemble. The impact of "poésie du théâtre" was intended to be more visual than dramatic or literary.

The principal means of creating "poésie du théâtre" was what he called in *Le Boeuf* "décor qui bouge"—a living or moving set (*Théâtre II,* p. 597). The idea of a moving set was a new conception of dramatic art where the characters are an integral part of the set and where stage objects play as important a role as the actors. Cocteau's early theatre was a marvelous mixture of dance, pantomime, music, and masks. These together created an atmosphere where the fantastic nature of everyday life could astonish the audience in a poetic process.

Cocteau was particularly influenced by Pablo Picasso and Cubism in his early theatre. Picasso collaborated with him for the set design and production of *Parade,* the ballet which became the starting point for more radical experiments. One characteristic of Picasso's Cubism was the recombination of certain aspects of a familiar object so that the viewer could see it in a new and esthetically revealing way, almost as if seeing it for the first time.

At the time of the production of *Parade,* Picasso was doing experiments with sheet metal constructions. He and Cocteau believed their set should play a more active role than was traditionally given to it. So Picasso literally built it on the backs of the actors. Two of the Managers wore costumes three meters tall and moved around the stage like giant buildings, deprived of most of their human quality. Picasso said he wanted to play with the idea that these enormous superhuman structures could become more "real" to the audience than the dancers who played the part of the Crowd.[3] The people in the Crowd would thus be reduced to the size and importance of small puppets despite their more human appearance.

In *Parade, Le Boeuf sur le toit,* and *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel,* Cocteau did not use actors, of course, in the proper sense of the word. The roles of the characters were played by professional dancers and clowns. He was more fascinated by the performance of a dancer than by the interpretation of an actor. The dancer is a set that moves on the stage. He uses his body as an instrument, to create a "poésie de mouvement." Looking at a ballet, we do not necessarily concentrate on the dancer as a human being but rather on his body, movements, and gestures as esthetic objects. In traditional theatre exactly the converse is true. A particular actor's dramatic and psychological representation is often quite divorced from his physical appearance. The use and perception of the body as an object, or even a machine, was attractive to Cocteau. For the expression of his conception of theatre the dancer was a very natural medium to choose. Cocteau's esthetic vision—where characters became objects and stage objects became characters—was better fulfilled by a dancer than an actor. So Cocteau became associated with Diaghilev and the Ballets russes early on, and later with Rolf de Maré and the Ballets suédois.

To examine the phenomenon of "décor qui bouge," we must reconstruct as many elements as possible of the *mises-en-scène* of these first three works. Let us start in 1917, with *Parade.* When Cocteau created the ballet *Parade,* he was under the direct influence of Picasso and Erik Satie. In the beginning he envisioned, to accompany the dance, a series of raw sounds in the "bruitiste" tradition of the Futurists. However, Picasso and Satie refused to agree to this. In the end Satie did incorporate into his score parts for typewriters, horns, helicopters, and other machines. Because of technical problems, few of these could be used in the actual performance (Melzer, p. 121). However, the idea of giving obvious importance to machines in the music was certainly there. They would alienate music from its human orientation and thus complement the dehumanized characters of the play.

Picasso rejected Cocteau's idea of making the characters speak through holes in the set. He was just as deaf to the

objections of the dancers, who hated the restrictive costumes he had designed (Melzer, p. 121). According to the script, the Managers were supposed to be in front of their theatre booth, gesticulating at the Crowd to come inside and watch the show, and finally crumpling from exhaustion when no one listens to them. But two of the three Managers were nearly ten feet tall—more like buildings than human beings. The other Manager was a horse played by two dancers. Their dramatic interpretation was not easy under the circumstances.

In spite of this, all the dancers' movements were precisely choreographed. The main characters of *Parade* are stereotyped—the Little American Girl, the Chinese Juggler, and the Acrobats. They are in this sense bigger than life, more real than real. The Juggler and Acrobats perform typical music-hall numbers for the Crowd, and the Little American Girl cranks a car, takes a photograph, rides a bicycle, and imitates Charlie Chaplin. The whole effect of the ballet was one of a parade of visual surprises, a distortion of everyday reality *à la cubiste*. The Crowd is so fascinated by the actions of the three characters mentioned above that it pays no attention to the theatre Managers.

