DRAMA AND REALITY: the European theatre since Ibsen

Ronald Gaskell

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Routledge & Kegan Paul
London

First published 1972
by Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd
Broadway House, 68-74 Carter Lane,
London EC4V 5EL
Printed in Great Britain by
Northumberland Press Limited, Gateshead
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ISBN 0 7100 7145 0 (c)
ISBN 0 7100 7146 9 (p)

Preface

This book makes no attempt to offer a critical survey of modern drama. Its purpose is to clarify different conceptions of reality and to show how these have found expression in the European theatre of the last hundred years.

Broadly speaking, we can distinguish three perspectives: the naturalistic account of the world implied in plays like *The Cherry Orchard*; a subjective view which stresses the isolation and complexity of the mind (Symbolist, Expressionist and Surrealist drama, Pirandello, Beckett, Ionesco); and the religious vision which is basic to the work of writers like Eliot and Claudel.

Of course there is a good deal of overlapping. Ibsen's plays, for example, are as much subjective as naturalistic. Still, the essential differences are clear.

It will be agreed that if any dramatist transcends these differences —if any dramatist offers us not a partial but a complete image of human life—that dramatist is Shakespeare. The present study therefore begins with a brief sketch of Shakespeare's realism. Chapters 2 to 4 examine the more limited conceptions of reality in the modern theatre. Chapter 5 considers the consequences for dramatic form. Part II goes on to take a number of plays which imply a distinctive vision of reality, a personal modification of one of the three perspectives I have indicated, and tries to show how the form of each play expresses and defines this personal vision.

The two parts, I hope, complement each other: Part I providing a context for the more detailed analyses in the second half of the book, Part II substantiating or qualifying some of the more sweeping judgments made in Part I.

Without the encouragement of my wife, who discussed it with me at every stage, this book would probably never have been completed. I am grateful also to my brother, Fr Austin Gaskell, O.P., who did

his best to remedy my ignorance of theology; to David Milligan, who read the whole of Part I in typescript; and to Geoffrey Connell, Henry Gifford, Ronald Hayman, Philip Henderson and Richard Peace, who were kind enough to criticize earlier drafts of certain chapters in Part II.

My debts to published sources I have acknowledged wherever I could recognize them. (Superior figures are not used in the text, but references will be found at pp. 159-66.) I am especially indebted to the dramatic criticism of Yeats and T. S. Eliot, and to three books from which I have learned more than references can suggest: Eric Bentley's *The Life of the Drama*, Francis Fergusson's *The Idea of a Theater* and Raymond Williams's *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot*. (An extensively revised and expanded edition of Mr Williams's book appeared in 1968 as *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht*.)

The Oxford Ibsen, translated and edited by James W. McFarlane, and *The Oxford Chekhov*, translated and edited by Ronald Hingley, have been very helpful. Quotations are from these texts, except that for *Brand* I quote from Michael Meyer's version and for *Peer Gynt* from Norman Ginsbury's. Other translations I have used, and from which I quote, are those of Brecht (Eric Bentley), Lorca (James Graham-Lujan and Richard L. O'Connell) and Pirandello (Frederick May). I am responsible for altering a word or two in the translations of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, *Blood Wedding* and *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, where it seemed useful, in a short quotation, to give a more literal rendering of the original.

The editors of the *Critical Quarterly*, *Drama Survey*, *Essays in Criticism* and *Modern Drama* have kindly allowed me to make use in Part II of some material which appeared, in rather different form, in their pages.

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Part 1

The world of the play

I

Shakespeare and the modern theatre

In the fourth act of Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* Antony, hearing of Enobarbus' desertion to the enemy, orders his treasure to be sent after him. Enobarbus, alone for a moment, has already begun to regret his treachery, when a soldier of Caesar's breaks in:

Soldier: Enobarbus, Antony
Hath after thee sent all thy treasure with
His bounty overplus.

Enobarbus: I give it you.

