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ON DRAMATIC METHOD

BOOKS by HARLEY GRANVILLE - BARKER

Plays •

- *The Marrying of Ann Leete.
- *The Voysey Inheritance. (Revised 1913.)
- *Waste. (Rewritten 1926.)
- *The Madras House. (Revised 1925.)
- *Rococo: Vote by Ballot: Farewell to the Theatre.
(Three one-act plays.) 1917.
- *The Secret Life. 1923.
- *His Majesty. 1928.

With LAURENCE HOUSMAN

- *Prunella: or, Love in a Dutch Garden. 1906. (Revised '1930.)

With DION CLAYTON CALTHROP

- *The Harlequinade. 1918.

English Versions of Foreign Plays

- *Anatol: by Arthur Schnitzler. 1911.
Deburau: by Sacha Guitry. 1921.
Doctor Knock: by Jules Romains. 1925.
- *Six Gentlemen in a Row: by Jules Romains. 1927.

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- *The Kingdom of God. 1927.
- *The Romantic Young Lady: by Gregorio Martinez Sierra. 1929.
- *The Women have their Way: A Hundred Years Old Fortunato: The Lady from Alfaqueque: by Serafin and Joaquin Alvarez Quintero. 1927.

Criticism

- *The Exemplary Theatre. 1922.
From Henry V to Hamlet.
- *Prefaces to Shakespeare: First Series. 1927.
- *Prefaces to Shakespeare: Second Series. 1930
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On Dramatic Method

being the Clark lectures
for 1930

by

Harley Granville-Barker

London

Sidgwick & Jackson, Ltd.

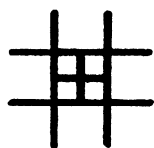
1931

Printed in Great Britain at
The Westminster Press
411a Harrow Road
London W.9

THE opportunity for these lectures I owe to Trinity College, Cambridge; and to its Master and Fellows my thanks (which I here tender them) for much kindness besides.

H. G.-B.

February 1931



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THE NATURAL LAW OF THE THEATRE

THESE lectures, as their title implies, will be mainly technical; and, for the rest, I shall do my best to keep them free from vague enthusiasms. Also, in their own method, they will be empirical. For I am a practising playwright, and it is a healthy instinct, I believe, which has always made me shy at the very phrase, "the principles of dramatic art." It is a dangerous phrase, it delivers the artist bound to the doctrinaire.

THE RULE OF THE ANCIENTS

The prophets of Aristotle have much to answer for. English drama at least, you may retort, has been little enough troubled by them. Still too much! Ben Jonson wrestled bravely with the 'Rule of the Ancients,' the artist in him at odds with the academic. He was not to be intimidated. "Nothing is more ridiculous," he says, "than to make an author a dictator, as the schools have done Aristotle. The damage is infinite knowledge receives by it. For to

many things a man should owe but a temporary belief, and a suspension of his own judgment, not an absolute resignation of himself or a perpetual captivity. Let Aristotle and others have their dues; but if we can make further discoveries of truth and fitness than they, why are we envied?"

It is sound doctrine. Aristotle and the others haunted him nevertheless, and stiffened a talent and a method already by nature sufficiently stiff. Dryden took up the critical tale where Jonson left it, with Corneille and the new French school to consider too. If drama could be argued into life our Restoration theatre would out-match the Elizabethan; and there have recently been brave attempts to argue it into fame again. But is it only a coincidence that, with us English at any rate, didactic criticism and a plentiful lack of inspiration for the art itself seem to go together? While even Aristotle wrote, we may remember, when all that was great in Greek tragedy had been long left behind.

Then in 1765 another Johnson—Samuel, that genius of commonsense—in the preface to his edition of Shakespeare, gives what might well be a death-blow to the mere tyranny of the Unities of Time and Place. "Yet," says he, "when I speak thus slightly of dramatic rules, I cannot but recollect how much wit and learning may be produced against me. . . ." So

the ancients were in their trenches still. When he adds, though, that he is almost frightened at his own temerity—" . . . and when I estimate the fame and the strength of those that maintain the contrary opinion am ready to sink down in reverential silence"—this is his fun. Aristotle in person would not have brought him to that pass.

For a hundred and twenty years after we find Shakespeare made a fetish to be ever more and more blindly worshipped; while if the learned are not too hard on contemporary drama, it is chiefly because they think it (with some reason) beneath their notice altogether. But when—almost within my own recollection—this comes to life again, there, after a little, was Mr. A. B. Walkley, still ready to use Aristotle as an occasional egg, so to speak, for the making of those excellently light omelettes which he used to serve us up in the *Times*.

What the present younger generation make—or are officially supposed to make—of the *Poetics* I do not know. But only the other day Mr. F. L. Lucas thought well to give here in Cambridge a set of lectures upon "Tragedy in relation to Aristotle's *Poetics*," which was in effect—though in no timid sense—an apology. A very brilliant apology; and, far more importantly, a reconciliation of those seemingly dusty dogmas with drama as a living art.

But see how Mr. Lucas goes about the business. He speaks of “. . . the Poetics, ill-written, incomplete lecture notes as they are . . .” and, in the next paragraph, tells us, as to the famous definition of tragedy, that “there could be no better example of Aristotle’s useful power of provoking disagreement.” Somewhat of a drop, this, from the old doctrine of plenary inspiration! But having thus skilfully resolved our minds into the key of the higher criticism, he soon shows us that Aristotle has much to say of as pregnant importance to modern drama as it is instructive of the old, if—though only if—we bring imagination and some historic sense to bridge between the two. In fact it is not Aristotle who has been to blame, but the misunderstanding, misinterpreting, and even, in the matter of the Unity of Place (as had, of course, been pointed out earlier), the sheer falsifying of what he said.

Nevertheless, at any moment, I feel, in an age which runs rather to criticism than to unselfconscious creation, a new Aristotle, specializing in drama, may arise. So I will do my small best to counter him betimes by enforcing my point that such didactic criticism, which makes for the formulating of what come to be thought the principles of play-writing, is a mischievous thing. It must have this ill effect, if no other. The would-be dramatist is encouraged

to think that he has only to pin up a set of rules like a recipe over his desk and to follow them and all will be well. But this is how puddings are made, not plays; not good plays, certainly, nor the best puddings for that matter. There must, of course, as in every human activity, be a certain order of things involved, there will be certain conditions to be fulfilled; but these will be found—so I mean to suggest to you—not to be laws of play-writing, but only the natural laws of the medium in which plays exist, the laws of the theatre, that is to say. The distinction is an important one. An artist must so master his medium that its use will be second nature to him, and the nearer he can come to complete freedom of expression the better. That is not, I hope, in itself, too dogmatic a statement. He will need all his energy for the realizing of the idea possessing him; whatever are the laws he must obey, he no more wants to be currently bothered by them than does a man sprinting a hundred yards by theories of kinetics or an orator by the spelling of the words he uses. And though obedience to a law of play-writing may become a second nature to him, it cannot be so elastic a law as not to form something of a barrier against his free use of the medium. And though the law comprehend all the potentialities of the medium—which is only theoretically possible—

the dramatist will still be doing what he does without proof of why he does it. He will be working in a prison, however noble a one.

THE WAY OF INITIATION

How, on the other hand, does one 'naturally' set out to be a dramatist? By the way of imitation, and of trial and error. Pens and paper are needed, and a large waste-paper basket. If one is young, and unless one is a heaven-sent genius, the craft of the business will be more interesting at first than the art of it. One will have admired models, but will soon be picking these to pieces to see if they could be put together better. One will write and destroy and write and destroy. But above all one will want to be in intimate touch with the theatre, behind the curtain or before it; and this intimacy will need to be developed till the pleasures of illusion are replaced by a more critical pleasure in the processes of the scene, till one finds oneself sitting there anticipating what dramatist and actors should do—and with this one is, and knows it, in one's element, as the expressive phrase goes.

That, I think, is the 'natural' way to master the dramatist's art and to learn the laws of its medium the theatre. What are they, these laws? How far do they persist beneath the physical changes through

which the theatre has passed from Aeschylus' times to Ibsen's, and how far must they change with them? Like many laws they are easier to obey than explain. They are simple in the sense that walking and talking are simple; babies learn, but it may take a black-board and the higher mathematics to tell us just how the thing is done. Nor is the comparison inapt, for in their inception they reflect the capacity of human beings for emotional expression on the one hand and for sympathetic attention on the other; and this human part of the medium (the actor) and the audience's relation to it have remained of dominant importance. But in their development they have been conditioned by every sort of circumstance. There will, for instance, be a pretty wide difference, of degree if not of kind, between what you can do effectively in the theatre of Dionysus at Athens, in Shakespeare's Globe, and in the theatre for which *Rosmersholm* was written. They do not often get formulated by dramatist or actor (who know most about them), because, as we saw, this is not the 'natural' way of mastering them; and, once mastered, the less those who live by them are conscious of them the better.

All arts are mysteries, the way into their service is by initiation, not learning, and the adept hugs his secret. Yet they need the discipline of criticism, which

learning can impose, and none needs it more than does the art of the theatre. The primitive drama of dancing, singing and miming was mere anarchy. The Greeks gave it ritual form, but of this, as we find when we try to articulate it, little more than the skeleton has survived. The music and dancing of the chorus is lost knowledge. While the speaking remained the business of a single actor—the poet himself, perhaps—this also could be passed on by tradition, as the Homeric poems first were. It was only when actors and characters multiplied and the action was elaborated that the play began to be recorded and was resolved into terms of literature. But only the speech was recorded, even so, and in the simplest terms; the action, supposedly, would be well enough suggested by it. And what this was at times is as much lost knowledge to us as the singing and dancing of the chorus.

THE LITERARY RECORD

Here is the first difficulty in bringing any but a contemporary criticism to bear upon the art of the drama; the literary record is never complete. It was not much more so with our Elizabethans than with the Greeks, nor is it, indeed, for a modern play, nor can it ever be. Speech itself will not always

be written out in full. In one of the Coventry plays, so called, we find: *Here Herod rages in the pageant and in the street also*. And from other stage directions (as these plays were to be done by amateurs, not professionals, who would know what to do, they are full of stage directions) it is clear that he was meant, if not to speak, at least to howl more than is set down for him—even as Shakespeare's very professional clowns were meant to, and they would not have been worth their pay to the theatre otherwise. That famous snub, they must have felt, was a little unfair; Shakespeare's own plays might pull through without extempore funniments, but where would some of the others have been? For the *Commedia dell' Arte* action was outlined and dialogue largely left to the actor. And one could find in melodramas being played in booths to-day what are called 'carpenter's' scenes, in which, before a cloth showing a street or country lane or what not, the villain or the comic man is expected to improvise talk for the five minutes' extra, it may be, which the carpenters need to turn the scenery behind from the baronial hall of the wicked uncle into the humble heroine's cottage.

The drama's life has always lain in elemental things, in vehement humanity venting itself in a medley of action and speech, dance and song, and

we do well not to sophisticate it too far. But it will always need discipline, or it would lapse into anarchy; and few laymen realize how much it ordinarily gets. A self-imposed discipline largely! The staging of a play is the working out of an elaborate scheme of co-operation in movement and emotional expression. If all this could be written down the full score of a modern opera would look simple beside it. In performance, with an audience for a reverberator, each actor knows that if he does not loyally stick to his part, the whole affair may at any moment get dangerously out of control. The reckless gaiety of burlesque must be counteracted by a very tyranny of control. The stage romps which quicken the pulses of those whose romping days are over will be the product of a drilling that would astonish a sergeant-major.

But the discipline which now concerns us is in the conversion of drama into literary form, the putting it permanently on record, the bringing it within reach of considered criticism; and the difficulty lies in the necessary nature of the record. Drama becomes literature, but as it has been something other it must now be something more than literature. The dialogue and stage directions which can be written down should somehow signify besides so much that cannot be; and it would seem to

follow that the more of this expanded drama there is innate in them, the less complete will be the record.

Why not—both for literary use and the instruction of actors—enlarge the record, describe not the room only in which a scene is to be played, but the unseen house which contains the room and the town in which the house stands? All this may be significant, surely. Why not write down, besides what the characters say and do, what they think and feel but leave unsaid? This will make matters easier for the reader and keep the actors from misreading their parts. Well, we are used to the editorial enscening of Shakespeare—and nothing has done more to distort and nullify the stagecraft of the plays! The fault is not Shakespeare's, however. The argument for the yet fuller practice is persuasively set out in the preface to Mr. Bernard Shaw's first volume of plays, but we note that Mr. Shaw has never followed his own advice very far. In effect, a little of that sort of thing goes a long way, and the arguments against more of it are just about those we should urge against an architect's painting in perspective on the surface of his building. In each case a bastard art will develop, with architect and playwright letting essentials go hang for the sake of superficial effect. It is not so much that the bare literary record

of a great drama is incomplete as that it is complex; and, if we lack the clues to its original presenting, it may be cryptic to a degree.

The record will be close packed, that is one thing. The dramatist works within strict limits of space, and he must not waste a stroke. Even so, when we come to really considerable plays, the space available proves altogether too small for a plain parade of their whole matter. Some things have to be made unmistakably clear; the story and the main scheme of the conflict of character. Nor can the minor issues be let crowd and jostle the major ones, there must be a final effect of order and clarity. But to say all he wants to say the dramatist, we find, has been using two or three devices simultaneously, imposing one on the other, so to speak. And the multiple and complex nature of his medium allows him to do this. There is scene and its atmosphere and the action within the scene. There is speech with its double use, for the telling of the plain fact, for the playing upon our emotions by pure sound. And there is the weight of actuality which the very presence of the actors will add. A not too calculable factor, this last. Its nature will vary with the means of approach to the audience which a theatre provides, formal in Greek drama, intimate, as with the Elizabethans, illusionary as in our own. But from such

variety of means a dramatist can weave work of a very dense and rich texture, that is clear.

THE PHYSICAL 'LAWS' OF THE GREEK THEATRE

How much of the total effect of a play will be explicit in its literary record will partly depend upon the sort of theatre for which it is meant. I only know of one for which the record need be quite explicit; the theatre of the microphone. And in the recognition of this lies whatever future there may be for the broadcast play, unless television is to complicate the matter.

But whatever the theatre, the less there is likely to be on the plain surface of the record of a play of any quality and the more underneath. It will be like the iceberg, floating one-ninth above water and eight-ninths submerged. Ideally, everything should be implicit in the record in this sense: set the play in motion and all the hidden things should come to light and life. We must be sure, though, that all the conditions of its staging and acting—even, strictly speaking, to the sympathetic attitude of the audience—are those that the dramatist provided for. Here opens the finally unbridgeable gulf between us and the Greeks, even between our day and Shakespeare's. We can play the *Agamemnon* in the very theatre for

which Aeschylus wrote it, but it cannot mean to us what it meant to his audience. We can rebuild Shakespeare's Globe, but can we come to accepting its conventions as spontaneously as the Elizabethans accepted them?

