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ENGLISH STUDIES

*Theatrical Literature*

*Special Number*

Modern Humanities Research Association

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*Theatrical Literature*  
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*Edited by*  
G. K. HUNTER and C. J. RAWSON

Modern Humanities Research Association

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## EDITORIAL NOTE

The specialized section of the present *Yearbook*, the second in the new format, deals with the question of literary texts in the theatre. The essays concentrate on the range of literary effects that the dramatist can use to control the responses of his theatrical audience.

The *Yearbook* for 1980 will be concerned with Literature and its Audience. The next topic for a volume, now being planned, will be Heroes and the Heroic.

Contributions submitted to the *Modern Language Review* or the *Yearbook* will continue to be considered for both publications interchangeably. Manuscripts and copies of books for review should be sent to the Editors, *Modern Language Review* and *Yearbook of English Studies*, Department of English, University of Warwick, Coventry CV4 7AL, England.

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# PART I

## THEATRICAL LITERATURE

---

### Literature in the Theatre?

ARNOLD P. HINCHLIFFE

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If we read the title of this essay it remains a fairly neutral question but if we speak it out loud we have to give it some kind of intonation, expressing surprise, contempt, even incredulity, or do our best to keep it on the level of a simple query. Literature (from *littera*: letter; hence written or printed matter) in the theatre is spoken out loud and should be written with some indication of how it should be spoken. If it is not, then it remains literature (that is, written or printed matter) and fails; so there is literature in the theatre and there is literature of the theatre and it is the latter that concerns us. This means that we need not concern ourselves with the translation of a work of literature into a theatrical medium, as, for example, *The Wings of the Dove* as a stage play or *The Ambassadors* as a television play (both reduced to the two hour traffic of their respective stages), or *The Great Gatsby* or *Moby Dick* turned into films. Discussion of such translations requires evidence that cannot be written about and there would probably be very little agreement on whether the translation improved upon, was inferior to, or even captured the original. But such examples provide clear instances of translation. There is a novel by Henry James (or Herman Melville or Scott Fitzgerald) and there are plays and films by — by whom? We have not only the fact of translation but also the dilemma of where to put the blame or credit. While it is obvious that the original will naturally be changed in being translated, there is doubt as to who is responsible for the changing process. Is it the writer, director, actor or, even, the cameraman?

Similarly the words, the written text, of an opera, called a libretto (that is, a *little book*) will be different from a novel or a poem. By this we do not mean that *War and Peace* as opera must be different, as in simple translation from one form to another, but that the music has a prior claim on the audience over the words, just as the film presents an audience first with pictures then with sounds. Opera is basically a musical form just as film is basically a visual form. The masque was an excellent and early example of the problems of

collaboration and Ben Jonson a notable protagonist. He printed his plays as if they were literature, to be read, which caused a few raised eyebrows but established a practice that still seems fairly normal to us today; but the topical nature of the theatre compelled him (for all his literary pretensions) to engage in a joint effort where literature was only a partner (and a junior partner as it turned out), where the poet was joined by the scene painter, architect, musician, the devisers of dances and dresses: a combination which, as Herford and Simpson remark, 'surpassed even modern opera in its capabilities as a hot-bed of professional intrigue'.<sup>1</sup> Jonson, standing for the supremacy of the literary element, seems to have lost the battle because the audience were enchanted with scenery and music: in short, with spectacle rather than literature. The dramatist has to know and meet the requirements of his audience and write his play within the practical and economic realities of the theatre.

His play is, of course, not his play at all. These examples of translation and collaboration have been obvious ones but a play exhibits the same problems. In what sense is the work of literature (the printed text) a thing in itself rather than an invitation to performance? For Dr Johnson a dramatic exhibition was a book recited with concomitants that increase or diminish its effect. It is still possible for a critic to insist, as does S. W. Dawson, that the action is the language, that the language creates the dramatic 'world' of the play, and that the relation between this world and reality is metaphorical. The nature of the stage, therefore, the settings and the style of acting, should be such as to assist the language in its creation of this metaphorical world. The *language* of a play establishes for the audience what are the criteria of possibility and probability; movement, gesture, properties and scenery are auxiliaries which, ideally speaking, should *grow out* of the creative language.<sup>2</sup>