Soldier: Mock not, Enobarbus,
I tell you true. Your Emperor
Continues still a Jove. (*Exit*)

This sounds rather thin. The point of the scene is Antony's generosity, and if we are to feel that generosity we need some proof that the treasure exists. To trundle it on to the stage, on the other hand, would be clumsy. Better to write:

Soldier: Enobarbus, Antony
Hath after thee sent all thy treasure with
His bounty overplus. The messenger
Came on my guard, and at thy tent is now
Unloading of his mules.

Enobarbus: I give it you.

Shakespeare then remembers, and reminds us, that the messenger will have to make his way back through Caesar's lines:

Soldier: Mock not, Enobarbus,
I tell you true: best you saf'd the bringer
Out of the host. I must attend mine office,

> Or would have done't myself. Your Emperor
> Continues still a Jove. (*Exit*)

The episode takes less than thirty seconds. In the theatre it convinces by its particularity, by the way the soldier's words bring an offstage world to life in our imagination.

When we speak of Shakespeare's realism we have in mind this fidelity to the particular. Clearly, however, we mean more than that. Consider some of the details borrowed from Plutarch: Antony roaming the streets with the Queen of Egypt, her trick of hanging a salt fish on his line, Antony's bungling of his suicide. Why select such details as these, often unromantic, for a play which presents Cleopatra and Antony in a nobler light than Plutarch allowed them? Shakespeare seems to delight in the unexpected, in the contradictions of experience. Enobarbus follows his description of Cleopatra's splendour on the Cydnus with:

> I saw her once
> Hop forty paces through the public street,
> And having lost her breath, she spoke, and panted,
> That she did make defect, perfection;

and the clown who brings the asp has barely time to leave ('Yes, forsooth, I wish you joy o' the worm') before we are listening to:

> Give me my robe, put on my crown, I have
> Immortal longings in me.

The realism of *Antony and Cleopatra* is partly a matter of this clash of tones, the everyday and the magnificent coming together as they could not in a more decorous art—the art of Racine, say, or of Daniel's *Cleopatra*. Partly it is a matter of concrete detail, as in the soldier's words to Enobarbus: detail made vivid by lively, idiomatic speech. And none of these would be feasible without Shakespeare's grasp of the world in which men act, or without his grasp of the men themselves and their passionate involvement in the world.

Shakespeare, we can say, affirms the whole range of our experience: sensual, emotional, moral, intellectual, spiritual. Not so Racine; not so, either, any dramatist of the last hundred years—not even Chekhov. To every writer certain areas of experience come to seem important; these he illuminates, others he leaves in shadow or excludes completely. Shakespeare is no exception to this, yet his mature work excludes so little that it seems to enlarge rather than limit our experience. Francis Fergusson has written of the 'partial perspectives' of

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the modern theatre: partial in comparison with the world that Shakespeare offers to the imagination. It will be useful, before we turn to these perspectives, to recall that larger world.

Modern drama, like modern life, takes place for the most part in drawing rooms and kitchens. Insulated, except on rare occasions, from the harshness of wind and sky and even from the onset of darkness, we can forget that man is an animal who lives by the fruits of the earth and dies. Shakespeare does not forget. In all his plays nature is accepted as the setting and basis of human life.

Not that nature provides a sufficient life. The forest of Arden is more than once described as 'desert'—meaning, apparently, not 'barren' (for there are streams, oaks, brambles, hawthorns), but 'unpeopled': a place where few men would live from choice. Orlando himself has no mind to be a peasant, and the Duke and his friends, as everyone has noticed, are delighted to leave the forest at the end. The Renaissance debate between nature and culture runs through half a dozen of Shakespeare's plays, but nowhere does Shakespeare resolve it in favour of nature. Storm and shipwreck are common in his work, and on the heath unaccommodated man confronts the violence of the elements: Lear defiant, the Fool shivering with cold, Tom O' Bedlam exposed half naked to 'the extremity of the skies'.