Not quite: but we can go some way towards it, can at least measure our distance from Athens, and arrive within hail of Bankside. The aspect of the record that reflects the play's staging should be fairly easy to read once the ways of the theatre it belongs to are known, and these, again, we can partly deduce from the physical features of the theatre itself. Take the theatre for which the *Agamemnon* was written, open to the air, seating seven thousand people, with its large circular orchestra, and its long shallow stage backed by a wall for a sounding board—it had to be shallow if the sounding board was to be effective. On such a stage, and as seen by the further spectators, quick or complex movement will be quite ineffective. Only formal speech and gesture will tell, and all the action will look flattened as on a frieze. But the chorus has the orchestra to move in. Figures detached from a background, their manœuvring can be elaborate in pattern to the point beyond which it would prejudice the effect of the lyrics and their music. Here then will be the main plastic contrast between the

action on the stage and in the orchestra, and we find it put to very various and modulated to very subtle uses. The customary change is from the tension of sheer drama to the relaxing rhythm of the chorus movement, with the refreshment to the eye there will be in the shifting pattern of it. While this relieves the strain, the lyrics and their music can moderate (or can sustain in another form) the emotion. Then, a quickening of the chanting and the movement and a varying of the pattern may be made to re-stimulate excitement to the pitch at which the next dramatic passage must begin. But this division of the action is not invariable or precise. There can be dramatic action in the orchestra too, shared between actors and chorus, cast predominantly in lyric form, with (perhaps) music for a detached accompaniment. This is, in fact, the older method, and strict division between the dramatic and lyric marked the decadence of Greek tragedy. Easy to see why: unity of form is destroyed and the strength which lies in it.

Very obviously a particular sort of stagecraft must be rooted in the opportunities of its particular stage. But I suggest that the whole fabric of a play's artistry will ultimately rest here; and that not merely the more plastic beauties of Greek Tragedy as it lived and moved and can now be re-created only in imagination, but its more intrinsic qualities too,

those architectural qualities of spacing, proportion, cumulative effect, of repose and ordered power, which are extant still in the literary record, fetch their origin from the physical conditions of the theatre they could best adorn.

THE PHYSICAL FACTORS OF THE ELIZABETHAN STAGE

Now look at our Elizabethan stage and into the factors of its artistic problem. We have the inn-yard, which becomes, without essential change, the Globe or the Fortune Theatre. The dramatists of the time had a certain variety of inherited matter and method to choose from for imitation and development. There is the Senecan model. They all but wholly reject it. There are the old Moralities, looser of structure, with verse that was easier to speak, with allowance for the popular fooling of the clowns. This influence prevails, though the more obvious marks of it soon became indistinguishable. For one thing, the square platform thrust into the centre of the theatre will not conveniently accommodate the 'Mansions' which had localized the episodes in the Moralities,* though something of the sort remains in the 'Machines'

* It was only on the Continent, perhaps, that the Mansions were accommodated on one stage. But the English custom of assembling the single 'Pageants' in a row or a semicircle came to much the same thing.

which occasionally serve a part of their purpose. Not to mention the cost of such splendid affairs, prohibitive if you are presenting, not one play a year, but two or three a month! For another thing, you cannot continue to gather subjects for your plays from the Bible; the Puritans give you trouble enough without that to add to it. Nor have you any such store of familiar legends as had Seneca and his exemplars to draw upon. Besides, you have an audience enfranchised by Reformation and Renaissance and romantically keen to hear about anything and everything under the sun. A play should tell a story, then, as fresh and exciting a one as possible; if it can tell two at a time, so much the better.

Elizabethan stagecraft reflects, variously enough, these conditions and obligations. The forthright telling of the play's story, the freedom with time and place which lets the dramatist rivet each consecutive link in it, the confidences of the soliloquy, the spell-binding rhetoric, the quick alternation of one interest and one group of figures with another—all this is adaptation to environment and the solving of a practical problem. And if the work was rough and ready, well it might be! The Greeks, writing their plays for a yearly festival, could discuss their art and meditate on it. The Elizabethans, one doesn't doubt, discussed furiously, but a hungry public left

them little leisure for meditation. If one man could not finish a play quickly enough, two or three more might be called in to help. Old plays must be polished up anew, and if their own authors wouldn't or couldn't do the job, anybody else who was on the spot was expected to oblige. This haste accounts, of course (if nothing else does), for the borrowed and re-vamped stories. And it is possible that we owe the full version of *Hamlet* to the fact that the Globe was closed during eleven months of plague, so that Shakespeare was less rushed than usual.* Such a way of working would certainly make more for liveliness than discretion, for impulse and power, but for nothing like perfection of form.

THE ILLUSIONARY THEATRE

Now turn from the projecting platform at the Globe to the framed picture of the modern play.† What are the physical factors of the problem here? The indoor quiet, the artificial light, and its concentration on the actors. Their isolation; for actors within a picture frame are in another world, a world

* A suggestion which I, for my part, owe to Dr. J. W. Mackail; it will be found in his *Approach to Shakespeare*.

† The ultra-modern play has, I know, come out of the frame again; but I am talking of what was modern when I was, as I hoped, up to date.

of visual illusion. Not that you are free to paint any sort of picture there; its fantasy must be limited by the fact that human beings cannot fantasticate themselves beyond a point, and they have to form a part of it. Fantastic staging asks the abolition of the picture frame, for the breaking of this visual unity.

But background made actual becomes a part of the play, and one begins to make dramatic use of it. In Shakespeare it seldom matters where exactly the characters are (when it does he takes care to tell us), and at times we might wonder if we stopped to think about it (though he does not let us) if he knows himself. But Hedda Gabler's surroundings—she herself such a contrast to them—are very much a part of the play; so is the gallery, up and down which we hear—with his wife's ears—and later with our own eyes see John Gabriel Borkman pacing. And as for the studio and that queer garret in *The Wild Duck*, there is as much dramatic life in it, one could protest, as in any character in the play.

Here too is one reason why the skilled dramatist may concentrate upon one scene to an act, sometimes on one to the whole play. He increases the illusionary value of his characters by first establishing and then continuing them in convincing surroundings. One may rest too much upon the conviction to be carried by the actor's mere embodying of a character. There

is just as strong a disposition on our part to refuse to believe that the individual we see (and whose private name we have just read in our programme) is Hedda Gabler or Hialmar Ekdal, and their continuance in identical surroundings does something to counteract it. When the curtain first rises and we see an actress “ . . . *sitting in an easy chair by the window, and crocheting a large shawl which is nearly finished,*” it is by a certain effort of goodwill that we accept her as Miss Rebecca West. But when it rises on the fourth act, and there she is standing in that same room, with her cloak, hat, and that same white crocheted shawl, finished now, hanging over the back of the sofa, we may, if we are superior people, smile a little at the shawl, but Rebecca West will be, by now, very much more real to us—and our smiling will be one sign of it.

THE DRAMATIST'S PARTNERSHIP WITH THE ACTOR

The other aspect of the literary record, the apparently quite explicit part of it, the dialogue by which the actors tell the story and interpret character—however simple this may seem on the surface, may be complex enough beneath. And here occurs the cardinal part of the dramatist's problem: how best to provide for the collaboration of the actor.

Collaboration it has to be. Interpretation understates the case. This applies better to the musician, whom bar and stave permit to infuse just so much of his personality into a performance and no more. But more is demanded of the actor. It was all very well for that aristocratic amateur Prince Hamlet to ask his visitors to "Speak the speech, I pray you, as *I* pronounced it to you, trippingly on the tongue . . .", but if actors did no more than this performances would be pretty dull—as no one knew better than that hardy professional, Shakespeare. He could have given the First Player a good answer to that sententious sermon had he chosen. I have been tempted by the thought that he allowed him to stand listening with a polite but ever so slightly ironic smile. But I confess that I cannot discern it in the record.

Much more than interpretation is asked of the actor. He has to *embody* the character. Not, let us be clear, to suppress his own personality in favour of another of the dramatist's invention. This is a common fallacy; but such a method produces only an 'animated puppet' sort of acting. It may just do for minor parts, but you could not play Hamlet or Othello so. The character as it leaves the dramatist's hands has to be re-created in terms of the actor's personality; and the problem for

the dramatist is how to write it so that he may prevent it—*his* character—from perishing in the process.

Some characters do; but there may not have been very much in them to begin with. Some plays are created mainly by the actors. The story will be the dramatist's (perhaps); he will plan out the action and arrange the exits and entrances; and this—though anyone can learn to do it—is a skilled business enough. He will write the dialogue and it will be spoken more or less faithfully. But a play's essential life lies neither in story nor construction, nor mere words. All these may be effectively assembled and yet leave a blank, which the actors with their personalities will have to fill. There are many varieties and degrees of this contribution. They can range from such a conscious creation as was Henry Irving's Mathias in *The Bells* (and that this was his creation and not the dramatist's is proved by the fact that out of the same material Coquelin modelled a wholly different character) to the lively charm with which some pretty girl may invest a little love scene. It is all legitimate acting; for the actor is required—within the limits of a due regard for his fellow actors and the main purpose of the play—to 'make the most of his part,' and to do so he must make the most of himself too. How can the dramatist ensure that the

essentials of *his* part in the business will remain and will prevail?

You notice, I hope, that I have dropped into the argument this 'essentials.' Because the first thing to be determined is what these are—and are not. It is futile, for instance, to try and make them consist—except very generally—of the outward appearance of a character, or of tricks of speech and manner (this is not so true of pure farce, in which the dramatist may be drawing not characters, but conventionalized caricatures). Such things are the actors' concern. One sign of the amateur playwright is his despair when the heroine he has fancied fair-haired and blue-eyed presents herself brown-eyed and black-haired, or if the comic man wants to change a prescribed stutter to a giggle. One has watched him swayed between delight at his creatures taking form and disgust because the form is strange to him. If he is concerned in the casting of the play he can insist on such things if he thinks it worth while. But (this is the point) if he sacrifices any of his scanty resources to the weaving of such *inessentials* into the substance of his play—why, in doing the actor's share of the business he will be leaving the actor to do some part of his, which, perforce, he has left undone. Nor are the essentials of a character likely to lie in those wise things the dramatist himself may

want to say, the little sermons, the epigrams noted down before he had thought of the character at all; nor in the journeyman service of helping on the plot. And the more it is charged with such matters the more the actor will be found making it all his own.

It would seem indeed as if this collaboration were less an alliance than a rivalry; and there is some truth in this. The history of the theatre could be viewed as a never-determined struggle between dramatist and actor for pre-eminence. We should then note several salient things about it. With the actor in the ascendant the contemporary drama is generally lifeless. Remarkable plays are not written by taking the actor at his own valuation, and by giving him merely what he likes best to do. But neither are they by men who take other plays for a model and know nothing at first hand about the actor's art at all. The great periods in drama, the periods of renascence and development, have almost invariably been dominated by dramatists who knew so much of the theatre and of actors and their acting that they had no illusions left about them. And their way of dealing with this rivalry has been to provide for the actor, perhaps what he liked to do, but always with far more of it than he could easily manage to do, and sometimes with what it was apparently quite impossible to do.

These dominant dramatists—Aeschylus who led on his chorus and may have acted too; Shakespeare, Jonson, Molière; Ibsen with his years of spade-work in the theatre at Bergen before he came to revolutionizing modern drama; Racine, Strindberg, Tchekov (a diverse trio), less directly, but still pretty intimately tied to the theatre.

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DRAMA CLOSE PACKED WITH LIFE

This excessive demand upon the actor is an inevitable development. For here, as we said, is the dramatic form, which cannot effectively be enlarged beyond certain limits. Therefore, if he has an overplus of matter or much complexity of character to disclose, the dramatist must pack it tight, and upon whom but the actor can the extra burden to the square inch fall? The limits are fairly strictly defined. When Swinburne writes a *Bothwell* 15,000 lines long—nearly four times as long as *Hamlet*—while upon the surface of the literary record it is drama and has passages which might prove magnificent in a theatre, we cannot for this reason alone quite call it a play. Much more than custom is involved; questions of human endurance, and of the springing of the immense span. Can such a bridge be made to bear?

Packing may be a good thing in itself. Mr. Bernard Shaw has proved himself a most practical dramatist (to the confounding of the wiseacres), and when he writes *Back to Methuselah* he at least makes five plays of it instead of one, and with more stuff in them, truly, than one might find in another man's fifty. But is it all dramatic stuff, one asks; and has all that is dramatic in it been scrupulously dramatized? One remembers the man who wrote such a long letter because he could not find time to make it shorter. We must allow men their methods; but might not Swinburne's be a play and Mr. Shaw's a better play if the floods of emotion in the one and the intellectual abundance of the other were purged and refined into just about a quarter of the space?

All great art would seem to be close packed with life. There is need of the discipline of form, and perfect work, work to the very level of greatness, can be done contentedly within its bounds. The artist who wantonly transgresses them and needlessly emancipates himself wastes and loses all force of expression. But with high creative power the form always seems to be super-charged to just short of bursting point. Sometimes it will be burst in pieces altogether, and then fresh form must be found. Now drama, as we have seen—with humanity itself for its medium—has unusual need of discipline; and this close packing

of matter and emotion is discipline of the finest kind for both dramatist and actor, and produces a form far more vital than any regularity of construction can. How to do the packing, enforce the discipline and endow the result with effective spontaneity; that is the problem.

They say you can detect the true poet in the very first line of a poem. Certainly one of the signs of the true dramatist is that his characters, at first sight, seem to leap from the pages at you. And one of the tests of the fully achieved character is—paradoxically enough—that it can be given a dozen different personalities and interpreted from nearly as many different points of view, and yet remain essentially the same character. It is said that no actor ever fails as Hamlet. The truth in this would seem to be that Shakespeare has somehow contrived to distil so much humanity into the fiction, that at a touch, at the lively speaking of a line, it wells up and overflows; he has shown so many sides of the man that no actor, unless he be the veriest stick, can fail to reflect a few of them. The better the actor, of course, the more of Hamlet he can give us; but—we now reach an interesting crux—can any actor, and in a single performance, give us the whole?

CAN A PLAY BE TOO GOOD?

Performance—though we may demand an ideal one—is surely the legitimate test of a play. If the best of what there is in it will not then emerge, must it not be ranked with symphonies that should not be played, plans for houses never to be built, ships that look noble in harbour but are useless at sea? Turn from *Hamlet* to A. C. Bradley's study of *Othello*. It is masterly interpretative criticism, not least so in its qualities of sanity and honesty. Not for Bradley those brilliant discoveries of the treasure you first plant there yourself! There is nothing in his argument that cannot be justified by a plain reading of the text. But, fresh from his extraordinary expansion of the characters of *Othello* and *Iago*, do we not ask: Could any two actors convey all this to us, in its breadth and subtlety, by performance? And if the answer is No, as I think it must be, are we not then driven to the conclusion that there must be something radically wrong with the art of drama itself? We have been used to facing this dilemma in *King Lear*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and even in the pretty fantasy of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. But *Othello* is admittedly a most practical play; all that can be said against it from this point of view is that it is a superlatively good one. But if the same difficulty is innate in it—?