But the organic ideal is deceptively plausible; and presumably a play is written with performance in mind? There have, of course, always been people who prefer to read plays as literature, and who claim that the theatre of the mind can produce them better than any other theatre; this, given the usual imperfect nature of theatre, is hardly surprising. There are a great many people not necessarily confined to the Outer Hebrides who have no choice, and the dramatist should oblige them. For most people, however, what is gained even from an imperfect performance of a play is immediately obvious, if impossible to define. We assume, after all, that someone has done a careful reading, that performance bears the fruit of that study, fruit which is the combination of expertise and time passed in rehearsal producing a relationship between the actors and the text that no single reader could hope to gain. According to Peter Hall the only point in putting a play on is to develop these relationships:

<sup>1</sup> C. H. Herford and P. and E. Simpson, *Ben Jonson*, 11 vols (Oxford, 1925-52), 1, 60.

<sup>2</sup> *Drama and the Dramatic* (London, 1970), pp. 8-9.

Good communication within a group makes actors and directors better at their tasks than they knew they could be. And a good performance makes a good audience; it is more responsive and intelligent than its individual members. And if we of the theatre don't achieve this, it is preferable to leave the play on the book-shelf in the hope that someone will take it down and read it from time to time.<sup>1</sup>

Not everyone will agree with this. Somerset Maugham observed that the 'mental capacity [of an audience is] less than that of its most intelligent members. . . . When the intelligent look for thought in a playhouse, they show less intelligence than one would have expected of them. Thought is a private thing'.<sup>2</sup> And E. D. Martin makes a distinction between audience and crowd. An audience, he suggests, remains individual and one giggle can disturb it, but crowds act as an entity, where individuality is replaced by an emotional blanket: the crowd thinks only in platitudes, propaganda, visual dogma, and symbol.<sup>3</sup> Whatever one believes, the French still use the verb *assister* to describe attendance at a play.

Noticeably, too, Dr Johnson allowed that the concomitants could increase or diminish and there are many times when expertise and relationships hint at divorce rather than marriage. Emrys James discusses, in 'On Playing Henry IV', what happens to the play during rehearsal and comments: 'We — actors — are men of the theatre. We aim at putting across as best we can the essential ideas contained in a play. And, therefore, we take liberties — so-called — with the text.'<sup>4</sup> So-called, indeed, because the assumption behind this remark is that works of literature possess ideas and spirits exterior to themselves that their begetters somehow failed to bring out. And it is not just the actors who feel this; there are other men of the theatre. Henry James frequently recorded his alarm at the sacrifice of Shakespeare to 'the machinist and the gas-man', reflecting that production was not directing the actor to illuminate the author's intentions but rather treating the play as something to be costumed, lighted, and presented to reflect glory on the producer regardless of the effect on the play itself, 'as if the only way to put a piece on the stage were not to act it'.<sup>5</sup> In the words of S. W. Dawson, when 'considerations of effect, and a consciousness of the audience as a body of spectators whose feelings can be played upon, become predominant the play is regarded as a means rather than an end'.<sup>6</sup>

Faced all too often with this use of the play it is not surprising that some people prefer to read the original, the text. Edmund Gosse relates that Swinburne was so much disgusted by a performance of *Othello* in which the actor Fechter looked in a mirror when he said, 'It is the cause, it is the cause,

<sup>1</sup> Foreword to *The Royal Shakespeare Company* by David Addenbrooke (London, 1974), p. xiv.

<sup>2</sup> *The Summing Up*, Pan Books (London, 1976), pp. 131–33.

<sup>3</sup> *The Behaviour of Crowds* (London, 1920), p. 26.

<sup>4</sup> *Theatre Quarterly*, 7, No. 27 (Autumn 1977), 15–23.

<sup>5</sup> *The Scenic Art*, edited by Allan Wade (New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1948), pp. 165, xix.