Nature is no pastoral world for Shakespeare. Yet an awareness of it, as the condition of man's life, is everywhere; even the history plays have their incidents on country roads or in the open fields. The modern theatre, in comparison, gives us little or nothing of the natural world. No doubt this is what we should expect, since life in Europe has been largely urban for at least a hundred years. It might even be argued that drama will always concern itself with the finest consciousness of its time, and will seldom find this in a rural setting. Is *Oedipus the King* not a play of the city? Does Hamlet trouble himself with rocks and trees? Yet Sophocles, chiefly through the Chorus, and Shakespeare, through metaphor and allusion, keep us constantly aware of sea and mountain and of the labour that built and sustains Elsinore and Thebes. Perhaps they could do this because fifth-century Athens and Elizabethan London were country towns, but even today one can feel the dependence of a great city on sea and sky, and a drama that ignores these is the poorer for it.

Shakespeare can create a landscape in a line or two:

> Alack, the night comes on, and the bleak winds
> Do sorely ruffle. For many miles about
> There's scarce a bush.

In general, however, he works through metaphor, which wakens our senses to the reality of nature not as landscape but as life. Often his metaphors stress the activity of men, finding images in the swiftness and certainty of the animals, the flight of birds, the sap rising in the tree; or they define the mood or character of the speaker, as Othello's free and open nature finds expression through metaphors of wind and ocean and the heavens. Since the natural world, like the passions of men, changes from moment to moment, rage, fear, jealousy and so on, are everywhere made vivid for us in Shakespeare by imagery of weather, the struggle of the waves, clouds gathering or travelling on the wind. The plays are crowded with metaphors of this kind, and nothing exhibits more strikingly Shakespeare's grasp of the abundance and complexity of life. For through these metaphors, charged with conviction by human feeling, Shakespeare brings home to us the unity of mind and body and the relatedness of all living things: the kinship of men and women, in their emotional no less than in their physical life, with the cycle of the seasons, the activity of the animals, the ebb and flow of the tides. And this sense of kinship is confirmed by the pressure of the verse, which seems to echo, in its variations of pause and stress, the rhythmic movement of all organic life.

Do we find this awareness of life in the modern theatre? Occasionally in Brecht, Synge and Claudel, at full strength perhaps only in Lorca. The vitality of Lorca's work is not just a feeling for the natural world, for the life of the senses, or for human emotion. It includes these, and the senses give emotion the words and images it needs to find a voice. But what makes his plays so exhilarating, what reminds us of Shakespeare, is his intuition of an energy that displays itself equally through nature and in the passions of men and women. So the focal point of Lorca's drama, the fertility dance of *Yerma*, affirms the moving stream of human life within the larger rhythm of generation which we call the world.

The belief that European drama had its origins in fertility ritual has been questioned. Yet Susanne Langer is surely right that comedy at least springs from the impulse that gave rise to such rituals: an impulse to celebrate not just the triumph of man over fortune but the process of life itself to which men and women commit themselves in marriage. Shakespeare's comedies answer to this interpretation, and there is no break, except chronologically, between *As You Like It* or *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the deeper feeling for the affinity of man with nature that runs through *The Winter's Tale*.

But affinity is not identity. If man belonged wholly to the process of nature, drama would be inconceivable, or at best would be reduced to something like Brecht's *Baal*, a kind of Dionysiac dithyramb in praise of the careless promiscuity of life. At the close of *A Mid-*

summer Night's Dream nature, in the person of the fairies, invades the palace to bless the marriage of Theseus and the lovers, for marriage is the human gateway to fertility and fertility the only end (if we can call it an end) that nature has. But Theseus and the lovers have interests, affections, manners, values, outside the order of nature. They even like to watch a play.

Shakespeare, we said, works chiefly through metaphor. Metaphor springs from heightened feeling, in which the mind may animate nature with its own energy or find in nature an equivalent for its own passion. Since Coleridge the mind's ambition has often been to deny the natural world any reality except as a projection of its moods. This extreme position is reached in Symbolist poetry and at times in the plays of Yeats; an important stage on the way to it is marked by the subjective landscapes of Ibsen's later work. In Shakespeare the mind never swallows the world in this way. Obviously the to-and-fro-conflicting wind and rain presents the whirl of Lear's passion on the heath. Lear himself speaks of 'the tempest in my mind'. But the tempest is not only in his mind; a real storm rages in the sky outside him, soaking and deafening Kent, Edgar and the Fool. And though it is not an accident that the confusions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* take place in a wood by moonlight, the moon, however evocative of mutability, however brilliantly Shakespeare uses it as an image to explore the validity of the imagination, remains the moon, drifting over a wood near Athens: a wood with briars, mulberries and cowslips, acorns, hedgehogs, bats.