Can a play, as a play, be *too* good? That would be an absurd conclusion.

I suggest a rather different explanation, which has this encouragement about it, that it is, at any rate, not a conclusion. For though we may none of us be able to rise to the writing of an Othello, we do not want for a dramatic beacon the sign 'bad plays are best.' In art there is always a paradox involved, and here is the drama's. Just because it employs this inevitably imperfect medium of humanity it must always be an imperfect art. And its strength must lie, not in logical conduct and regularity of form, but in employing to the full this rebellious human medium. In this collaboration and its fruitfulness is drama's essential life. Form of some sort, with its discipline, there must be. Here follows the paradox. Set the actor impossible tasks and he will do better by them than by the possible ones; let him be himself to the utmost, he will the better be Hamlet or Othello or Lear.

There are no laws for living abundantly, nor any rules for writing plays with this magic in them. But we can detect the magic where it is, and even discern sometimes how it has come to be.

II

THE MAKING OF BLANK VERSE DRAMA

DRAMATIC dialogue has two obvious ends, the telling of the story and the disclosure of character. But there is another not so obvious; it must be made to stimulate our imagination and emotion—and here, mainly, comes in the need for some artifice of form.

MAGICAL SPEECH

You cannot, in any case, transfer casual conversation to the stage. You may produce the effect of having done so, but that is quite another thing. You must—all else apart—set in order and condense. If there were no more matter and method in ten minutes' dramatic talk than in an hour's round the average luncheon table, no one would ever guess what the play was about and it would never be over. It may be that a ten minutes' actual talk by a man to his lawyer at some crisis in his affairs, or an Ambassador's to a Minister with peace or war in the balance, might make pretty good drama as it stood. But note what would make it so: the emotional

tension produced by precedent events and a strict mental ordering of what must be said in the ten minutes if precious time was not to be wasted. Even then, give the dramatist such matter to make fully effective on the stage, and he will find redundancies to prune—leaving a few of them to suggest the redundancy of spontaneous talk—and in their place he will have slyly to add a little information about these precedent events. The man and the lawyer, the Ambassador and the Minister, each knows all about them and knows that the other knows, and they need not refer to them. But this new third party to the talk, the audience, knows nothing, and must be informed. Very slyly, though, the information must be slipped in, or all effect of spontaneity will be gone. And if so much dramatizing is still needed of what life has already dramatized, how much more will have to go to the converting of the slack, haphazard happenings of every day? Besides which, all dramatic talk, at pedestrian level or climax, must be tuned to concert pitch.

What that pitch will be will depend upon the sort of theatre for which the dramatist is working. For the modern playhouse it will be very different from that Aeschylus needed, and of a different quality from that which Shakespeare found effective at the Globe. But the test of it is the same; it must be the pitch at

which the attention of the audience can be captured and held. This may seem to be purely the actor's business, with no more in it than the Town Crier's 'Oyez, oyez, oyez'—a few listeners secured, he lifts his voice above the noises of the market-place as the actor must lift his to make the small boy at the back of the gallery hear. But the dramatist has his part even here. The actor's speeches must be so written that not only the sound but the sense—even though the sound of a word or two should go wrong on the way—will travel easily and effectively. We condemn a composer for writing badly for the singing voice; so we should the dramatist for not considering his speakers. And much more develops. The audience must not only be made to hear but to listen, to want to hear; to feel also and imagine (not to think; they should not be let think till the play is over, and about many plays not even then!). They have somehow to be transported out of themselves and their own world into the imagined world of the play; and in every sort of drama and theatre the chief means to this is the magic of the spoken word. The dramatist must provide for the actor's exercise of this peculiar power.

Has the power of the spoken word declined in these days when we read as unthinkingly as we eat and no more look to be read to than to be fed with

a spoon? Such things, of age-long inheritance, die hard. The trouble is rather that we no longer write with the living voice in mind. Of old, not verse and drama only, but everything would be written so. I do not know, or know if it is known, how, once meaning had been settled, the translators of our Bible went to work, but they never could have forgotten that its chief destiny was to be read aloud. And, so it happened, *Paradise Lost*, another abiding force in literature, had first to be spoken aloud. For long after silent reading had become a common habit writers wrote under the old obligation, and poets, at least, one would suppose, do so still. I have read modern poetry, though, that left me wondering. But newspaper reading teaches our eyes to skim along the lines and snatch at the sense, and newspaper writers, knowing they will have no more attention, are apt to spin out loose sentences and say everything twice over. I am thinking of leader writers and the like, of course; the snappy paragraphist must pack his choice fact in a sentence, and if he gives us grammar we need ask no more. The dramatist alone must write not only with economy, but still to be spoken aloud. He must convey clear meaning and stimulate emotion too. And reasonable means will not suffice for this. He must practise magic and weave spells.

'Spell,' I think, is the word. It means, by the dictionary, 'words used as a charm,' which exercise a power on you, apart from their sense, and over more than your reason.

Upon the point of economy only, consider how the dramatist's task differs from his fellow fiction-monger's, the novelist. Each wants to tell a story; the novelist can write a hundred thousand words and more if he likes, while the dramatist must be content with twenty thousand or so. The whole play of *Hamlet*—thought, as it stands, to be far too long for acting—hardly runs to thirty-five thousand words. Hamlet himself, about the most elaborately written character in recognized drama, speaks only 1,570 lines. Iago speaks rather more than 1,000, Othello rather less, Lear and Macbeth each less than 800. As to the women, Lady Macbeth has to dominate her share of the play with 260 lines, and Desdemona to pervade *Othello* with 390; Ophelia speaks 175 and Cordelia only 115. Comparable parts in modern plays will be shorter still; and any dramatist must be able to give an actor, in twenty lines or so, material for the making of at least some external show of a character. The novelist, certainly, has to paint his own scenery; but only the modern dramatist has this done for him, Shakespeare had to spend good poetry on it when he wanted any. Not that scenery is of much

dramatic use; it must be kept in subjection or it will throw the actors and their acting into the shade. Nor can sheer action be made effective for more than a few moments at a time, and the effect will be owed to its preparation even so, and this must be talk. The dramatist, in fine, to-day as in any age, has the spoken word to rely on, little else, and little enough of that. Each sentence must be made to do full service, double service indeed, even treble; to advance the story, to reveal character in the speaker, and responsively in the listener too. Yet mere compression of sense, the reduction of the dialogue to a sort of mathematical formula, will not do. It must retain human qualities; it may be super- but not sub-natural; nor can it be merely natural, as we saw. It needs to have a touch of magic in it.

Poetry is magical speech. Psychologists now tell us just how the spell works, how the rhythm absorbs our marginal attention, how the reiteration of certain sounds stimulates or dulls our nerves. "Wonderful, wonderful and most wonderful wonderful! and yet again wonderful, and after that, out of all whooping!" The pity of it would seem to be that, from this point of view, bad poetry will serve as well as good. And in the theatre so it has done, more often than not, the psychologist might retort.

It was the dramatist's earliest resource. I am not competent to discuss its use in Greek drama, and I must politely doubt whether anyone can now more than dimly appreciate its emotional effect there. I doubt indeed whether we can ever quite appreciate poetry—in its full emotional force, in all its delicacies—written in any language but our own. However this may be, English dramatic verse, which is our immediate business, has owed little enough to foreign influence, and that little even less to its advantage. It came to its full strength and beauty by use and wont, and theory and precept did nothing to help it in its decline.

THE WORKMANLIKE *EVERYMAN*

From the beginning it was practical in method and aim. Take the long-neglected but now—thanks to Mr. William Poel—familiar *Everyman*. I do not know the origin of the metre, or rather of the medley of metres, which it contains, nor does this affect the present argument. The author will have had some choice at least in the matter, and the point is that it exactly reflects the practical conditions of the play's performance. This would take place upon a scaffold in a market-place or before a church door; though the actors might be carefully trained they

would not be expert; the audience would be attentive but simple-minded, and it might not be too easy to make them all hear. What can be better, then, than the direct hammer-stroke rhythm and rhyme of—

*I pray you all give your audience,
And hear this matter with reverence,
By figure a moral play—
The Summoning of Everyman called it is,
That of our lives and ending shows
How transitory we be all day.
This matter is wondrous precious :]
But the intent of it is more gracious,
And sweet to bear away.*

The short lines are easy to fling out; the phrasing is simple; the emphatic words are unmistakable, hit them and the sense cannot be missed. The least skilled speaker could make the matter plain to the furthest listeners. God's speech out of heaven:

*I perceive here in my majesty
How that all creatures be to me unkind,
Living without dread in worldly prosperity;
Of ghostly sight the people be so blind,
Drowned in sin they know me not for their God.
In worldly riches is all their mind . . .*

shows a smoother cadence and a slightly freer—yet still a very sparse—use of important words. Yet, for

all the simplicity, sheer dramatic effect, innate in the verse, is not lacking.

. . . *where art thou, Death, thou mighty messenger?*

Death enters.

Almighty God, I am here at your will,

Your commandment to fulfil.

There is a grim grin in the very sound of that couplet. •

As the play proceeds the dialogue grows easy and familiar, as if the author felt that by now he would have the audience intent. Note too how, in the very long part of *Everyman*, he avoids monotony by continually varying the metre, using quatrain, couplet, long line, short, with a lively lilt to give the whole thing pace, and rhyme to unify and stiffen it. It is all very simple; there is little true music in it, no verbal felicity, no attempt to develop character, and there are no calculated effects of any sort or kind. But it is workmanlike, it answers its purpose.

THE PRACTICAL ELIZABETHANS

Not for a hundred years or more after this does English drama come to its own in the Theatre, the Rose, the Fortune, the Curtain and the Globe. Various influences, classic and traditional, combined to mould it. There is an illuminating study

of a part of the process in Mr. F. L. Lucas's *Seneca and Elizabethan Tragedy*. By 1587, he tells us, when *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Tamburlaine* had appeared, classic tradition had "... established the conventions of blank verse, of five acts, of Moralising and Introspection, Rhetoric and Stichomythia, Ghosts and the Supernatural. The Mediæval spirit on the other hand jettisoned the unities and the restriction of the number of characters ..." and it had "... added the vital interest of romantic love." All such statements must need qualification. Blank verse never quite excluded rhyme, and how far the five-act rule was followed is a matter of doubt and controversy. But adopting this—and gratefully—as a sound summary of the facts, what I am now concerned to show is that the men of the theatre accepted or rejected these methods, classic and mediæval, not in the light of authority but, after experiment, according to the use they were.

Mr. Lucas quotes a long passage of 'classical' stichomythia from *Richard III*. Shakespeare was learning his business then and working under various influences. But look at the scene in *Antony and Cleopatra*, in which Enobarbus and Agrippa cap mockeries of Lepidus. Stichomythia still, if not quite so classic. Shakespeare, free from all influence now, puts the trick of the thing to spontaneous dramatic

use. There is indeed enough example of it in everyday life to keep this volleying of phrases, at moments of tension or excitement, in any canon of drama.

But that other trick—more of a legacy from the Mysteries, I suppose, than the Classics—by which Kyd, and even Marlowe, lard their lines with Latin is very quickly outworn. It has no dramatic value. Latin words in an English speech will be dumb notes emotionally. Is Shakespeare, still in his prentice days, burlesquing the business in *Love's Labour's Lost* by leaving the tagging of Latin to his Pedant? "Twice sod simplicity; bis coctus," says Master Holofernes contemptuously of Goodman Dull. But the laugh, even from an aristocratic audience (if that was the play's first), much more from the crowd in the yard and the galleries, will not be against Goodman Dull.

The effect of an echoing line—this is one of nature's own, whatever its intermediate ancestry—we find fully developed very early; in *The Spanish Tragedy*, *Lochrine* and *Selimus*, to name three plays pretty well at random. *The Spanish Tragedy* gives us:

*In time the savage bull sustains the yoke,
In time all haggard hawks will stoop to lure,
In time small wedges cleave the hardest oak,*

*In time the flint is pierced with softest shower :
And she in time will fall from her disdain
And rue the sufferance of your friendly pain.*

A memorable passage; Benedick will quote from it, twenty years later, in *Much Ado about Nothing*.

In *Lochrine* the effect is contrived 'in reverse,' so to speak.

*For Lochrine hath forsaken Guendoline.
Behold the heavens do wail for Guendoline,
The shining sun doth blush for Guendoline,
The liquid air doth weep for Guendoline,
The very ground doth groan for Guendoline,
Ay, they are milder than the Britain King,
For he rejecteth luckless Guendoline.*

Shakespeare employs it in *The Merchant of Venice* :

BASSANIO : *Sweet Portia,
If you did know to whom I gave the ring,
If you did know for whom I gave the ring,
And would conceive for what I gave the ring,
And how unwillingly I left the ring,
When naught would be accepted but the ring,
You would abate the strength of your displeasure.*
PORTIA : *If you had known the virtue of the ring,
Or half her worthiness that gave the ring,
Or your own honour to contain the ring,
You would not then have parted with the ring.*

But note that it is now put to comic use, and here we

have the wonted evolution^o of such devices. This one is rooted, however, in natural habit; and, much de-formalized (with dramatic method in general), the echoing line and phrase runs through Elizabethan drama and beyond. It has an obvious oratorical value. We find it, given verisimilitude and with all its essential effect gained, in Mark Antony's recurrent—

But Brutus is an honourable man. . . .

Again, the rhymed couplet for the ending of a play, a scene, or the life of a character is a device which lasts through and outlasts the entire seventeenth century. Peele and Greene and Kyd have employed it constantly. Marlowe was not very fond of it, he was sworn to blank verse. But with Shakespeare, Fletcher, Jonson, Massinger and the rest, with Dryden and Otway, and for long after, whatever the main body of the medium—even if this be prose—the convention of the rhymed 'tag' persists. It can be found even in nineteenth-century comedy and farce, a solitary couplet at the end, to 'bring the curtain down' (and, by tradition, this must never be spoken at rehearsal). Here is good evidence of how dominant were vocal values in Elizabethan drama and its acting. One can compare the thing to a full close in music; to the well-accustomed ear any other sort of ending to a scene would perhaps seem ragged and unfinished. It may even be that

when the dramatist omitted the final couplet he wanted to produce a markedly unfinished effect. And of course the actors liked it. It was a recognized signal for applause.