<sup>6</sup> *Drama and the Dramatic*, p. 5.

my soul', that he determined never to see Shakespeare on the stage again.<sup>1</sup> But Swinburne's imagination may have been better than most. In Charles Lamb's *On the Tragedies of Shakespeare* we have a good defence of reading rather than watching, and if we read A. C. Bradley on Shakespeare, with an emphasis on character and poetry, we get the feeling that the plays are being treated as novels decorated with verse. Dramatic criticism is usually different from theatre criticism; the former is written in the study, the latter looks at performance, the actor's ability to convey character, with frequent references to the scenery. The text is the source of both, the foundation of acting and for design, though what is written is written to be spoken and is therefore different from that which is written to be read. Henry James noted this when he was reading Ibsen. In his review of the production of *Hedda Gabler* he wrote:

We have studied our author, it must be admitted, under difficulties, for it is impossible not to read him without perceiving that merely book in hand we but half know him — he addresses himself so substantially to representation . . . [*Hedda Gabler*], on perusal, left one completely muddled and mystified, fascinated but — in one's intellectual sympathy — snubbed. Acted, it leads that sympathy over the straightest of roads with all the exhilaration of a superior pace.<sup>2</sup>

There is an unconscious irony here. In 1877 Ibsen wrote to Edvard Fallesen, the head of the Royal Theatre, Copenhagen, complaining against the regulation which required that any dramatic work should be first made accessible by means of a stage performance, a practice which Ibsen felt inhibited playwrights:

As things stand now, a new play can never be considered on its own, purely and simply as a literary work. The judgement will always include both the play and its performance. These two entirely different things are mixed up together; and as a rule the public is more interested in the acting and the actors than in the play itself.<sup>3</sup>

And when the Royal Theatre accepted *A Doll's House* on the condition that it would not be published until 21 December (which effectively removed it from Christmas sales) Ibsen objected most strongly, and the play was published on 4 December but not produced until 21 December 1879. However, the dramatist in Ibsen would probably agree with Pirandello that if the characters have been properly created they will each have a different way of expressing themselves so that the text, when read, 'will seem to have been written by more than one author, its dialogue made up in the heat of the action by the individual characters, not their creator'.<sup>4</sup>

Arthur Symons, definitely on the side of literature, summed up the problem at the time when it was becoming crucial:

<sup>1</sup> *Swinburne as Critic*, edited by Clyde K. Hyder (London, 1972), p. 17.

<sup>2</sup> *The Scenic Art*, pp. 245–46, quoted by Michael Egan in *Henry James: The Ibsen Years* (London, 1972), p. 40.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibsen: Letters and Speeches*, edited by Evert Sprinchorn (New York, 1965), p. 169.

<sup>4</sup> *The Theory of the Modern Stage*, edited by Eric Bentley (Harmondsworth, 1968), p. 155.

The question is this: whether the theatre is the invention of the dramatist, and of use only in so far as it interprets his creative work; or whether the dramatist is the invention of the theatre, which has made him for its own ends, and will be able, when it has wholly achieved its mechanism, to dispense with him altogether, except perhaps as a kind of prompter.<sup>1</sup>

Edward Gordon Craig would not allow him even as a prompter for, in time, Craig believed, 'we shall be able to create works of art in the Theatre without the use of the written play, without the use of actors'.<sup>2</sup> Ben Jonson's battle was with Inigo Jones and perspective scenery; throughout its history the theatre has battled with the church or politician or puritan fighting for its existence. The dramatist has fought with the actor who was often an actor-manager, and the long history of Shakespearian productions from Betterton to Irving recorded by G. C. D. Odell is evidence of this. But recently it is the rise of the producer, now called director, who threatens the dramatist. Until the nineteenth century productions were co-ordinated by the dramatist or the leading actor because stock companies and the simplicity of stage machinery made a director unnecessary. The improvement of machinery and lighting and naturalistic under-playing, which went hand in hand, made rehearsal important. The presence of an arranger is first acknowledged in England in 1863 for the première of Byron's dramatic poem *Manfred*, which required considerable adaptation for the stage. As C. D. Innes puts it, 'his services were only required when a play needed extensive revision and the author was unavailable, when the actors were amateurs and the machinery architecturally complex, or in a tradition without set speeches where various conventional elements needed co-ordination and expansion'.<sup>3</sup> But in many ways the director is now the obvious beginner of performance. John Arden, in his recent collection of essays, recalls receiving a letter:

from a student of 'Theatre Studies' at a British University. She described her course as one designed to show the problems of actors and directors, but particularly it outlines the struggle for survival of Theatre in today's society. Not a mention of Playwrights. Theatre, in a contemporary academic environment, is thus regarded as the preserve of those who have been sealed off by contemporary theatrical practice into the ghetto of *performance*. The other ghetto, script-writing, is well away across the tracks, sharing its cabins with the practitioners of *literature*.<sup>4</sup>