The reality of the natural world, in which and by which we live, implies the reality of the body which belongs inescapably to the world.

No writer seizes more eagerly than Shakespeare on the energies of the human body. Coriolanus draws his sword on the plebeians, Hamlet hurls his friends aside to follow the ghost, Falstaff illustrates the saga of his fight with the men in buckram: 'I tell thee what Hal, if I tell thee a lie, spit in my face, call me horse. Thou knowest my old ward—here I lay, and thus I bore my point. Four rogues in buckram let drive at me—.' Every scene, almost every passage, gives the actor opportunities for expressive gesture. Not that Shakespeare relies on gesture, as a dramatist like Chekhov often does, to do the work of articulate speech. In Shakespeare gesture never replaces speech but enforces or clarifies it. When Lear kneels to Cordelia, the words they speak are exact and moving, though the act of kneeling confirms and brings home to us the humility and love that the words utter.

Shakespeare's awareness of the body finds expression not only in

gesture and movement but through the pace and emphasis of his verse. An unexpected metrical stress can make as sharp an impact in the theatre as the turn of an actor's head:

> But wherefore could not I pronounce 'Amen'?
> I had most need of blessing, and 'Amen'
> Stuck in my throat.

The brutal, almost muscular, thrust of the verb there is characteristic. Language in drama approximates everywhere to gesture, but nowhere so closely and frequently as with Shakespeare. It is this, perhaps, more than anything else, that attracts us in his most vital characters: Berowne, Mercutio, Richard of Gloucester, Falstaff, Rosalind, Edmund. Intelligence, assurance, imagination, they have all these, but essentially what they communicate in the theatre is the excitement of being physically alive. If we happen to see *Ghosts* or *Rosmersholm* in the same week as *As You Like It*, what strikes us surely is not that with Ibsen we are watching events that might well have taken place, but that in Shakespeare, with all his improbabilities, his convention of disguise and absurdly happy ending, we have life expressing itself with a delighted energy in every phrase.

This is not to say that Shakespeare always imagines character naturalistically. Escalus remarks of Angelo at one point that 'he is indeed Justice', and the Duke's role in *Measure for Measure* seems to be at least partly allegorical. Morality plays were acted in England well into Shakespeare's lifetime, and it is certainly no requirement of drama that the actors should present men and women. In *Henry IV* Shakespeare remembers the kind of play in which a young man—Youth, Mankind, or whatever—is seduced by Folly, Riot and Sensual Appetite to a life of drink and revelry in the taverns. Hal's relationship with Falstaff recreates this familiar stage situation. But to say no more than this would be misleading to anyone unacquainted with Shakespeare's play. Falstaff is not just a comic Vice, he is also humorous and witty. As a boy, he was page to the Duke of Norfolk; as we see him on the stage, trotting away at Gadshill, feigning dead at Shrewsbury or enjoying himself with Doll or Shallow, he is incomparably more complex, human and alive, than any figure in morality drama. And Hal, the prince who trains himself for the throne, is by no means simply an image of young manhood. Shakespeare sees in the development of the Prince and the rejection of Falstaff an archetypal situation. He also sees, and shows us, human life; and our pleasure in the theatre includes a pleasure in men not only for what makes each of them unique but for the humanity we share with them—with Falstaff on the field at Shrewsbury ('I would 'twere bedtime, Hal, and all well'), or with Shallow when he remembers his

days at Clement's Inn 'where I believe they will talk of mad Shallow yet'.

Eliot, many years ago, drew attention to the trend of Elizabethan drama towards naturalism. Behind this trend can be felt the Protestant stress on the uniqueness of the individual and the Renaissance delight in the vitality and variety of men. It is true that when we study any of Shakespeare's plays in relation to the source from which he worked, we find that character is never explored for its own sake, but as part of a total pattern through which he objectifies his theme. Rosalind is not Lodge's Rosalynde, because Shakespeare saw in Lodge the possibility of a complex criticism of romantic love and pastoral. Yet what we see in the theatre is a young woman, charming, level-headed and affectionate. We make-believe her to be a person, and so we must if we are to respond to the play. For Shakespeare's themes are in the widest sense ethical: every play explores a central insight not just into life but into human life. And such themes find their clearest expression—why else did Shakespeare write for the stage?—through characters who, within the world of the play, love and suffer as we do outside it.