BLANK VERSE AND ITS RIVALS

For all Marlowe's influence and achievement, blank verse did not come to its own without a struggle, and at no time had it quite swept the board. Competitors clung on. The haphazard methods and metres of the Mysteries could hardly survive. By exception an *Everyman* may have the root of the dramatic matter in it, but in general their elaborate simplicities mark the end rather than the flowering of a fashion. But there was the long fourteen-syllable line, which we know best in *Gammer Gurton's Needle* and the Newton translations of Seneca. I doubt if this could ever have taken hold. It is hard to speak well. It lends itself to gabbling and competitive shouting. We find Shakespeare making comic play with a line of the sort in the early *Comedy of Errors*. And in *Love's Labour's Lost* (when he may be poking literary fun, for the benefit of a special audience, in various directions) he gives his burlesque worthies snatches of twelve- and fourteen-syllable verse with the right ridiculous effect. But for serious dramatic

work it proves too monotonously sing-song. The difficulty here lies simply in breathing. A ten-syllable line can not only be easily spoken at a breath, but there will be enough surplus energy to give to the varying of pace and tone. Moreover, when the end-stopt line is no longer the rule and the sense is carried over there will be breath enough to spare for this too. Now these are important considerations. Dramatic verse should no more be awkward and ineffective to speak than should vocal music be awkward to sing. If it is we write the composer down as incompetent; so we should the dramatist in like case. He may try his actor's *skill* to the utmost; that is a very different thing. Marlowe set Alleyn magnificent tasks, and the early Shakespeare plays abound in passages—mostly for the boy actors—as deliberately bravura as are the arias of Mozart, and capable of as beautiful effects. There are very definite limits to the *dramatic* use of such 'set pieces'; and Shakespeare at least—dramatist first, last, and all the time—soon found them and passed on. But, here and elsewhere, the ten-syllable line, blank or rhymed, proved itself unrivalled for eloquence, not so short as to be spasmodic, nor so long as to be unwieldy. Whether a great poet could have made good dramatic use of the 'fourteener' and have absolved it from its monotony, who shall say? The French use a long

line. It always sounds, I think, a little monotonous to us, though seemingly not to them. It asks great skill in the speaking. But here the genius of a language comes into the question, to enlarge it beyond the bounds of present discussion.

There were other rivals. Lyly tried prose for his school-boys; and *The Famous Victories of Henry V* is presumably in prose—though the printer of the second half apparently thought it would look a little better set up as verse. But while prose had certain obvious uses—prosaic and comic uses—it lacked the impetus, exhilaration, and music of verse, dramatically valuable qualities in themselves. It was harder to learn. That, by the way, did not matter to Lyly, for his school-boys were there to learn for learning's sake. It is harder to speak well, harder, that is to say, than the simple forthright verse which swings along to uniform cadence and tune; the verse of *Antony and Cleopatra* is another matter. And for dramatic purposes it is harder to write, to write well, at any rate. When the slinging and counterslinging of speeches was subdued and developed into the subtler give-and-take of true dialogue, the dramatist was bound to discover this.

A more insinuating rival was the rhymed ten-syllable couplet. For thirty years or so there had been academic dispute enough upon the respective

merits of 'classic' verse¹ and native rhyme, with 'beggarly rhyme' getting rather the worst of it. Not upon their practical dramatic merits; these would have been a bit beneath the notice of the disputants—quite luckily, one exclaims, since first and last the arguments seem to bring more confusion than light—and, truly, till the new London theatres gave drama its home, this part of the issue was not a very living one. Then, doubtless, the young playwrights and play-cobblers had it out among themselves over their ale and sack. But they could have come to no conclusions. The couplet never fell into complete disuse; tags apart, whole passages of rhyme crop out in the maturest blank verse plays. They left Dryden to complete and implement the argument something like a century later, to bring it to terms of clarity and reason, and thereby, as he finally found, to stultify it; not all his literary intelligence could atone for his lack of dramatic intuition. But the Elizabethans—though Jonson might lay down the law—had cared little for the logic of such matters. They were there to make any metre and any form effective, blank verse, rhyme or prose, as and how best they could, as a painter puts on colours, brown, blue, vermilion, whichever may suit his scheme.

Now there is a certain brilliancy about rhyme. Give a repartee the snap of a rhyme to end it and it

will sound just about twice as clever. Take the masked encounter between Biron and Rosaline in *Love's Labour's Lost* (though these contests of wit are hardly to be quoted in cold blood). They approach each other with a mutual

Did not I dance with you in Brabant once?

Then follows:

BIRON: *I know you did.*

ROSALINE: *How needless was it then to ask the question!*

BIRON: *You must not be so quick.*

ROSALINE: *'Tis long of you that spur me with such questions.*

BIRON: *Your wit's too hot, it speeds too fast, 'twill tire.*

ROSALINE: *Not till it leave the rider in the mire.*

BIRON: *What time o' day?*

ROSALINE: *The hour that fools should ask.*

BIRON: *Now fair befall your mask!*

ROSALINE: *Fair fall the face it covers!*

BIRON: *And send you many lovers.*

ROSALINE: *Amen, so you be none!*

BIRON: *Nay, then I will be gone.*

It is really pretty puerile—even though, in a sense, it is meant to be. It is word-juggling; but how the rhyme adds to the skill of it! It adds tune too, and it keeps the thing in shape.

The touch of artifice in rhyme makes it the right form for Romeo's self-conscious grievings over

another Rosaline. It suits the fantasy of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Note that Shakespeare never uses it by rule. He seldom gives an entire scene to it; a speech or so, or part of a speech, or a ding-dong exchange, that is all—he rhymes for the immediate effect that he wants to make. In *Love's Labour's Lost* we have from time to time a perfect riot—a Dionysiac riot—of wantonly irregular metre, with rhyme to do a double duty, both to manifest the wantonness and control it.

In *Romeo and Juliet* he sets the first meeting of the two to a sonnet:

ROMEO: *If I profane with my unworthiest hand
This holy shrine, the gentle fine is this,
My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand
To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss.*

JULIET: *Good pilgrim, you do wrong your hand too
much,
Which mannerly devotion shows in this;
For saints have hands that pilgrim's hands do
touch,
And palm to palm is holy palmer's kiss.*

ROMEO: *Have not saints lips and holy palmers too?*

JULIET: *Ay, pilgrim, lips that they must use in prayer.*

ROMEO: *O, then, dear saint, let lips do what hands do:
They pray, grant thou, lest faith turn to
despair.*

JULIET: *Saints do not move, though grant for prayer's sake.*

ROMEO: *Then move not, while my prayer's effect I take.*

The convention allowed for, here is a perfectly calculated dramatic effect. Up to this point the whole scene has been a lively one, with Tybalt's irruption to add colour and force to it. Shakespeare has used blank verse for Capulet's fussings and bridlings (which make, so to speak, the verbal backbone of the scene), rhyme, by contrast, for Romeo's still ecstasy at his first sight of Juliet:

O, she doth teach the torches to burn bright!

It seems she hangs upon the cheek of night

Like a rich jewel in an Ethiop's ear . . .

—then rhyme again to give precision and importance to Tybalt; for, as we said, he abides by no rule in the matter. And now he needs still another contrast, and, for the first meeting of the lovers, a quite fresh effect. He pitches on a sonnet for it, to be spoken in canon. The very peculiarity will strike us; and, dramatically, what better—what more rightly ironic—beginning could we have to the story of tragic passion than this gentle formality? All their innocence is in the manner, as the religion of their love is in the matter of it; there is even a sense of fatality in its rounded completeness. See too how exactly Shakespeare proportions their share of speech. They

each speak four lines, then one each; then Romeo, because he is the wooer, is given a couplet more; then for agreement they share the last couplet. The kiss marks the end (the stage direction for it is generally astray).

The plays abound with instances of this fitting of metrical form to dramatic use; more noticeably in the earlier plays, for there the form is more distinct. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* scene after scene give us examples. And the Fool's scenes in *King Lear* show mature and elaborate and most cunning use of the lyric and dramatic in contrast.

WHY BLANK VERSE WON

But whenever Shakespeare and the rest need continuing strength as well as poetic exhilaration in their dialogue, they soon learn to turn to blank verse for it. Blank verse, as a stand-by, wins. Was it the power and repute of Marlowe which finally settled the question? There was little he did with his verse to show the subtle dramatic medium into which it was later to be made. He never became, in fact, very much of a dramatist; whether, but for that dagger thrust, he might have is an interesting question. He evidently knew little of the theatre, but there was at the time, truly, not very much to know.

I suspect too that Alleyn, from all but one point of view, was the wrong sort of actor for him—with such a presence, and a voice, which could send the mighty lines resounding so nobly round the yard! For no number of mighty lines will make a play. Marlowe sowed, but he was not to reap.

What was it, in such a theatre as the Elizabethan, that gave blank verse its supremacy, and what, at this moment, was needed for its developing into the strong and subtle medium it became?

The two chief partners in the art of the drama are the dramatist and the actor; and, whatever the theatre (while it remains anything of what we now call a theatre), no contribution can count beside theirs. For the Elizabethans there was no other worth counting at all, but a certain combination of circumstances was needed before the partnership could bear its full fruit. The old Mystery plays had been written for amateur actors, from whom not much more could be expected than a bold appearance, some forceful speaking, and a little native humour. Not much more, therefore, ever came to be demanded. And, for something the same reason, the University plays remained what they were. Then, in the mid-sixteenth century, we have the travelling troupes of actors, wearing for their protection the livery badge of some lord. These developed, no

doubt, a certain professional ability; but their vagabondage and other haphazards of existence could hardly have let them give much care to the niceties of their work, nor had they, I suppose, a very great variety of plays to act nor more than casual relations with the writers of them. Then there were the boys' companies, the Children of Paul's, of the Chapel, and the like. They must have been most carefully trained. Their master was often their dramatist too. The performances were probably very perfect things of the sort; much admired, we know, and the adult companies, at the height of their own popularity and achievement, suffered from the rivalry. Famous actors were recruited from them. Sir Edmund Chambers even thinks that (though long after the time we are talking of) the business-like Burbages took over the Blackfriars to secure some of these boys, then playing there and growing to manhood. It was to them, very largely, no doubt, that the Elizabethan theatre owed its standards of beauty of diction, and still more, for the playing of women's parts, the grace in action which made this by no means a ridiculous exhibition, something, as we too easily assume, to be tolerated merely, but a most delicate art. The singing of church music by boys will be partly comparable to it; and in China, if not in Japan, the custom holds still. But children are

children and training is training, and they could not be expected to bring any creative impulse to their work, nor to enlarge the dramatic ideas of the authors who wrote for them.

Yet here was the need, a close creative collaboration of dramatist and actor. And not till the late 1570's, when the companies settled in London and began to acquire theatres, homes of their own, not till the dramatists could thus keep in constant and intimate touch with them, till to-morrow's work could truly profit by to-day's, did this come about. But then at once the two aspects of the art began to react fruitfully upon each other. The dramatist saw more in the actor's art, and the actor deeper into the dramatist's. Out of this partnership a very vital and—with Shakespeare at his greatest—a very great art came. And the new and most vital thing in it was the creating and interpreting of character.

An essential part of true drama, this was at the time a new thing. The old plays had been peopled by walking abstractions and animated lay figures; and, as far as individuality went, there was little to choose between a character labelled Covetousness and one called King Herod. Indeed, in Bishop Bale's *King John*, written not forty years earlier, we have, besides John himself, Stephen Langton and Cardinal

Pandulphus, cheek by jowl, Clergy, Commonalty and England, a widow. Comedy, it is true, had gone a more familiar gait. Ralph Roister Doister is a human being, but he is not any human being in particular. And we come to the heroic and tragic in Kyd and Marlowe to find their characters abstractions still, little more. Tamburlaine has no individuality; he is simply the tyrant magnificent. Hieronimo is a succession of extravagantly effective attitudes. But there is a groping and stumbling towards the new thing, the presenting of a human being and the showing of the inward man in terms of the outward. In a short passage in *The Spanish Tragedy*, one of the many in which Hieronimo bewails his son's death, we may discern it. Significantly, this is one of the later additions to the text, and it gives us far more of Hieronimo the man than can pages of the very best poetic rant. He is apostrophizing

. . . yonder pale-faced He-cat there, the moon,
and he asks:

*Where was she that same night when my Horatio
Was murdered? She should have shone. Search thou
the book.*

*Had the moon shone, in my boy's face there was a
kind of grace*

*That I know—nay, I do know—had the murderer
seen him,*

*His weapon would have fallen and cut the earth,
Had he been framed of naught but blood and death.*

MARLOWE

In this too, Marlowe's *Edward II*, his last work, is very much of an advance upon *Tamburlaine*. It has been held that because he wrote it for a company which contained no magnificently stentorian Edward Alleyn, he deliberately lowered the play's tone to suit lesser capacities. But I prefer to think simply that he was beginning to learn his true business as a dramatist. For in place of an orgy of declamation we have a play which is schemed, however crudely, as a conflict between recognizably human beings.

Marlowe's earlier notions of drama may be found set down, appropriately enough, in the opening lines of *Tamburlaine*, when poor-spirited Mycetes of Persia remarks:

Brother Cosroe, I find myself aggrieved,

Yet insufficient to express the same

For it requires a great and thundering speech. . . .

Great and thundering speeches follow galore, full of splendour and power and sheer beauty—we find them in every scene. For power take

As when a fiery exhalation

Wrapt in the bowels of a freezing cloud,

*Fighting for passage, makes the welkin crack
And casts a flash of lightning to the earth.*

For splendour,

*Then in my coach, like Saturn's royal son,
Mounted his shining chariot gilt with fire
And drawn with princely eagles through the path
Paved with bright crystal and enchased with stars
When all the gods stand gazing at his pomp,
So will I ride through Samarcanda streets
Until my soul, dissevered from this flesh,
Shall mount the milk-white way and meet him there.
To Babylon, my lords! To Babylon!*

We can hear Alleyn, noble of presence and voice, making the theatre ring with that, and the answering applause as the "pampered jades of Asia" drew him off in his chariot. While for sheer beauty take the vigil over the dying Zenocrate:

*Now walk the angels on the walls of Heaven
As sentinels to warn the immortal souls
To entertain divine Zenocrate;
Apollo, Cynthia and the ceaseless lamps,
That gently looked upon this loathsome earth,
Shine downwards now no more, but deck the Heavens
To entertain divine Zenocrate.
The crystal springs, whose taste illuminates
Refined eyes with an eternal sight,
Like tried silver run through Paradise,*

*To entertain divine Zenocrate.
The cherubins and holy seraphins
That sing and play before the King of Kings
Use all their voices and their instruments
To entertain divine Zenocrate ;
And in this sweet and curious harmony,
The God that tunes this music to our souls
Holds out his hand in highest majesty
To entertain divine Zenocrate.*

If this is not poetic drama, one exclaims, then so much the worse for poetic drama. Great poetry of its sort it undoubtedly is, and if that were the only question Marlowe would be a living force in the theatre to-day. But put back these passages where they belong, and the very essentials of drama are lacking to them. Three-quarters of Tamburlaine's speeches might be spoken by any other character, and this marvellous threnody upon Zenocrate would not be spoken by him at all. It never occurred to Marlowe to sacrifice the integrity of his poetry to the demands of the play as a play. No play, moreover, can be made up wholly of great moments, nor is it even the great moments which make the play. If you are capable of them, as he so superlatively was, so much the better. But the dramatist's main task—and his chief difficulty—is to give the pedestrian part quality and vitality.