He proposes a distinction between playwright (one who puts pen to paper and sets down dramatic dialogue), who will need a director, and Playwright, who will write a play including those skills now thought to be the exclusive province of a director. Thus the writer will cease to be a semi-skilled subcontractor to the theatre. But he concedes that there may be Union difficulties in bringing this about. And indeed, with the rise of the director who may be neither writer nor actor and who has probably been largely trained in the

<sup>1</sup> *The Theory of the Modern Stage*, p. 146.

<sup>2</sup> *On the Art of the Theatre* (London, 1911); reprinted Theatre Arts Books (New York, 1956), p. 53.

<sup>3</sup> *Erwin Piscator's Political Theatre* (London, 1972), p. 66.

<sup>4</sup> *To Present the Pretence* (London, 1977), 'Playwrights and Play-Writers', pp. 173-212.

cinema, the need for a writer has been seriously challenged. In the cinema the text palpably functions as a scenario and improvisation is a fairly standard method of achieving results (and possible when filming, since you can always repeat the shot).

Lionel Gossman, in a recent article, 'The Signs of the Theatre', begins:

The focus of attention, clearly, will be the theatrical act of representation or performance rather than the dramatic text or script. The dramatic text has a life of its own, independent of all performances of it: on the one hand, as Gordon Craig, one of the great champions of the theatre over the text, recognized, it overflows all performances and is exhausted by none; on the other, any performance overflows the literary text that it purports to be a performance of, and is not reducible to it. A clear distinction must therefore be made between theatrical representation and literary text. As most theatrical performances are based on dramatic texts, however, some consideration of the nature of the relationship between the two is desirable.<sup>1</sup>

The critic is trying to be balanced and consequently begs too many questions. He seems to take it for granted that the text has a life of its own and until recently most dramatic criticism would have agreed. As he notes in paragraph 2 of his article, however, most dramatic criticism has been written by literary critics who normally deal with texts and therefore write literary history or literary interpretation. This is justified in one sense that the plays are written down and become literary texts, entering the domain of literature 'the moment a written version is made of them, that is to say, in that written version'. But the form of words used here, if plausible, is evasive. A scenario may be written down (and printed), witness the film scripts of Harold Pinter, but the writing down or printing does not make them literature: merely a record of the verbal part of a film. Similarly (again witness Pinter) a play text may vary from printing to printing according to modifications achieved in performance. Lionel Gossman mentions that Molière justified the printing of his text of *Les Précieuses ridicules* in his preface on the grounds that altered versions of it were being produced. But, of course, as a man of the theatre he knew that adaptation and improvisation were inseparable from performance. The printing of the text marks the beginning of his ambition as a writer rather than a playwright.<sup>2</sup> It should be mentioned here that in England improvisation was not, strictly speaking, permitted until recently, since the text had to be submitted to the Lord Chamberlain and, at least theoretically, the text approved must be performed, down to the last expletive deleted. In practice, however, the theatre naturally modified the text.

This distinction, for Lionel Gossman, becomes a matter of concern only at the beginning of the present century in attacks on Sire Le Mot and the emergence of men who were not writers but directors, and he points to Brecht, who, as a writer, aimed at counterpoint with song, gesture, and décor

<sup>1</sup> *Theatre Research International*, 2, no. 1 (October 1976), 1-15.