The audience at the first performance was outraged by *Parade* and provoked into a violent reaction against Cocteau, Picasso, and Satie. The reaction of the critics was hardly less violent. They blasted the performance right down to the typewriters in the orchestra (Melzer, p. 122). The spectacle of the "moving set," the "décor qui bouge," threatened the members of the audience. They were shocked by the dehumanized, quasi-architectural or blatantly stereotyped "characters." Evidently Cocteau had proved himself a master of a variety of astonishing stage effects, taking an aspect of everyday life—such as the French idea of an American girl—and changing it into spectacle.

His second dramatic work, *Le Boeuf sur le toit* (1920), was for Cocteau a reaction to the critical reception of *Parade*. A few critics had labelled it a "farce" and Cocteau was very offended. He decided to give the Parisians a true farce which would satirize their poor taste. The characters of *Le Boeuf sur le toit* were inspired by the sterotyped image that the Frenchman had of speakeasies in the United States during Prohibition: "Entrent tour à tour: la dame décolletée, en robe rouge, très maniérée, très commune. La dame rousse, aux cheveux de papier, jolie, d'une allure masculine, un peu voûtée, les mains dan les poches. Le monsieur, en habit de moleskine, qui regarde son bracelet-montre et ne quitte pas son tabouret de bar jusqu'à sa sortie. Un bookmaker écarlate, aux dents d'or qui porte un melon gris et une cravate de chasse maintenue par une perle de la taille d'une boule de jardin" (*Théâtre II*, p. 598). Cocteau uses the stereotyped idea of violent American society as a support for the Guignolesque atmosphere of this pantomime, which is supposed to last only about fifteen minutes. The characters move around like automatons in a completely choreographed manner, as if in a dream. The Brothers Fratellini, famous European

clowns, played the roles of the barman, the *dame rousse,* and the *dame décolletée*. Using clowns gave Cocteau the same advantages as did using dancers in *Parade*. They were already a "décor qui bouge," a moving set. The characters were even more dehumanized by their costumes and the huge papier-mâché masks they wore.

In *Le Boeuf* the characters do form a "décor qui bouge" as much by their appearance and their movements as by the way in which other objects or stage situations control them, like the different parts of a complex machine. Cocteau uses an associational logic to organize the action. The action can take on qualities of language, reflecting the way that certain words are always associated with certain other words. In *Le Boeuf,* this sort of association leads to a series of visual jokes. Because the pantomime is set in a New York speakeasy, naturally all the stock characters are represented. It is because there is a ceiling fan that the policeman is decapitated; because there is a severed head on the stage, the woman dances the triumphal dance of Salome with the head of John the Baptist. Cocteau uses the elements of the set to determine the plot. We see the same kind of visual wit or invention as in *Parade.*

The music for *Le Boeuf sur le toit* was composed by Darius Milhaud. He contributed lively Brazilian melodies which were played once before the curtain rose, then again during the performance. The music was to have no relation to what was happening on the stage. Its liveliness formed a jarring contrast to the somnambulant movements of the characters, separated from its normal function of complementing action.

Le Boeuf is an intentionally superficial work. In fact there is nothing but surface. The action is determined by stereotyped objects and situations that are immediately identifiable. We cannot predict the direction that the action will take, but this action is always understandable within the logic of the play. Even the characters have only surface, accessible to vision alone, deprived of human expression by huge masks. They are types, without psychological depth. Moreover, the music reveals nothing. Cocteau's audience was forced to stay on the surface—to look only.

Cocteau's intention to leave the audience there, to fascinate with visual aspects of the performance, is manifested differently in *Le Mariés de la Tour Eiffel* of 1921. The element of a text is added, opening the possibilities of language for his creative intentions. Language becomes a property of the set, not of the characters. Cocteau realized that he had at last achieved his esthetic goal of creating a "poésie du théâtre," for which the other two plays had been experiments. Here he uses the idea that Picasso had rejected during the production of *Parade* Rather than having the actors speak through holes in the set, he encloses the two Narrators in large stationary phonograph costumes and has them deliver their lines through the trumpets at each side of the stage.