Possibly there was a pedestrian part to *Tamburlaine*, now lost save for such traces of it as the scene before the battle in which Mycetes tries to hide his crown, and the passage in the second part between Perdicas and Calyphas. For Richard Jones, the play's first printer, tells us—as Miss Ellis-Fermor, its latest editor, points out—that he has “omitted and left out some fond and frivolous gestures, digressing (and in my poor opinion) far unmeet for the matter, which I thought might seem more tedious unto the wise than anyway else to be regarded, though haply they have been of some vain conceited fondlings greatly gaped at what times they were showed upon the stage in their graced deformities.” This is indeed probable, I think, if we remember the ‘fond and frivolous gestures’ which are still extant in *Doctor Faustus* and *The Jew of Malta*. Miss Ellis-Fermor agrees with Richard Jones—holds, in fact, that for Marlowe’s dignity’s sake he might well have ‘omitted and left out’ rather more. But I fancy she would have found herself in profound disagreement with Alleyn and the men of the theatre around him. Perhaps, however, Marlowe did too. Perhaps the ‘fond and foolish’ gestures were written in under protest, or even, in spite of him, by one of Henslowe’s earliest hacks for the price of a dinner and a few pots of ale.

What more can you want than this, asks the poet (and his editor), when he has wrought to a triumphant climax his fiftieth thundering speech? The ungracious answer must be: comparatively, if you please, a little less. What better? and the answer is: a due share of something not quite so good. The tomfooleries and brutalities which disfigure (admittedly) *Doctor Faustus* and *The Jew of Malta* may not be quite the thing. But without some contrast and relief a play's nobilities must lose half their effective value. Even Alleyn, fine and resourceful speaker though he be, cannot go piling climax upon climax for ever.

With Marlowe one speculates sadly on the 'might have been.'

*The stars move still, time runs, the clock will strike,
The devil will come, and Faustus must be damned.
O, I'll leap up to heaven! Who pulls me down?
See, where Christ's blood streams in the firmament!
One drop of blood will save me. Oh, my Christ,
Rend not my heart for naming of my Christ,
Yet I will call on him.*

Here is a note unstruck in *Tamburlaine*; and if it does not quite chime with the boxing of the Pope's ears and fireworks flung among the Cardinals, what matter? Had he lived, surely he would have mastered his medium; and we might now have a tragedy or

two, not ranging wider, but striking deeper than it was ever in the magnanimous Shakespeare to strike. The Star Chamber would probably have suppressed them, and suppressed Marlowe too, but its archivist might have kept copies of the outrageous things. Or would he never have come to treating even the follies of the theatre with respect?—for this is what the dramatist must do; and then master them, or they will betray him.

With *Edward II* he does, as we said, discover that there is something more to playwriting than the stringing out of fine lines. There are still enough of them to count; and one or two—

Gallop apace, bright Phœbus through the sky

And dusky night in rusty iron car . . .

(in particular)—seem to have caught the young Shakespeare's ear; not to mention other matters, turned to profit in *Richard II*. But the subject and the characters, the wretched Gaveston's fancy for

Sweet speeches, comedies and pleasing shows . . .

will not let him 'get going' oratorically as *Tamburlaine* did. Nor, after Faustus, is there much spiritual tragedy in Edward himself. He sets himself conscientiously to this new job, however, to the telling of the story and the staging of the conflict.

He is, one must confess, terribly inept at it. He rambles through the whole of Edward's reign. He

has little sense of what may be better put in and left out, what shown and what recounted, and no notion of how to put his theatre's freedom in time and space to dramatic use—by limiting it! So Gaveston comes back from exile and is off again and again comes back, and Edward and Isabella and Mortimer and the rest wander about England and France for no better reason than that history says they did. Nor does all this, naturally, leave him much time for the disclosing of character. Even when he can rob the needs of the strung-out action of a few lines, he either devotes them (and one easily forgives him) to a little poetry for its own sake or to useless description—gives us fifteen lines, for instance, about Gaveston's womanish dress and behaviour when the fellow himself has been parading before us for at least three-quarters of an hour.

Altogether it is as well for Marlowe that his fame has not to rest on *Edward II*. And yet, in accomplishment so little, in promise it is much, in the promise which others were to fulfil. He does here try to show us credible human beings in conflict. They are painted puppets still, not living creatures—though by the play's end he has belaboured the pitiful Edward into some sort of dramatic life. Further, he did, I suppose, in this and such other Histories as he set his hand to and left unfinished, finally win the day for blank verse.

It was a victory fraught, as all victories seem to be, with very opposite consequences. It has given us some of the noblest dramatic poetry in the world, as medium—and no other could have so served—to some of the greatest drama. On the other hand it has been the source of a very river of turbid verbiage, flowing through three centuries, winding between the theatre and the printed page, and hardly yet run dry. Rhyme probably asks some skill in the writing (I do not know; I have never tried any). True dramatic blank verse asks for more than skill. If he is to accomplish much more than fifty lines of it, a man must, it seems, be both tragic poet and playwright born or bred, and the combination is a rare one. Yet anyone can learn to write respectably correct lines by the thousand, which will look well enough on paper; and actors were once so trained to declaim them that at the moment it was hard to tell them from the real thing. The modern theatre has its faults, and one of them is that few actors now know how to speak blank verse. But the hidden gain in this is that at least we can tell bad blank verse when we hear it, and we hear much less of it, therefore. For it used to be said that at any literary lunch a safe opening to your neighbour would be: I wish you'd tell me about that blank verse play of yours. There always was one.

III

SHAKESPEARE'S PROGRESS

THE dramatic advantage that verse in general has over prose is that it is more quickly and easily raised to emotional pitch; and there is little place for it in drama except for the expression of emotion. The Elizabethans were always apt to make a too commonplace use of it. The actors liked it, I dare say. It gave pace and colour, and a sense of excitement. It was easy to learn. And blank verse, at any rate, was easy to write, once one had the trick of it. It was, of course, far too easy to write slackly and anyhow, and this at last brought it into disrepute. The Elizabethan dramatists were not all born poets, nor, when they were, did they always wait for inspiration. The case against blank verse, when Dryden came to make it, was a very good one, though it was not precisely the case he made. As usual, the form subsisted long after the spirit had gone out of it. But Massinger and Shirley were, to the end, writing excellent verse dialogue, and the loose freedoms of the metre should have been easy enough to forgive. What was wrong was the lack of compelling

emotion. As it was not poetry it should not have been framed in verse at all. The discipline of prose would have been fitter. Dryden, possessed by literary theories and with an eye towards Corneille and his alexandrines, turned to rhyme, and seems never to have remembered that in an earlier battle blank verse had all but ousted this from the theatre; or, if he did, he never asked himself why. Yet there were excellent reasons, as we began, I think, to see.

Irregular rhyme runs to doggerel, and regular rhyme is not malleable as blank verse is. You cannot quicken or slacken the pace of it, heighten or lower its temper with the same ease. You cannot reduce rhyme to commonplace, if what you have to say is commonplace, without making it sound ridiculous—at least this is very difficult. And however highly you charge it with emotion it will still seem trammelled by form. Very obviously, too, the more set the metre, the harder to distinguish in it between the mood and manner of speaking of character and character. Moreover the dramatist himself and his style will be more apparent in it; and his business is to suppress himself in favour of his characters—what place has he among them, however artfully he hide himself? A play is not a puppet show. On these points at least blank verse seems to have the better

of it. Granted the idiosyncrasies of English and a demand for some sort of verse for a medium, is there any other which gives such freedom of expression coupled with a sufficient strength of form, so much unity and variety in combination; is there any so fitted, then, to the drama of character and its conflicts?

I am going to try and trace the main lines of its development to this end by Shakespeare, a thing not to be done, of course, with any pretence to completeness in the course of a lecture, or a dozen lectures. But one cannot talk of English dramatic method and leave it unattempted.

It was Shakespeare's passionate interest in human beings which carried him to supremacy as a dramatist; his poetic power, and his finally all but infallible sense of the theatre would have availed little without this. It flashes out in his earliest work, though he is still, as young men will be, too occupied with the mechanics of his business, or with being clever, and too delighted with his cleverness, for what is innate in him to find full expression. But in each new play we find him freer from his exemplars and from his own self-conceit, and nearer to the creating of characters who will seem to live and move by the laws of their own being. These are likely to be the less important ones at first; heroes and heroines

may be too rooted in the borrowed story, or the burden of the play's success will be too heavy on them, for it to be safe to set them free from the assurance of a practised method. Comic characters win an irresponsible freedom; those that just help along the plot do not, because there is no creative energy to spare for them. And the verse is always at its richest and freest where the creation of character is most complete.

ROMEO AND JULIET

This is certainly the case with, for instance, *Romeo and Juliet*. Shakespeare is still 'finding himself,' and writing somewhat by rule. Even so, it is less a set of rules he obeys than that a light cloud of influences seems to hang over him; and, sensitive as he is, he can absorb them, yet not lose himself in them. What is more, as a practical playwright and actor, he knows just what must be done with these verses, and each one is made sure of its effect.

Take the Prince's first speech with its studied
That quench the fire of your pernicious rage
With purple fountains issuing from your veins,
and the neat antithesis of
To wield old partisans in hands as old,
Cankered with peace, to part your cankered hate.

It is close framed in conventional expression, but the very music of it is dramatic. Throughout the speech the cadence of each line is to the point; the sharp vociferous ending of the first six of them with *peace . . . steel . . . beasts . . . rage . . . veins . . . hands*; the mere use of the vowels and consonants in the next three lines:

*. . . Throw your mistempered weapons to the
ground*

And hear the sentence of your moved prince,

Three civil brawls, bred of an airy word . . .

—with the commanding harshness and firmness in the rolling r's and final d's. By its sound alone the speech does half its business.

It is the smooth music as much as the meaning of the passage between Benvolio and old Montague that woos us into sympathy with the love-lorn Romeo, whose coming it heralds.

Madam, an hour before the worshipped sun

Peered forth the golden window of the east,

A troubled mind drave me to walk abroad

Where, underneath a grove of sycamore

That westward rooteth from the city's side,

So early walking did I see your son. . . .

Many a morning hath he there been seen,

With tears augmenting the fresh morning's dew,

Adding to clouds more clouds with his deep sighs. . . .

But dramatic, in another and more important respect, it is not; for neither by sense nor sound can we tell which of the two should be speaking which lines nor what sort of a human being either of them is meant to be.

But turn to the Nurse's first speech.*

NURSE: *Faith, I can tell her age unto an hour.*

LADY CAPULET: *She's not fourteen.*

NURSE: *I'll lay fourteen o' my teeth,
And yet to my teen be't spok'n I've but four—
She's not fourteen. How long is it now
To Lammas tide?*

LADY CAPULET: *A fortnight and odd days.*

NURSE: *Even or odd, of all days in the year
Come Lammas eve at night shall she be fourteen.
Susan and she—God rest all Christian souls!—
Were of an age: well, Susan is with God,
She was too good for me: but as I said,
On Lammas eve at night shall she be fourteen:
That shall she marry; I remember't well;
'Tis since the earthquake now eleven years
And she was weaned—I never shall forget't.
Of all days of the year, upon that day,*

* The printer of the first Quarto seems to have thought that Shakespeare had written it in prose; but then the printer of the second Quarto thought the same of the 'Queen Mab' speech. I leave the solution of such mysteries to my betters.

*For then I had laid wormwood to my dug,
Sitting i' the sun under the dove house wall . . .'*

—and so on for twenty matchless lines more. What a difference! Apart from the matter of it being the Nurse, the whole Nurse, and nothing but the Nurse, how Shakespeare makes the tune, or rather the tunelessness, the chattering rhythm, the curt syllables, the monotony of the metre just saved from monotony by irregularities—how every single quality and oddity in the lines serves for the fuller expression of her! Note the number of one-syllable words and how the dissyllables and trisyllables themselves are slurred and reduced in value. Note, in particular, that the lines are to be scanned—and can only be scanned—dramatically and characteristically. Count the third line (as it is customarily printed) on your fingers and it has thirteen syllables. But treat it as the clipped parenthesis it is meant to be—

And yet, to my teen be't spok'n, I've but four

—and it flows along with the rest. Modern editions print the next line as ten neat syllables; but all the Quartos and the First Folio (even though the printers are turning the whole thing to prose) have 'Shee's' and not 'Shee is.' This again is dramatically right. There needs a pause while the Nurse wrinkles

* This is printed as it should, I think, be spoken.

her forehead or rubs her nose or scratches her ear. It is provided after 'fourteen.'

. . . *She's not fourteen* (pause). *How long is it now
To Lammas tide?*

And the picked out *How—long—is—it—now* . . . is as eloquent. If the Nurse's next line—

Even or odd, of all days in the year
—is markedly regular, it is because she is asserting herself against Lady Capulet, beginning her tale (in which no one shall interrupt her) and hammering its preface out syllable by syllable. The little passage about Susan is regular too; this helps to keep it slow and pensive.

*Susan and she—God rest all Christian souls!—
Were of an age. Well, Susan is with God,
She was too good for me. But as I said . . .*

And after that it tumbles along, with only a regular line dropped in at intervals to save the speech from metrical anarchy. While, incidentally, for a touch of pure rhythmic charm, take

Sitting i' the sun under the dove house wall.

I wonder if that line was not marked in the late Poet Laureate's copy of the play as an instance of effect to be gained by subtle displacement of stress.

We shall hardly exaggerate if we say that in the writing of the Nurse Shakespeare solves at a stroke all the essential problems of the dramatic use of

blank verse. He was to enlarge its scope and enrich it in power and mystery beyond recognition; but as a vehicle of the expression of character, here it is running true. There is nothing else in the play so complete; and—though he had a hint of her from the borrowed story—the Nurse is essentially Shakespeare's own. We know it from the first opening of her mouth. He has not had to come to what she is by way of what he must make her do, trusting her to conform to this. She is what she is, and absolutely. Mercutio, by the time he dies, is as spontaneously alive, but he has achieved himself in prose. Here is a good instance of a character born in convention and breaking the shackles of it; for the Mercutio of the Queen Mab speech is a figure of that name and a speaker of musical verse, little more. Capulet, too, comes to something like life. He has conventional things to do. At times they warp the expression of him, at times he takes them in his stride.

As to Romeo and Juliet themselves, the burden of the play and its success rest on them, so the young Shakespeare will use every device—his own or anyone else's!—to make them effective. They are not his creatures to begin with, and his writing of them becomes, in a sense, the process of making them so. As a rule the nearer they are to Brooke the more they abide in the set phrase and the calculated conceit.

The scene, in which Romeo hears from the Friar of his banishment, has passages taken, almost sentence for sentence, from the poem. But suddenly the verse will vitalize, turn spontaneous and simple, directly dramatic, will break free. That is Shakespeare with Brooke out of mind.