<sup>2</sup> 'The Signs of the Theatre', note 2.

to comment on the spoken word.<sup>1</sup> He fails, however, to pursue the example and to recognize that Brecht as writer and director was, presumably, able to preserve his own words when he wanted to. Other writers have had less luck. Indeed in some quarters they are held to be completely redundant. The most distinct attack on words in the theatre came from Artaud, who, with writers like Apollinaire, illustrates Pierre Albert-Birot's *théâtre unique*, a theatre that having got rid of classical form would now focus on acrobatics, sounds, pantomime, cinematographic elements, multiple actions on the stage and in the auditorium, aiming at a 'grand simultaneity'. Artaud saw it as essential to 'put an end to the subjugation of the theatre to the text, and to recover the notion of a kind of unique language halfway between gesture and thought'; of not simply suppressing words but giving them 'approximately the importance they have in dreams' and basing theatre on spectacle 'before everything else'.<sup>2</sup> In this he echoes Gordon Craig, who saw the origins of theatre in movement and dance: 'I only wish you to understand that the poet is not of the theatre, has never come from the theatre, and cannot be of the theatre, and that only the dramatist among writers has any birth-claim to the theatre — and that a very slight one.'<sup>3</sup>

As Craig reminds us, people flock to see plays, not to listen to them. The most notable disciple in our time is Jerzy Grotowski, who insists that only actors are necessary and that theatre can exist without texts:

Yes; the history of the theatre confirms this. In the evolution of the theatrical art the text was one of the last elements to be added. If we place some people on a stage with a scenario they themselves have put together and let them improvise their parts as in the *Commedia dell'Arte*, the performance will be equally good even if the words are not articulated but simply muttered.

For Grotowski, Artaud was a great theatre poet, which means a poet of the possibilities of the theatre, not of dramatic literature. And what happens when Grotowski is faced with a literary text?

Now, we cannot express what is objective in the text and in fact it is only those texts which are really weak that give us a unique possibility of interpretation. All the great texts represent a sort of deep gulf for us. Take *Hamlet*: books without number have been devoted to this character. Professors will tell us, each for himself, that they have discovered an objective *Hamlet* . . . But there is no objective *Hamlet*. The work is too great for that. The strength of great works really consists in their catalytic effect: they open doors for us, set in motion the machinery of our self-awareness.<sup>4</sup>

But was *Hamlet* written simply to set in motion the machinery of an actor's self-awareness?

Recent dramatic criticism has responded to theatrical behaviour. From allowing the text to exist in itself it has shifted to allowing the text to exist

<sup>1</sup> 'The Signs of the Theatre', p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> *The Theory of the Modern Stage*, pp. 55, 59, 67.

<sup>3</sup> *On the Art of the Theatre*, p. 116.

<sup>4</sup> *Towards a Poor Theatre* (London, 1968), pp. 32, 57.

only in performance. Here is Denis Donoghue, writing in his history of modern verse drama, *The Third Voice* (Princeton 1959):

The 'poetry' of poetic drama is not necessarily or solely a *verbal* construct; it inheres in the structure of the play as a whole. That is, the 'poetry' is not in any one part of the play, or any one of its elements, separately exhibited, but in the manner in which and the degree to which, all the elements act in co-operation. (p. 6)

Compare this with the statement by Martin Esslin, in 1976:

In Greek the word *drama* simply means *action*. Drama is mimetic action, action in imitation or representation of human behaviour. . . . What is crucial is the emphasis on action. So drama is not simply a form of literature (although the words used in a play, when they are written down, can be treated as literature). What makes drama drama is precisely the element which lies outside and beyond the words and which has to be seen as action — or *acted* — to give the author's concept its full value.<sup>1</sup>

Here Dr Esslin is writing specifically about action, about what lies outside and beyond the words or literature, though there is a tactful concession that when written down the words can be spoken of as literature which is either nonsense or a paradox. But it is the paradox that must be explored. Raymond Williams's study, revised in 1968, was actually called *Drama in Performance* and considers the relationship between a dramatic text and a dramatic performance:

We can study a written play, and state a response to it, and that statement is, or is intended to be, literary criticism. Alternatively, we can study an actual performance of a play, and state a response to that; and that statement is, or is intended to be, theatrical criticism. . . . These methods have their uses, but, ultimately, dramatic criticism must proceed beyond them.<sup>2</sup>