Cocteau was fascinated as a boy by the carnival game in France in which the player tries to knock over moving figures representing a wedding party.[4] *Les Mariés de la*

Tour Eiffel, a ballet and mime, contains the same characters and the same violent action. Jean Hugo's costumes were charming and quite elaborate, and they gave the dancers the air of large dolls. Hugo describes how he tackled the problem of designing them: "Le poète a voulu réhabiliter les lieux communs. J'ouvris donc le dictionnaire Larousse aux mots baigneuse, bottine, cycliste, marié, etc. J'y trouvai des baigneuses en jupons, des mariées à taille de guêpe, un lion semblable à celui des magasins du Louvre, une cycliste en culotte, des bottines à boutons, tout un style. . . ."[5] Following Cocteau's intentions, Hugo tried to find the most banal representation possible for the characters, so that their extreme banality might bring the commonplace back to life for the audience.

All the actors' movements were choreographed to be automatic—they had to appear to be controlled by the speech of the two Phonographs. The Phonographs are really the only characters that talk (the Camera does talk once). They speak in turn "très fort, très vite, et prononcent distinctement chaque syllabe" (*Théâtre I,* p. 11). Their dehumanized voices recite the lines of all the characters in a monotone. They seem like automatic machines but they possess the power to control the action of the "human" characters.

Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel is, on one level, a satire of the bourgeois' sacred institutions. The characters represent all that is banal and ordinary; they "talk" to each other in a hilarious juxtaposition of clichés. At the same time, this play is an attempt to astonish with the potentially fantastic nature of everyday life. The amazing world that comes into contact with the everyday one is the Photographer's Camera, which releases a whole series of strange and wonderful personnages. An Ostrich, a Bather, a Child, and a Lion come, and they disturb the guests since their logic does not correspond to that of the wedding party.

Language and object function together according to this unusual logic, belonging to two different worlds simultaneously and having different meanings in each one. They work together to control and limit the action. For example, when the Photographer says, "Regardez l'objectif; un oiseau va sortir," this signals the Camera to produce another miraculous character. The General does not realize that by merely mentioning the tigers in Africa, a Lion will be produced and will eat him, but that is the way the logic works. The ambiguity of the word "balles" results directly in the massacre of the wedding party by little Justin. Ordinary logic no longer applies in this crazy world of linguistic associations. Cocteau no longer uses objects alone to control stage action, as in *Parade,* but extends the same whimsical determinism to language.

The playwright takes the idea of creating a wholly superficial, visual spectacle as far as possible at the end of this play. A complete exchange of roles has taken place between the set and the actors. The actors are almost totally immobile—only the set can act now. The wedding party freezes into a painting, a kind of backdrop, "created" by the conversation of the two Phonographs.

In Cocteau's dramatic vision, objects play roles like those of actors and vice versa. That which means "actor" is not necessarily an animate object or human being, and that which denotes "set" is not always an inanimate object. There is a kind of subjective/objective continuum through which all the elements of a *mise-en-scène* pass during any theatrical performance.[6]

It is essentially upon this phenomenon—this capacity for exchange—that Cocteau plays to create his "poésie du théâtre" using a "décor qui bouge." Poetry, generally associated with language, a property of characters, becomes associated with the set. The set, traditionally associated with inanimate architecture and objects, is now "played" by people. In sum, the early dramatic works of Cocteau demonstrate the magic of theatre, which allows all these elements to be recombined into a spectacular esthetic ensemble.

Notes

1. *Théâtre 1* (Paris: Grasset, 1957), p. 5.

2. E. Freeman, ed,. *Orphée: The Play and the Film,* by Jean Cocteau (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1976), p. xvii.

3. Annabelle Melzer, *Latest Rage the Big Drum: Dada and Surrealist Performance* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1976), p. 121.

4. Milorad, "De *La Noce Massacrée* aux *Mariés de la Tour Eiffel,*" *Cahiers Jean Cocteau* 5 (1975), p. 30.

5. "Pages de Journal: *Les Mariés,*" *Cahiers Jean Cocteau* 5 (1975), p. 22.