A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

There is one play which seems to stand apart from his consistently progressive interest in the creating of character, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*—which is early work, but not prentice work by any means. Here, however, he has set himself another sort of task. Theseus and Hippolita, the lovers, the clowns, are weighted with no more actuality of life than the fabric of the whole fantasy will sustain, and the fairies must not tread the earth solidly at all. And he aims at a unity of effect, with no sharper contrasts or conflicts than are needed to keep the action amusingly alive. The clowns stand out boldly enough, but even they are occupied with the unreality of their play. And he soon assimilates the lovers to the background of the forest and its fairies. He has with his verse—and for this and for all the romance he has only his verse to serve him—to give being to the forest too. He does not do this by immediate and direct

description—of what it would then at once become obvious was not there—of the trees and the moonlit sward. Titania's bower even (which will be a pretty enough machine in its way) is painted for us in words—

. . . a bank whereon the wild thyme blows,

Where oxlips and the nodding violet grows

—a scene before it is shown, lest its actuality should put poetry to shame. When he cannot well escape description he gets through with the bare necessities of it in a phrase, as when Oberon begins with

Ill met by moonlight, proud Titania!

—and thereafter we hear no more of the matter. Or, more subtly—and this is a method he is to bring to a magical perfection—he reflects it through the emotions of the characters, as in Helena's

O weary night, O long and tedious night

Abate thy hours. Shine comforts from the east. . . .

But his chief resource is to set the speakers painting in poetry, not an immediate background, but *kindred* images, and to play upon our imagination with these, yet so digressively and transiently that our attention is never distracted from the immediate action itself. This is the dramatic purpose in Titania's description of the dreadful weather since she and Oberon quarrelled, in

. . . *hoary headed frosts*
Fall in the fresh lap of the crimson rose,
And on old Hiem's thin and icy crown
An odorous chaplet of sweet summer buds
Is, as in mockery, set

and the rest of its suggestion; and—compliment to Queen Elizabeth though it may have been—in Oberon's more famous speech about the fair Vestal throned in the west, the bolt of Cupid and the little western flower,

Before milk-white, now purple with love's wound
And maidens call it love-in-idleness,

and in a dozen other passages of such pure witchery.

The whole play, with its changing use of blank verse, rhyme, couplet and quatrain, and its shifting from ten syllable line to seven or six, is conceived as music, and in this is its integrity. Shakespeare has now mastered his medium—to the term of his present needs. He keeps the verse similar in cadence and colour; but this is because, as we said, he does not want his characters to stand out too vividly from the poetic picture of which he has made them a part. They have not the strength; and, if he gave it them, then his play's slight fabric would be ruined.

A Midsummer Night's Dream stands alone, an exemplary adaptation of means to end. And never—

thank goodness!—did Shakespeare attempt to repeat its success, or to imitate the inimitable.

THE MERCHANT OF VENICE

In play after play now we find his interest in character broadening and deepening; but it still does not outweigh his care for the story, nor does it yet bring more metrical freedom to his verse. On the contrary, if we take the maturer Histories, and *The Merchant of Venice*, even if we add a later three, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *As You Like It*, and *Twelfth Night*, we might say that he has forged his verse into a firm, a sufficiently supple yet fairly regular medium which answers all his purposes.

In *The Merchant of Venice* he is excellently at his ease. The lines flow graciously on; small liberties are taken when need be, but very few are needed. And, dip into the play where we will, be the story on its levels or its heights, in form and temper and poetic value they differ very little.

*In Belmont is a lady richly left,
And she is fair, and fairer than that word,
Of wondrous virtues. . . .*

*Your mind is tossing on the ocean,
There where your argosies with portly sail
Like signiors and rich burghers of the flood. . . .*

*Signor Antonio, many a time and oft
In the Rialto you have rated me
About my moneys and my usances. . . .*

*Mislike me not for my complexion ;
The shadowed livery of the burnished sun,
To whom I am a neighbour and near bred. . . .*

*So may the outward shows be least themselves,
The world is still deceived with ornament. . . .*

Even the Trial scene moves to the same smooth cadence. We have, of course, deliberate quiet for its beginning, and in

*The quality of mercy is not strained,
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath. . . .*

But even at the climax, save for a few exclamatory short lines, there is no change.

*We trifle time ; I pray thee, pursue sentence.
A pound of that same merchant's flesh is thine,
The Court awards it and the law doth give it,
Most rightful judge !
And you must cut this flesh from off his breast ;
The law allows it and the Court awards it,
Most learned judge ! A sentence : come, prepare !
Tarry a little, there is something else.
This bond doth give thee here no jot of blood,
The words expressly are, a pound of flesh ;*

*Take then thy bond, take thou thy pound of flesh,
But in the cutting of it if thou dost shed . . .*

There is good reason for all this. The play is a romance, and it is the smooth beauty of the verse, keeping a mean between lyric lightness and dramatic strength, that does most to hold us to its mood. Shylock, to be sure, coming uncompromisingly to life, also comes near to wrecking the pretty story altogether. And one thing is particularly worth noticing. The scene, in which he looks most dangerously like doing so, of his famous outbreak to Solanio, Salarino and Tubal, is written in prose.

Shakespeare is, in fact, now entering upon a period when he turns to prose very readily. Falstaff is cast in prose, so is a fair amount of *Henry V*, so is the best of Rosalind and Orlando, and almost the whole of Benedick and Beatrice. There is, again, in each case good dramatic reason for it. Nevertheless one may suspect that, having moulded his verse to a method which fulfilled his needs, and having for the moment no fresh needs which might set him to its remoulding, he became a little weary and a little impatient of it. When he must use it, its competence never fails, and inspiration will still flash here and there. But about this time we seem—do we not?—to find its finer qualities fading, and ever more rarely does it give us those moments of delighted surprise.

Of all writers, Shakespeare was the least able, once he had learnt to do a thing, just to go on doing it contentedly. His genius was like a hungry fire; it needed ever fresh and ever richer fuel if it was to blaze.

HENRY IV PART I

For *Henry IV* certainly (the first part) he evolved a verse most admirably suited to the History with its continuing tale of action. Note that it is almost wholly a tale, that the action and the men of action have to be presented by this means. Battles and things of that kind make a very momentary effect, and one is so like another that they do not bear much repetition. The drama must be lodged in the speeches; and these are apt to be long, for they do genuinely give us the *history* of the business in hand. But the method of the verse abounds in contrivances to keep them from flagging. For one of the simplest (though it is not a new one with Shakespeare, nor peculiar to him) there are the lengthy sentences. The second sentence in the play is thirteen and a half lines long and the third nine. Prince Hal's first soliloquy contains three sentences only; the first is nine lines long and the second twelve. Hotspur's first speech runs to forty lines, contains five sentences, and two of them are of sixteen lines each. And to-

wards the end of the play we find Worcester speaking one of twenty-five lines, no less.* This will leave the actors little licence for pausing at any rate. Then there are no parentheses and few metaphors—their place is taken by the terser epithet—nor any shadowed meanings, and every phrase sounds crisp and clear. The verse is very regular, and so close knit that we have lines like

Afford no extraordinary gaze . . .

And military title capital . . .

Capitulate against us and are up . . .

Of hurly-burly innovation . . .

In a word it is the verse of action, most business-like verse; so business-like indeed sometimes that one may stop to ask: Is this poetry? But it is surely, with hardly a lapse, first-rate dramatic poetry. And its title lies, I think, in these two main virtues: it never lacks character and it never lacks passion—passion in its widest sense, and character in the sense of sticking to the point, and making each speech and each line in it add something to the sum.

There is passion in the play's very first line, in Henry's

So shaken as we are, so wan with care. . . .

* This is by the usually (I think) accepted punctuation. Modern usage might split up the sentences more, but it would be to little dramatic purpose.

Straightway comes the distracting news of the Welsh and Scottish fighting; then at once the Percy rebellion begins to ferment; we have Henry's envy of Hotspur, Northumberland's warped ambition, and behind their present strife is the memory of the tragedy of Richard and their mutual guilt in it. And it is this charge upon charge of emotion which carries through such seeming verbiage—dissect it in cold blood!—as

*What never dying honour hath he got
Against renowned Douglas! whose high deeds,
Whose hot incursions and great name in arms
Holds from all soldiers chief majority
And military title capital*

Through all the kingdoms that acknowledge Christ and the rest of the hundred and sixty lines of the king's reproach to his son and the boy's promise of amendment, not to mention passages of a lower pressure.

As to character in the stricter sense, Hotspur, of course, on the play's heroic side, carries everything away. For if this is the play of action, he is the man of action, and Shakespeare's liveliest picture of one till he gives us Mark Antony and Coriolanus—who are something more. Hotspur is no more, and in him are epitomized the not very varying moods and tenses of the theme, while the terse, impetuous virile

methods of the verse belong to him and he to them. From his first word to his last, and up and down the gamut of the calls on him, he is spontaneously alive. Whether it be the Hotspur of the tale of the popinjay lord who came from the king to demand his prisoners of him—

*And as the soldiers bore dead bodies by
He call'd them untaught knaves, unmannerly,
To bring a slovenly unhandsome corse
Betwixt the wind and his nobility . . .*

or the Hotspur who ranges in a moment from

*By heaven, methinks it were an easy leap
To pluck bright honour from the pale-faced moon,
Or dive into the bottom of the deep
Where fathom line could never touch the ground
And pluck up drowned honour by the locks . . .*

to his answer to Worcester's

*These same noble Scots
That are your prisoners—*

his

*I'll keep them all.
By God, he shall not have a Scot of them,
No, if a Scot would save his soul, he shall not.
I'll keep them, by this hand!*

and, later, to the excellently humorous domestic Hotspur of

*This evening must I leave you, gentle Kate.
I know you wise, but yet no further wise
Than Harry Percy's wife : constant you are,
But yet a woman ; and for secrecy
No lady closer, for I well believe
Thou wilt not utter what thou dost not know.
And so far will I trust thee, gentle Kate . . .*

—in all these moods he is authentically himself ; and (our present point) throughout the range of them there is no break in the integrity of the method of their expression. By later standards, to the ear that has been won by the richer music of the tragedies, the verse may seem too smooth, too monochrome. But here, again, is a problem solved—of the integrity of dramatic expression, solved wholly in terms of poetry too, so that no emotional force is lost.

HENRY V

Accomplishment has no to-morrow ; for Shakespeare in particular it had not, as we said. The heroic side of *Henry IV, Part II*, is vapid beside all this ; but it is, and is meant to be, Falstaff's play. For *Henry V*, though, that formidable rivalry is quenched, and Henry himself reigns dramatically supreme. Yet the true spark of life, unmistakable and inimitable,

never glows in either the play or the man. The whole thing is extraordinarily well done, certainly; with tact and skill and understanding. At moments we are all but persuaded—and perhaps Shakespeare was—that Henry is alive. But compare him at any moment to Hotspur (set within smaller scope, it is true); the one man seems to move spontaneously and autonomously, while the other is a puppet, however noble a puppet. Idle to ask why; whether the figure was taken too ready-made from history and *The Famous Victories* (which may actually have been a better play, perhaps, than our copy of it gives it out to be; a 'bad' quarto, a version garbled up for the printer, surely, if ever there was one); whether Shakespeare, with the job to be done now or never, could not for some reason quite attune himself to the heroic key—and few things are worse for the dramatist than working to order, even to his own order; or whether, as I myself think, his passionate interest in human beings made him a little impatient of heroes—though all he can do, within the heroic limits, to make this a human hero, he does. From whatever cause, *Henry V* is a magnificently manufactured work, no more. And the verse, above all, is evidence of it. There are fine lines, like

. . . *the tide of pomp*
That beats upon the high shore of this world . . .

moving lines, like

We few, we happy few, we band of brothers . . .

stirring passages, like the famous

*Once more into the breach, dear friends, once more,
Or close the wall up with our English dead.*

*In peace there's nothing so becomes a man
As modest stillness and humility :*

But when the blast of war blows in our ears

Then imitate the action of the tiger . . .

But is that, association apart, so stirring? Somehow I cannot feel that when Shakespeare, the poet and dramatist, was deeply stirred, there resulted such a line as

Then imitate the action of the tiger.

And when we descend to the jog-trot of the Archbishop's speech about the Salic law, to

Nor did the French possess the Salique land

Until four hundred one and twenty years

After defunction of King Pharamond,

Idly supposed the founder of the law,

Who died within the year of our redemption

Four hundred twenty six . . .

or, towards the play's end, to Burgundy's description of suffering France, with its last lines (and the other forty-one are no livelier)

. . . Which to reduce into our former favour

You are assembled ; and my speech entreats

*That I may know the let why gentle Peace
Should not expel these inconveniences
And bless us with her former qualities*

—if Shakespeare had written much such verse we could all turn Baconians with a good conscience!

Was it, perhaps, a weary impatience with the grinding out of these dull lengths of it that produced the burlesque bombast of *Ancient Pistol*, the

*O hound of Crete, think'st thou my spouse to get?
No, to the spital go,*

*And from the powdering tub of infamy
Fetch forth the lazar kite of Cressid's kind,
Doll Tearsheet she by name and her espouse :
I have, and I will hold, the quondam Quickly
For the only she—and, pauca, there's enough!*

—which is better fun, and better verse too.

It is at least evident, I think, that he had come to a point when he could do all he needed to do in this kind almost mechanically, and so found small interest in doing it at all. The best of *As You Like It* and the most and the best of *Much Ado About Nothing* are in prose. Jacques appealed to him; there is a certain happy freedom about

A fool, a fool, I met a fool i' the forest! . . .

But with the too-famous Seven Ages speech as with the Banished Duke's sermons in stones and much of the rest we have lapsed from drama to sententious

recitation. It is all excellently contrived; but the music and the magic and the dynamic power are out of it. We may even fancy we hear another voice than Jacques' in that sardonic

Nay, then, God be wi' you, an you talk in blank verse.

Viola stirs fresh melody in him again. Her
*Make me a willow cabin at your gate,
 And call upon my soul within the house,
 Write loyal cantons of contemned love
 And sing them loud even in the dead of night . . .*
 and the exquisite passage with the Duke—

Sooth but you must.

*Say that some lady, as perhaps there is,
 Hath for your love as great a pang of heart
 As you have for Olivia . . .*

and the rest—this is inevitably what it is, made so by the perfect fusion of the elements of character, idea, emotion. For the beautiful speech that his boy-actors were trained to, Shakespeare could always, and from the very beginning, provide beautiful lines. This is in direct descent from the music written for Julia, Helena and Portia, and the peculiar quality of it is to descend again to another Portia, to Ophelia, Desdemona, Octavia, Imogen, Perdita, Miranda. But in Viola there is a poignancy that is, at this moment, new.

Yet if she herself is saved as the chief romantic figure of the play, the prose comedy of Malvolio, Sir Toby and Sir Andrew elbows poor poetic Orsino clean out of his place in the scheme (which was evidently meant to be a chief one), till when at last he returns to it with his tragic airs we can no more take him seriously than has his author.