Consider, for example, the murder of Duncan. What makes this one of the finest scenes in the theatre? The tense expectancy of Lady Macbeth, darkness, the shriek of the owl; the dazed entrance of the murderer, the staccato exchange between them, then Macbeth's recognition of the horror and irrevocability of what he has done. Above all, deepening our response to the immediate situation on the stage, the intimacy with which Shakespeare has made us feel the agitation of Macbeth's mind and the overflowing kindness of the guest he kills. Macbeth can drive the daggers into a sleeping man only by stifling, momentarily, his awareness of him as a man: hence the nightmare unreality of the murder, from which he wakens to the physical reality of the world—blood on his hands, the daggers he still clutches, the knocking at the South entry. This is obvious enough once Shakespeare has done it, but it could only have been done by a writer for whom his characters are living men and women: a writer, therefore, for whom the ethical can never be isolated, as it is in Sartre and often even in Ibsen, from the sensuous and emotional life of the people involved.

Shakespeare's characters are physically alive, their senses are alert, their emotions deep and various. Erich Auerbach, analysing Shakespeare's realism, makes a further, very important, point: the diversity, especially the social diversity, of Shakespeare's men and women, with the consequent mixture of styles in all his work. Shakespeare, of course, has no monopoly here. Something of the kind could be found, to the dismay of classicists like Sidney, in most of the Eliza-

bethans. What is distinctive of Shakespeare is his ability to invent speech of equal verve and rightness for Hamlet and the gravediggers, Juliet and her nurse, Falstaff and the Prince, and to bring these characters together in episodes that allow their different ways of life to interact. This comes out most forcibly when we turn from Shakespeare to Racine. Phèdre has a nurse, but Oenone, like her mistress, speaks in alexandrines. She does not, like Juliet's nurse, bring a whole range of prosaic attitudes and assumptions into active contrast with the norm of feeling in the play. Can we identify any single mode of feeling as a norm in *Romeo and Juliet*? Mercutio's quick-witted sensuality and the nurse's coarse, good-natured commonsense are presented as vividly as the youthful idealism of the lovers. And *Romeo and Juliet* is an early play; in *Hamlet*, *Henry IV* or *Antony and Cleopatra*, the interplay of tones and the resultant complexity of feeling are incomparably more subtle.

If drama is to be true to the diversity of people's lives it must show us men in society, and it must show, or at least suggest, something of the world in which they live. We have seen that Shakespeare never loses sight of the natural world, the world of wind and shadow, spring and harvest. But drama begins with the separation of man from nature. Typically, the setting is not a rainswept heath or a wood near Athens, but the battlements at Elsinore, the Boar's Head tavern, an apartment in Oslo or Paris. Ibsen, and the naturalistic theatre generally, takes enormous trouble to persuade us of the reality of the rooms we live in, the clothes we wear, the chairs, beds and tables we use every day. Racine neglects these, they have no place to speak of in Greek tragedy or in *Everyman*; yet they provide an index to economic pressures that in some degree condition our lives. Does Shakespeare dramatize these pressures?

Antonio, we are told, has an argosy bound for Tripolis, another for the Indies, a third at Mexico, a fourth trading to England; like Shylock, he moves in a world of wine and spices, silks, velvets, alabaster, ducats, gold and turquoise rings. True, the commercial world of *The Merchant of Venice* is by no means common in Shakespeare. His leading characters, almost without exception, are economically and socially free. But a Shakespeare play never limits our attention or sympathy to its leading characters. An awareness of the stratification of society—the kind of awareness that gives such strength and tension to a play like *Coriolanus*—runs through several of the comedies as well as through the English histories and Roman plays: an awareness, that is, not just of society but of society in action.

In the histories action finds its natural scope. Plans are made,

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