6. Keir Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* (New York: Methuen, 1980), p. 15.

Carol A. Cujec (essay date fall 1996)

[*In the following essay, Cujec asserts that Cocteau's early classical adaptations—*Antigone, Oedipus-Rex, Oedipe-Roi—*are "bold avant-garde experiments reflecting the radical revision of the theater by modernist innovators of the era."*]

Following his initial productions of avant-garde ballet, Jean Cocteau sought to confirm his capabilities as a serious dramatist by turning to classical subject matter. Cocteau's interest in the classics was encouraged by his companion Raymond Radiguet who declared: "Il faut éctire . . . comme tout le monde."[1] By "tout le monde," he was not referring to the popular boulevard authors nor to the overly-fashionable avant-garde, but rather to the

celebrated authors of Western civilization. Cocteau agreed that only by seeming to conform to the traditional might one achieve the anarchy sought by the modernists. Paradoxically, he hoped to prove that modernity and novelty could be found even in the most ancient of texts: "J'étais agacé par le machinisme d'avant-garde. J'avais voulu démontrer que . . . n'importe quel chef-d'oeuvre ancien pouvait reprendre une incroyable jeunesse entre les mains d'un artiste" (*OC* 9: 319). While his plays *Orphée* and *La machine infernale* have generated much critical interest and analysis, his earlier classical adaptations, *Antigone, Oedipus Rex* and *Oedipe-Roi,* are ignored by critics or simply dismissed as dry precursors to his more celebrated myth plays.[2] However, close inspection of the text and staging reveals them to be bold avant-garde experiments reflecting the radical revision of the theater by modernist innovators of the era.

Classical works were not absent from European stages prior to Cocteau's production of *Antigone* in 1922.[3] Michael Grant calculates that in France alone: "582 French imitations, translations or adaptations of classical originals sprang from *le rêve hellénique* between 1840 and 1900."[4] However, Cocteau was the first French dramatist to realize that these classical dramas no longer engaged the average spectator, presented as they often were as sacred objects of high culture in highbrow translations and staged according to misguided attempts at historical accuracy. Cocteau announced: "L'*Oedipe* de Sophocle . . . ne marche plus à notre rythme. Il s'imposait de transformer un ennuyeux institut en un institut de beauté."[5] Antonin Artaud echoed this sentiment several years later:

> On doit en finir avec cette idée des chefs-d'oeuvre réservés à une soidisant élite, et que la foule ne comprend pas . . . si, par exemple, la foule actuelle ne comprend plus *Oedipe-Roi,* j'oserai dire que c'est la faute à *Oedipe-Roi* et non à la foule.[6]

To remedy this, Cocteau set out to modernize classical dramas and use them as vehicles to communicate personal themes. In France, his example was followed by others such as Gide, Giraudoux, Anouilh, and Sartre.

Cocteau did not regard classical dramas as historical artifacts but as living works of art which seek to communicate with the living spectator. The primary obstacle to communication lay in the complex rhetoric of previous adaptations. Like other modernist innovators such as E. Gordon Craig and Antonin Artaud, Cocteau sought to revitalize the theater by freeing it from the tyranny of the literary text. He strove to minimize the importance of the text by stripping it down to its bare essentials with very little rhetorical ornamentation. Hence, he eliminated what he considered to be unnecessary dialogue and employed frank, colloquial language as opposed to elevated, poetic language-a relatively new and surprising innovation for a production of a classical drama. Cocteau compared his technique of modernization to photographing Greece by airplane, or making a quick sketch of a famous painting at a museum: "De grandes beautés disparaissent, d'autres

surgissent . . . chacun croit l'entendre pour la première fois" (*OC* 5: 139). Reducing the text to its essential elements, he felt, made the play more powerful for the modern spectator: "J'ôte à un drame immortel la matière morte qui recouvre sa matière vivante. . . . Le drame [est] 'rafraîchi,' rasé, coupé, peigné."[7] To purists indignant at the thought of altering a classical text, he quoted Stravinsky: "Vous respectez, moi j'aime" (*OC* 9: 277). Far more offensive to Cocteau was a traditional performance of *Antigone* by an actress whose advanced age made her walk to the tomb seem rather timely.[8]