No, had this year or so seen the last of Shakespeare we should have mourned his loss, but we could have added, with apparent good reason: Well, we had the best of him, he had shot his bolt. Then he writes *Julius Cæsar*, *Hamlet* and *Measure for Measure*, and with them enters a new dramatic world.*

THE GREAT DISCOVERY

Rome widens the boundaries of his imagination as nothing else has done. With *Hamlet*, character for the first time totally defeats plot. I always imagine Ben Jonson telling him that it would have been a very good play if only he had made up his mind what it was about. We have hardly yet made up ours! But it remains something much more than a good play—

* This history of the matter may not be chronologically exact, I know, and it leaves certain sufficiently important plays out of account, *Troilus and Cressida* for instance. But I do not think their inclusion or a slight readjustment of dates would affect the main argument very greatly.

while, indeed, by a dozen pedantic measurements it is a very bad one—because Shakespeare was concerned, at any cost, to discover and show us Hamlet himself, to the utmost and innermost of the man. Then in *Measure for Measure* he faces again—more detachedly this time—the problem, implicit in all three plays, and of inexhaustible dramatic possibilities, which was to engross him, under one aspect or another, till his own powers were all but exhausted, the problem of the revaluing of good and evil in the light of self-knowledge.

The discovery which turned Shakespeare from a good dramatist into a great one was that the outward clashing of character with character is poor material beside the ferment in the spirit of a man, confined by law or custom or inherited belief, or netted round by alien circumstance or wills, but quickening in their despite. It was a discovery due in the England of Shakespeare's time, which the Renaissance and the Reformation had set spiritually free. It was due to be made in terms of drama; for here was an art which, as no other could, showed you the living, breathing man. And it must be a poet's discovery; for in what else than poetry could one hope to paint, not men's thoughts and their emotions merely, but their very souls? This was what Shakespeare now set out to do. The Greeks had done it before him,

but he had to find his own way. How to do it might have seemed a problem, indeed, had he argued the matter out. But, as an artist, impulse and trial and error sufficed him. We find it a sufficient task to analyse his means; and here we are confining ourselves merely to the part his verse had in them, and dealing far too perfunctorily with that.

In the writing of *Julius Cæsar* we chiefly notice, I think, an access of breadth and strength, something of a return to imagery, but more simplicity in its use, and this new power to suggest deep emotion in repose. Portia inherits Viola's poignancy; but in no earlier play is there to be found just the sustained melancholy melody which marks the decline in the fortunes of Brutus and his fellows, or any such tune as

. . . *but this same day*

Must end that work the ides of March begun;

And whether we shall meet again, I know not.

Therefore, our everlasting farewell take :

For ever, and for ever, farewell, Cassius.

If we do not meet again, why, we shall smile;

If not, why, then, this parting was well made . . .

or as

Night hangs upon mine eyes; my bones would rest,

That have but laboured to attain this hour.

HAMLET

In instancing *Hamlet* one must be careful. It is like digging at Ur; there is always the question of what particular stratum in the play's upbuilding one may have reached. But to this time must belong, at any rate, the release to an abundant ease and freedom of expression, an enrichment of speech by a suddenly imperious use of words and phrases, a new and bold opulence in the developing of character and dramatic effect, and an amazing increase of dynamic power. For ease of writing take this part of Hamlet's comment upon his countrymen's ill-fame as drunkards:

*So, oft it chances in particular men,
That, for some vicious mole of nature in them,
As in their birth—wherein they are not guilty
Since nature cannot choose his origin—
By the o'ergrowth of some complexion,
Oft breaking down the pales and forts of reason;
Or by some habit, that too much o'er-leavens
The form of plausible manners; that these men—
Carrying, I say, the stamp of one defect
Being nature's livery, or fortune's star—
Their virtues else (be they as pure as grace,
As infinite as man may undergo)
Shall in the general censure take corruption
From that particular fault. . . .*

Easy to extravagance one may call it, with its redundancy and parentheses; Shakespeare has surely never so let himself go before. But note that it is not careless writing, there is definite dramatic purpose in the spite of it. Hamlet is here on the castle platform, alert for the coming of the Ghost; his brain is fevered with excitement, but by strength of will, by concentrating it in consistent thought upon indifferent matters, he can just keep it clear. What better word-picture of the complex strain could we have than this that the speech gives? Then, as it ends, the Ghost appears; and by contrast with its wordiness the moment's silence is dramatic, and, doubly so, the stark simplicity of

Angels and ministers of grace, defend us!

The play is full of phrases so absolute in their power and memorable that for these three centuries they have been current coin, and are worn now too thin for their dramatic value to be spontaneously felt. But try to hear as if one never yet had heard it the soliloquy which marks its intellectual crisis:

To be, or not to be . . .

That in itself, surely, is about the most powerful and pithy phrase in all drama; in six short words what a width and depth of vision is opened out! Remember that it is meant to be spoken with passion—as every word of Hamlet is—and not the

less passionately but the more, because he is here held in the still white heat of thought. The textual analysis of great poetry is all but an indecency, but we have somehow to re-create our sense of this. Look closely into lines like

When we have shuffled off this mortal coil. . . .

*When he himself might his quietus make
With a bare bodkin. . . .*

And thus the native hue of resolution

Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought. . . .

Here is the imperious use of words I speak of. But what exactly is it that gives them their peculiar power? It is, I think, that in each case the phrase is sufficiently strange to arrest attention, yet not strange enough to puzzle. But the images tell with a sudden surprise and force, which, so to say, take all initiative from us (both force and surprise are needed, or we should resist), and thus we are delivered, bound, into the intimacy of Hamlet's mind.

Now take the play's emotional crisis, Hamlet's visit to his mother after the play-scene. This is a battle between two high-spirited natures, not, as it is sometimes presented to us, the lecturing of a lachrymose elderly lady by a distressed philosopher. She has promised to be 'round with him,' and she is. All that barrier of reserve built up between them

since her marriage to Claudius, the mistrustful cold courtesies of

Let not thy mother lose her prayers, Hamlet . . .
and

I shall in all my best obey you, madam . . .
are suddenly broken down, the long unspoken reproaches and resentments start forth. They wrangle bitterly; he but just spares her sheer violence, he kills Polonius and makes light of it, such a pitch is he wrought to; and thereafter he so batters her with hard words that did the Ghost not return (for that marvellous moment of the frustrate reunion of the three) we should have her agonized beyond endurance.

. . . O, such a deed

*As from the body of contraction plucks
The very soul; and sweet religion makes
A rhapsody of words; heaven's face doth glow,
Yea, this solidity and compound mass,
With tristful visage, as against the doom,
Is thought-sick at the act.*

Our business, once again, is with the method of the verse. What gives this its dramatic effect? Not any great clarity of meaning, certainly. But sense and sound combined produce for us—as on the Queen—an effect of overwhelming guilt; and, really, it is almost as much the sound which does it as the sense. The agony of thought in that

As from the body of contraction plucks

The very soul . . .

the intensity, more of imagination than feeling, in

A rhapsody of words; heaven's face doth glow . . .
(the sibilants yielding to the rounded vowels of
doth glow) and the

. . . solidity and compound mass . . .

massively falling, checked an instant by the grief of
the *tristful visage*, towards the tremendous *doom*
—it is a stunning accumulation of merely verbal
effect, snatch what meaning from it at the moment
we may; and we snatch enough.

With his meaning very clear indeed he hisses
guilt at her through a sequence of sibilant lines,
those beginning

Sense, sure, you have . . .

the *sense* again and again recurring, till the note
thickens, so to speak, into the reproach of

O shame, where is thy blush?

and then resolves into the ringing

Rebellious hell,

If thou canst mutine in a matron's bones . . .

the mere vowel and consonant value of

Nay, but to live

In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed,

Stewed in corruption, honeying and making love

Over the nasty sty . . .

asks no comment, nor the supercharging, now, of each phrase with meaning.

Shakespeare—and for the first time—is so possessed by a character that he breaks all bounds to give it full expression. He denies Hamlet nothing that may help reflect any aspect of the man he is; scenes with Ophelia, Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the Players, the Gravediggers, a meeting with the Fortinbras army, even with the waterfly Osric—was there ever such extravagance? The writing must cope with it. He has long left behind the neatly turned conceit; but the simply picturesque metaphor, the forthright idiom of the Histories, even as enriched for *Julius Cæsar*—will these suffice? In prentice days he pillaged for his needs. Now he seems to ransack his experience for any and every device to transform and fuse into no matter what strange shape so it may serve this passionate attempt to show us Hamlet the man; and the passion makes them live again. But even this does not suffice. He needs another language, racks the vocabulary till, indeed, he comes near inventing one, comes to the making of a purely magic use of words. He has, of course, always had that poet's faculty in a kind. Phrase after phrase in the earlier plays will win us by the sheer beauty of their music. But this is something different; it is a power.

Hamlet stands as an unsurpassed success—it must be the most successful play ever written—and as convincing evidence that character can be made to tell against every licence and vagary in story and construction. But there was no going further on this path; Shakespeare has stretched the capacities of his theatre to their utmost. The manœuvring of the triple theme—Hamlet in relation to his mother and uncle, to Ophelia and Laertes, to Fortinbras—that has asked, ingenuity apart, far more space than one must afford. And this unpacking of the heart with words, words, words, this elaborate self-revelation by self-description, how repeat it? It belongs to Hamlet alone.

MEASURE FOR MEASURE

So that if *Measure for Measure* was his next play the complete contrast in its methods is significant. This time he keeps rigidly within the bounds of his story, of his theme rather, and the characters must conform. Nor is it worked out chiefly in terms of the doings and sufferings of a single one of them. There are few scenes in *Hamlet* in which we are not looking at the action over Hamlet's shoulder, so to speak. But here almost every character is related directly to the central subject, the lure of sex: Angelo

by his yielding to it, Isabella by her nun-like repugnance, Claudio and Juliet by their trespass, Lucio by his cynicism, Pompey and Mistress Overdone by their profit in it. And almost every scene deals with it, after one fashion or another; or, if not, in a tragic enlargement of it to the worth of the carnal life in the face of death, imminent or remote.

It is the most didactic of the plays, and none is fuller of pithy sayings. They are germane to the characters that utter them, yet not always very self-revealing. But if the impersonal central subject is the chief matter, this they do illuminate, and here is their justification.

The characters suffer, however, from this constraint; yet even when Shakespeare could well release them to fuller expression, he seems deliberately to refrain. Consider that dryly reasoned soliloquy of Angelo's on his temptation and Isabella's even curter one upon his shameful offer to her. Is all this—after *Hamlet's* breaking of bounds—an heroic attempt at discipline and compression? Is he working against the grain, and does that account for a certain sense of frustration left with us at the end?

One fine device, at least, this controlled method gives him use for, and he will turn it to more account later: the device of the simple but suggestive phrase, so contrived and placed that the actor may

make it more eloquent than a dozen elaborated lines. Study the scene of Angelo's first encounter with Isabella, and note the little he says but the much that it expresses; from the

Hath he a sister?

the seemingly casual but secretly self-defiant

Well, let her be admitted.

and the

Stay a little while.

which is spoken to the Provost when, even at first sight of her, he half fears to be left alone with her. Meagre material it may seem; but with what lies both in the lines, and behind and between the lines, the skilled actor will add three vivid strokes or more to his portrait of the dangerously starved ascetic. Save for two set speeches carefully placed midway, such short, thin-lipped responses are all his share in the talk between them, till it ends with

Well, come to me to-morrow.

LUCIO: *Go to, 'tis well. Away!*

ISABELLA: *Heaven keep your honour safe!*

ANGELO: *Amen.*

(aside) *For I am that way going to temptation
Where prayers cross.*

ISABELLA: *At what hour to-morrow
Shall I attend your lordship?*

ANGELO: *At any time 'fore noon.*

ISABELLA: *Save your honour.* (She goes.)

ANGELO: *From thee, even from thy virtue.*

Nothing could be simpler or starker, but, again, every effect is there for the actors to make; Isabella's relief at the respite, her exhaustion too after her desperate pleading, her oblivion to Angelo the man, are all marked in the formal repetitive phrases, and the gnawing demon in Angelo and his shaking probity are as plain. While for an epitome of the complex of the temptation to which he, being the very man he is, will yield—

. . . even from thy virtue!

—four words! Could more be said in four hundred?

Measure for Measure, set beside *Hamlet*, may be called something of a failure. Sacrifice plot to character, and how little it seems to matter. We do not boggle at the odd chronology of Hamlet's and Laertes' journeyings and the Fortinbras expedition, or even lift a quizzical eyebrow at that last huddled holocaust. Hamlet himself and the rest have been made real to us, and this is all we ask. But sacrifice character to plot, as, after a little, both Angelo and Isabella are sacrificed, inner volition denied them, and—it is a paradoxical revenge—we are left unconvinced even by the story. We have not been transported from our own world into the play's world; our passage there and willing sojourn will

depend far more upon what the inhabitants authentically are than upon the things they do. Yet powerful concentration upon a theme counts for much; the play's purpose holds us. And for the Shakespearean student it has this added interest, that while *Hamlet* is the end of a chapter, here is the beginning of a new one.

OTHELLO

There is certainly no cramping of character in *Othello*, which is held besides to be the most perfectly put together of the great plays. But note that after an easy and lengthy rhetorical opening Shakespeare suddenly takes drastic order for the concentration of his action—to a point which, as has often been pointed out, would make logical nonsense of the story if we were given time to apply such tests to it. Desdemona, that is to say, could never have committed adultery with Cassio, there has been no opportunity. Why does he do this? Because, I think, Othello himself and Iago have now expanded in his imagination; he needs all the scope possible for their realizing. And from the moment of the first dropping of the poison into Othello's mind the two characters do rise upon a full curve of development which—thanks to that drastic midway condensation

—can be completed in the magnificent amplitude of the last scene. Had this been scamped Othello would have ended as Iago's trapped victim; it is the slow bringing home to him of the spiritual magnitude of his tragedy that is the greatest thing in a great play.

As to the verse, we have never yet found it with so many dramatic qualities combined. It ranges in effect from such simple conversation as the early passage between Othello and Desdemona about Cassio—

OTHELLO: *Went he hence now?*

DESDEMONA: *Ay, sooth; so humbled,
That he hath left part of his grief with me
To suffer with him. Good love, call him back.*

OTHELLO: *Not now, sweet Desdemon; some other time.*

DESDEMONA: *But shalt be shortly?*

OTHELLO: *The sooner, sweet, for you.*

DESDEMONA: *Shall't be to-night at supper?*

OTHELLO: *No, not to-night.*

DESDEMONA: *To-morrow dinner, then?*

OTHELLO: *I shall not dine at home,
I meet the captains at the citadel . . .*

to the tender exchange, cast in the same mould, about the loss of the handkerchief (I quote a few lines only from the midst of it)—

DESDEMONA: *Why do you speak so startlingly and rash?*

OTHELLO: *Is't lost, is't gone? Speak, is it out o' the
way?*

DESDEMONA: *Heaven bless us!*

OTHELLO: *Say you?*

DESDEMONA: *It is not lost, but what an if it were?*

OTHELLO: *How?*

DESDEMONA: *I say it is not lost.*

OTHELLO: *Fetch't, let me see it.*

DESDEMONA: *Why, so I can, sir, but I will not now. . . .*

The matter of the dialogue is simplicity itself; but how vividly it gives us the young wife and the husband mature in cares, the imperative soldier and the Venetian lady a little tremblingly on her dignity. And what spontaneity of emotion in the commonplace words! The scansion is free, and rather more; but never for a moment does the music fail.