Professor Williams, like Dr Esslin, wants to go beyond; and has, in fact, ended up with three kinds of criticism, literary, theatrical, and finally dramatic, which somehow will combine a response to the text as text and the text as scenario (that is, text in performance). Clearly Utopia's name is Erewhon. J. L. Styan puts the case even more bluntly in 1975:

The script on the page is not the drama any more than a clod of earth is a field of corn: it is essential constantly to return to this. The words of *Hamlet* are merely signals for communication, in which (heresy, still, to some) the unspoken can be as important as the spoken, in which the nighted colour of the Prince's costume can be as urgent as the stroke of a poetic image. Thus, the criticism of drama must imply a study of stimulus and reaction, but this is a social study concerned with all the vagaries of human social behaviour.

Heresy is a strong word. We would probably all agree that in the theatre language does not have and probably never has had primacy. What we see is

<sup>1</sup> *An Anatomy of Drama* (London, 1976), p. 14.

<sup>2</sup> *Drama in Performance*, revised edition (London, 1968; reprinted Harmondsworth, 1972), pp. 3-4.



words acted, that 'something beyond the words, the primacy of the occasion, is paramount'.<sup>1</sup> Even so this does not absolutely refute S. W. Dawson's suggestion that that primacy of occasion depends upon the words, but J. L. Styan has moved even further from this point. In 1977 we find him writing that 'the first and last values of drama are revealed in the response of an audience in a theatre, and all else must be secondary and speculative'.<sup>2</sup> On a merely practical level this excludes too many of the human race from enjoying drama, since that experience is commonly available for very few of us. Lionel Gossman, therefore, was restating the growing opinion in dramatic criticism (and some of the best has been written by academics as well as directors) that the text is a point of departure and that language (that is, words) is only one strand in the language of the theatre. For Lionel Gossman the problem of fidelity to a text is a false problem: which may be true unless you are a playwright.

Many great writers have flirted (there can be no other word, though it has been a passionate flirtation) with the theatre and the relationship has all too often been indiscreet and squalid; to name three: Henry James, Tennyson, and T. S. Eliot. All three behaved as if a solid respectable married citizen had taken a very public mistress and flaunted her before wife, family, and friends. All three seemed prepared to sacrifice integrity for success.<sup>3</sup> What such writers wanted has never been clear or convincing: why Tennyson, who could write such a haunting declamation as 'Ulysses', failed as a dramatist; or why James, who wrote *The Awkward Age* (a novel whose peculiarity is that it is written as if by a dramatist, presenting action and the interplay of characters almost entirely through dialogue), also wrote *Guy Domville*; or why T. S. Eliot, whose *The Waste Land* is full of speaking parts, could also write something as static as *The Elder Statesman*, will remain subjects for the scholar's idle times. But what of the dramatist who simply wants to be a dramatist, who feels that his natural inclination and talent is for writing plays and who is not urged into the theatre from other, successful literary forms, for money or wider recognition? Can such a man (or woman, though they are, so far, rarer in the theatre than elsewhere) preserve his identity? Shakespeare, no mean dramatist, can receive small-print billing. It is Peter Brook's

<sup>1</sup> J. L. Styan, *Drama, Stage and Audience* (London, 1975), p. vii.

<sup>2</sup> *The Shakespeare Revolution* (London, 1977), p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> There is no space here to pursue the curious relationship of these three great writers with the theatre. Tennyson, according to his son, 'was aware that he wanted intimate knowledge of the mechanical details necessary for the modern stage and his plays were written with the intention that actors should edit them for the stage, keeping them at the high poetic level'. Thus Irving arranged the script of *Becket* in 1893; this is reported in Denis Donoghue's *The Third Voice* which is mainly about unhappy relationships of writers with the theatre. See also George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy*. Henry James's career as a dramatist, the wasted passion and the squandered time, is recorded in Leon Edel's introductory essay to *The Complete Plays of Henry James* (London, 1949), where he reports James's own view of what he had learned. T. S. Eliot's career as a dramatist is fully recorded in E. Martin Browne, *The Making of T. S. Eliot's Plays* (London, 1969), a detailed account of how Eliot relied on his directors, who were usually right.