By reducing and simplifying the text, he shifted the emphasis away from textual lyricism (dubbed by Cocteau "la poésie au théâtre"), allowing him to experiment with the expressive powers of the many other theatrical resources to create his unique style of "poésie *de* théâtre." While these plays mark a drastic change in subject matter and tone from his previous stage works, aesthetically they are similar:

> Peu m'importe de faire rire ou pleurer. Il s'agit de remplir une scène avec certaines masses vocales et plastiques. *Les Mariés de la tour Eiffel, Parade, Le Boeuf sur le toit, Antigone* sont le même prétexte.[9]

Antigone marked Cocteau's first appropriation of Greek subject matter, a motif which would continue to resonate throughout his oeuvre to the very end. By simplifying and eliminating much of Sophocles' rhetoric, he created a text which communicated more easily with a modern audience. He even allowed for the occasional anachronism, as when Creon calls Antigone an anarchist (*OC* 5: 164).[10] Yet the language is not colloquial, since Cocteau did not seek to domesticate his characters as did Anouilh in his *Antigone.* Rather, Cocteau distances the text with respect to normal speech by reviving two ancient practices: the exclusive use of the informal address (*tu*) among all the characters, and the chorus's reference to itself using the first person singular (*je*). Cocteau further distances the characters by specifying that the dry text be delivered dryly. He instructs the chorus to speak almost mechanically: "Très haut et très vite comme si elle lisait un article de journal" (143). Likewise, he insists that Antigone and Creon speak with minimal inflection and gesticulation so that the emotion arises solely from what they are saying. This understated acting style, in stark contrast to the bravado of the *monstre sacré* who dominated classical drama in the nineteenth century, gave the characters a mysterious, inhuman quality. Their inhumanity was further emphasized by their appearance. Beneath the costumes, the actors wore black tights covering their arms and legs to suggest a royal family of insects. The costumes were created by Chanel because, as Cocteau remarked in a whimsical quip: "Je n'imagine pas les filles d'Oedipe mal vêtues."[11] He did not seek historical accuracy in the costumes but boasted that they were admirably inaccurate. For the 1927 revival, the actors wore masks, as in ancient Greece, yet these masks were transparent with delicate features sewn on, once again blending old and new.

Other aspects of Cocteau's staging are similarly stylized and symbolic. In keeping with the minimal text, the chorus is portrayed as a single disembodied voice emanating through a hole in the back wall of the set. For the 1927 revival, Picasso created five monumental heads of young men to surround the hole. In this way, Cocteau demonstrated directorial prowess by eliminating the problem of a cumbersome chorus of many actors.[12] At the height of the confrontation between Antigone and Creon, their opposing stances are represented visually when the two actors converse face to face with their foreheads touching. As Hugh Dickinson points out, this visually reinforces Cocteau's metaphor of a family of insects because "insects, when they communicate, put their heads together."[13] Later in the play, prior to Antigone's march to her grave, a guard thrusts his lance in front of her to prevent her from approaching Creon; she then grasps it as she utters her final justifications, giving the effect of a woman pleading her case in a modern courtroom.

The action moves swiftly forward, leaving no time for realistic transitions or detailed characterization. Cocteau contended: "Notre vitesse, notre patience, ne sont pas celles d'Athènes en 440 avant Jésus-Christ. . . . Ainsi réduite, concentrée, décapée, l'oeuvre . . . roule vers le dénouement comme un express" (*OC* 9: 319). Creon's exit to rescue Antigone leaves the stage empty (generally a theatrical taboo), bringing the rapid action to a tense halt. The void is filled aurally with an interlude written for the production by Arthur Honegger. This music, like the text, is simple—only two instruments. For the 1927 revival, Cocteau had a strange being, "[une] sorte de statue vivante" (*OC* 5: 176), slowly stride across the empty stage at this time. Given his penchant for anthropomorphizing death in later productions, this being can be considered Cocteau's first dramatic representation of the underworld, death coming to retrieve Antigone.

Because Cocteau was quite faithful to Sophocles' plot, despite the textual reductions, it may appear at first glance that the Frenchman put little of himself into the adaptation; Cocteau asserted this himself: "On a cru me reconnaître dessous. C'est bien de l'honneur."[14] Yet upon closer inspection, one can ascertain a personal message, as in all his works. His choice to recreate *Antigone* was not arbitrary, since she epitomizes Cocteau's spirit of independence and rebellion against established social order in the name of a higher (poetic) law. Her declaration to Ismene: "Je sais que je plais où je dois plaire" (*OC* 5: 148), was Cocteau's own battle cry against his enemies. Antigone's individuality is punished by society, making her the first of many martyred Coctelian protagonists. Cocteau considered himself constantly on trial for his art as well as for his homosexuality. He believed that, like Antigone, he would be condemned to suffering and gain admiration and respect only after death.

Given his attitude toward repressive social order, Cocteau subtly emphasizes the element of persecution in the play by rendering both the chorus and Creon more distasteful

than in Sophocles. Cocteau describes the chorus as fickle and opportunistic (*OC* 9: 320), most likely due to its reluctance to defend Antigone. Though he condenses much of the chorus's commentary, he does not omit lines which illustrate their passivity and respect for authority, such as the unhelpful remark made during Haemon's confrontation with Creon: "O roi, s'il a raison, écoute-le. S'il a tort, qu'il t'écoute. Le procès est, de part et d'autre, en excellentes mains" (*OC* 5: 164). Like Sophocles, Cocteau regarded the chorus as a reflection of society, in this case the Parisian public. His reducing it to a single voice was perhaps symbolic of his frustration at the audience's (and society's) homogeneity and adherence to one opinion:

> Comment se fait-il qu'une salle soit bonne ou mauvaise, jamais mixte? Comment se fait-il que les salles successives s'accoutument au relief d'une pensée, comme si ces salles étaient une seule et même personne à laquelle on répète quelque chose? . . . Les individus qui composent un public laissent, en principe, leur individualité au vestiaire.

> (*OC* 11: 407-408)

Creon, the symbol of social order to Cocteau, is made to appear villainous in the play through his curt, prosaic speech and ice-cold objectivity. While it is true that Sophocles' Creon displays moments of vindictive tyranny in his insistence to punish Antigone, he also exhibits nobility and pathos, allowing the spectator to alternately admire, admonish, and finally pity him. In contrast, Cocteau's Creon lacks nobility, appearing almost juvenile in his treatment of others, as when he hurls simplistic insults at the chorus ("Assez de sottises, vieillesse" [*OC* 152][15]) and at his son ("Coeur mou! Coeur mou!" [166]). The combination of simple language and unemotional delivery, as specified by Cocteau, renders the character brutish and inhuman. He appears particularly cruel when he sends Antigone to her grave with unsettling indifference: "Hop! Qu'on l'emporte vite. Qu'on l'enferme. Qu'on la laisse là!" (170). Antigone's language, on the other hand, is markedly eloquent at times: "J'ai entendu raconter la mort de la fille de Tantale . . . maintenant la neige la recouvre et ses larmes glaciales coulent du haut en bas. Voilà mon lit, voilà les caresses qui m'attendent" (169). Cocteau's goal is clear—as the authority figure is villainized, the free-thinking and poetic Antigone is canonized by poets across the centuries.

Antigone was first performed in 1922 at Dullin's Théâtre de l'Atelier, with Dullin directing and playing Creon, and Cocteau reading for the chorus. The reaction to the production was quite favorable, and it ran for 100 performances. However, the play did not escape criticism. Ironically, *Antigone* was attacked by both modernists and traditionalists. The surrealist leader André Breton was forcibly removed from the theater after shouting disruptive comments during one performance. Similarly, Raymond Duncan, who thought himself a true Greek, came twice clad in Greek garb, yelling, through a bullhorn, protests against the novelties of Cocteau's production.[16] André Gide objected to what he called "la sauce ultra-moderne" in which the