And the rise from this and its like to the intensity of

*O, thou weed
Who art so lovely fair and smell'st so sweet
That the sense aches at thee . . .*

or to the magnificence of

*And, O, you mortal engines, whose rude throats
The immortal Jove's dread clamours counterfeit . . .*

is effected without any break of style. We remarked on the same phenomenon in *Henry IV*; but compare the scale of the two achievements! Nor, even in its highest flights, does the verse and its emotion ever seem to escape Shakespeare's control; I doubt if there is a confused or overcharged line in the play.

With the characters so freely developed there would seem to be no need for the cryptic, dynamic simplicities, which intensify certain moments in *Measure for Measure*. But when we come to the consummation of the tragedy we find them—with something of a difference, and with their main effect made and enlarged by bolder means.

The great scene begins with a 'magic' line:

It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul . . .

—and the speech which follows paints a mystery of mind in Othello we have hardly glimpsed before. While from now to the end, if upon a surface reading he is articulate enough, even explicit of himself (one says), yet set the scene in action and it becomes plain that the words and their meaning give us not half of the man. Till his vengeance is sated we may see him as Desdemona does. But after? In the encounter with Emilia:

It is the very error of the moon;

She comes more near the earth than she was wont,

And makes men mad . . .

—in the strange mockery of

Why, how should she be murdered?

—in the long silence when he is accused to Montano and the rest, ended by the simple

Nay, stare not, masters: it is true indeed . . .

followed, before he has learned the truth (but is

light breaking on him?), by the sudden agonized outcry with which he flings himself on the bed. In the ignoring of Emilia dying and dead while he calmly looks for his second sword. In the sardonic approbation of Iago's

. . . *From this time forth I never will speak word.*

LODOVICO: *What, not to pray?*

GRATIANO: *Torments will open your lips.*

OTHELLO: *Well, thou dost best.*

In all this there is 'magic.'

Othello's part in the scene is a series of strange alternations between passion and quiet, his silences as arresting as his speech, and it is behind what is most manifest that the true tragedy moves. But do not the deepest tragedies in life itself defy explicit expression, or seem only to be belittled by it? Behind our conscious suffering lies an unplumbed blackness of despair and ignorance. It is this that Shakespeare has now learned to suggest. This power of suggestion is the hall-mark of what is greatest in tragic drama. Measure by it the difference in tragic height between Hamlet, unpacking his heart with words, and Othello, uneloquent till near the end, standing God-deserted between Desdemona's death and his own.

With *Othello*, but still more, I could argue, with *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*, he

has come to the fullest, maturest, and most inimitable expression of his genius. I should even be disposed to add *Coriolanus* to the list. The political theme evidently appealed to him (to say that Shakespeare was not interested in politics, which had, however, a very personal aspect in his day, is to deny that he was an Englishman); but the man of action who lacks imagination does not, in the result, set free the poet in him. The play, therefore, remains rigid and harsh, but it is a masterly play, for all that.

SUPER-DRAMA

From *Othello* dates another development. Othello himself, set against his surroundings, is a figure over life-size. Iago, his wickedness ripening, becomes simply inhuman. There is nothing incredible, nothing dramatically wrong here. So oppose two such powerful natures to each other, and nullify in them the weakness and indifference, the constant willingness to compromise, which keep the most of us the insignificant and pleasantly harmless people we are, and just such a tragedy as this may result. The playwright here makes an occasion, to which the poet rises as never before. But next, as a result, the poet demands more fodder of this quality and will not be satisfied with less. Hence, in *King Lear*

and its neighbour work, not single characters merely, but the whole play will be pitched in this super-human key. An intensive process this, by which the playwright makes much demand on the poet, who betters the opportunity and learns by it to ask more of the playwright, who in turn sets the poet a yet bigger task! So they go on, challenging each other; and, incidentally, making demands on the actors impossible, it would seem, to fulfil, only possible because the playwright is a playwright in grain and cannot betray his craft. But it is a giddy and desperate process, for what is to be the end of it? Poet or playwright must at last be taxed beyond his powers. The Greeks found an answer in a dramatic convention which approached symbolism, very much as the Church disciplines religious enthusiasm by ritual. But for Shakespeare, that spiritual anarchist, there was no such way out. He creates *King Lear*, so colossal a work of art that we still stare at it and deny that it is one—that it is, at least, the thing it sets out to be. And into *Antony and Cleopatra* he compresses so much life that we say: Such a crowd of trees simply cannot be a wood!

At this full stretch of his powers, mustering all his resources, he reaches no perfection of method—far from it, he arrives at a transcendent imperfection. He has set himself a task beyond all reason, and he

magnificently improvises the means to fulfil it. On a basis of a profound knowledge of his craft, it is true; but any sort of device, old or new, will serve, so long as it is effective. He is like a general who cuts himself off from his base, turns his camp-followers into cavalry, since it happens they can ride, fires howitzers point-blank, leaves his flank in the air—and wins the battle. As to his verse, it runs smoothly or roughly, into rhymed couplet or lyric, imperceptibly into prose and out again, yet always with such direct dramatic purpose that the question of form seems negligible. From the beginning he has been moving towards this, towards the making of his verse a dramatic language which he will speak uncalculatingly. And this, I suppose, is the great artist's final achievement, to absorb his medium into the purpose of his art. Nor, perhaps, is any art quite satisfying till the medium is so transparent that we are not conscious of it at all, but only of the matter itself.

Take the storm scene in *King Lear*. Shakespeare runs the gamut of prose, verse, rhyme and jingle too for the Fool and Poor Tom, yet the whole effect is one of unity and of the most perfect clarity. Again, what will metrical analysis do for

Pray do not mock me,
I am a very foolish fond old man,
Four score and upward, not an hour more or less,

*And, to deal plainly,
 I fear I am not in my perfect mind.
 Methinks I should know you, and know this man ;
 Yet I am doubtful ; for I am mainly ignorant
 What place this is ; and all the skill I have
 Remembers not these garments, nor I know not
 Where I did lodge last night. Do not laugh at me ;
 For, as I am a man, I think this lady
 To be my child Cordelia.*

The actor, certainly, must be able to discern why it is written as it is; but a trained ear should tell him this without much questioning. We can compare it, as 'characteristic speech,' with that early achievement of the Nurse's tale in *Romeo and Juliet*; there was the way to do the thing settled once and for all. But the secret of the art of this lies, in its simplicity, how much deeper!

Never, never, never, never, never
 happens to be a regular ten-syllable line; but that, very obviously, has nothing to do with the effective magic—the impossibly daring, the almost impudent magic of it!

Read the scene in *Antony and Cleopatra* in which the sentries, on their night watch, hear the music which betokens that

*. . . the God Hercules whom Antony loved
 Now leaves him.*

Is it in verse or no? Hard to say that, even; but it is pure dramatic poetry. Take

*I am dying, Egypt, dying; only
I here importune death awhile until
Of many thousand kisses the poor last
I lay upon thy lips.*

Tap it out with your fingers, it proves to be regular metre. But try to make this your guide to the speaking of it, and its beauty and power will vanish.

Our text of *Macbeth* is, I fancy, more corrupt than is generally admitted. The Mask of the witches is hardly half Shakespeare's. Shortly after the play was written his company was acting not only at the Globe but at the Blackfriars, where such matters could be made more effective. He himself was retiring to Stratford. Hecate and her satellites may well have been added in his absence or after his death. At least one earlier scene is corrupt, and the English episode is oddly disproportionate to the thrifty dealing with Macbeth and Lady Macbeth from after the murder of Banquo onwards. Are there signs of revision for a Court performance here?

But the method of the greater scenes, its spare strength and a reversion at times to more primitive form (fitting for such savage tragedy), gives us perhaps Shakespeare's completest assimilating of medium to subject, gives us certainly the most

striking use of the purely 'magic' line. The play is full of these, and they defy explanation. For Maeterlinck (in the fine preface to his translation) the whole of the dialogue has this double charge. There is, he says, the dialogue by which the immediate action is carried on, but beneath it there is another which we unconsciously hear, and which paints upon our minds the tragic atmosphere and the mysterious influences that externalize Macbeth's conscience. He remarks how devoid the play is of *expressions mortes*.

What else than magic is there in the effect made upon us by

*Ere the bat hath flown
His cloistered flight; ere to black Hecate's summons
The shard-borne beetle with his drowsy hums
Hath rung night's yawning peal, there shall be done
A deed of dreadful note.*

LADY MACBETH: *What's to be done?*

MACBETH: *Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest
chuck,
Till thou applaud the deed. Come seeling night,
Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day;
And with thy bloody and invisible hand
Cancel and tear to pieces that great bond
Which keeps me pale! Light thickens; and the
crow
Makes wing to the rooky wood;*

*Good things of day begin to droop and drowse ;
Whiles night's black agents to their preys do rouse.
Thou marvell'st at my words : but hold thee still ;
Things bad begun make strong themselves by ill.
So, prithee, go with me.*

Once again we can analyse; mark the cold blackness of the ill which possesses Macbeth, and the beaten spirit of the woman in that dull *What's to be done?* (we remember her uplifted at the sight of Duncan's blood). We can say of the actual verse that it captures us, maybe, by a constantly surprising conjunction of the simplest sort of speech with images so absolute that in themselves they wield a poetic power. But really, in face of the miracle, all such talk is as the rattling of dried peas in a bladder.

Light thickens ; and the crow

Makes wing to the rooky wood.

How explain the sense of chill, mysterious evil with which that fills us? It is a dramatic miracle, and there is no more to be said.

To this point of wonder Shakespeare reached; and from it, almost inevitably, he fell away, and thereafter did best by not trying to recapture the occult power. Nor had he encouraged competition in this kind.

I have made, I fear, rash statements enough in this chapter. I shall probably repent many of them; they must certainly all need to be qualified. Few

things are more risky than generalizing about Shakespeare's work. There has been too much, and how often have I warned myself against sliding into the trap!

IV

WYCHERLEY AND DRYDEN

GREAT dramatic movements seem for some reason—it would be instructive to determine it—to be exceptionally short-lived. All that was vital in Elizabethan and Jacobean drama had burned out in fifty years. Its public, like our own—but like every public, I suppose, anywhen and anywhere—had been more remarkable for appetite than taste. Shakespeare's genius and Jonson's power shine among much magnificent rubbish and much more, probably (if what has perished may be judged by what remains), that was rubbish unqualified. Yet at the worst, in its youth certainly, it had amazing vigour; and this, in the theatre, will compensate for the lack of many loftier virtues.

Why its vitality should have slackened when it did I do not know. The vogue of the indoor theatres may have been partly responsible. Their more sophisticated patrons would be after something new and the old methods would in any case be less effective in the straitened surroundings. The history of these theatres from 1610 to their closing by the Puritans

and of their influence upon playwriting has still to be worked out. One now expects it to show that their technical resources developed to a very close kinship indeed with the theatres of the Restoration. But it may well be that the playwrights who were working for the old theatres as well never reconciled themselves very fruitfully to the new condition of things.

A PICTURE OF MANNERS?

There has been of late much re-editing and re-valuing of Restoration drama. For the industry of the re-editing one can have nothing but gratitude. But the re-valuing leaves me, for the most part, blankly amazed. As to the comedy, I was trained in the doctrine (a compromise between Lamb and Macaulay) that, its indecency forgiven, we should find in the best of it—in Wycherley at his best, for instance—brilliancy and wit incomparable. About the tragedy little was said. But now it appears that Wycherley is not only a brilliant wit and a great playwright, but a stern moralist besides. Shadwell stands with the best, and Buckingham's *Rehearsal* is a masterpiece of humour. Dryden's pot-boilers are polished gems of art; his tragedies rank with Racine's, and Lee and Otway are his peers.

One must make some allowance for the editor,

who, plunged into a year or so's hard labour upon Shadwell or Lee, suddenly asks himself: Why on earth, if this fellow is no good, am I spending my time on him? The likely answer will be: As I *am* spending my time on him he *must* be some good. And the next step is to prove him so. I, in my turn, make bold to say that this talk about the moral purpose of Restoration comedy is all stuff and nonsense, and the present claims made for the 'art' of it are not much better. As to the tragedy, it was a respectable effort to do the wrong thing, which lapsed into extravagance, impotence, and absurdity.

With one or two of these latter editors the obscenity of the comedy is apparently to its credit, though they just avoid telling us this in so many words. Instead, they praise it as a revealing picture of the manners and morals of the time. It is nothing of the sort, as anyone who will read such uncalculating documents as the Verney papers, or Dorothy Osborne's letters, or Evelyn's Diary, or even Pepys' (read as a whole), may discover. It is no more a picture of the time than are Mr. Aldous Huxley's satirical novels of the life of the average England of to-day.

It was, in this respect, a flattering of the little Court clique and their snobbish disciples, upon whose patronage the theatre now depended. A

strange sort of flattery? Not at all! When men like Charles and Rochester and Sedley, women like Castlemaine and the Duchess of Buckingham, cast aside all decency and restraint, nothing so flatters them as such witness to their achievement. Doubtless there were such 'goings on' as Wycherley depicts in *The Country Wife* and *The Plain Dealer*, less intensified in fact than in the fiction (doubtless there are in some smutty little corners to-day); and it may be that the laughter and applause spread the taste for them a little. But the plays no more reflect the average morality of the time than a Palais Royal farce reflects home life in France.

Wycherley, deliberately or instinctively, was certainly the most skilful of the flatterers; since his amoral attitude—for which M. Perromat praises him as he might a Savonarola—accorded quite perfectly with the rakes' conceit of themselves. Poor Dryden did his best to provide the fashionable stuff. But it was in his nature to take both life and literature seriously. And of all literary commodities, calculated immorality, a tribute paid by virtue to vice, is most swift to mortality. It stinks betimes. He must, in his heart, have sighed over the mechanical obscenities of *Limberham or the Kind Keeper* as wearily as ever we do.

But putting such questions aside, what purely

dramatic claims can Restoration comedy make? It introduced women to the stage. That was a fairly inevitable revolution, which had far-reaching consequences. But to what account did Etherege and Wycherley and Shadwell turn it? The Elizabethan dramatist had set his boys a hard task, and the setting of it could tax his own skill. These gentlemen just asked the women to exploit their sex. 'Natural' conversation in comedy dates from now? Perhaps; though I fancy Shirley's conversation is as natural when he chooses to make it so. As to the pure craft of the playwright, the Elizabethans had developed a technique of construction to suit their semi-localized stage. Localization now becomes complete, but this is turned to no account, the Elizabethan licence continues—blunderingly exhibited too! There is a stage direction in Wycherley's *Love in a Wood* ('prentice work truly, but it has earned from its latest editor glowing praise), *They all go off in a huddle, hastily*. The play's stagecraft is summed up in that—young men and their mistresses chattering their bawdry and chasing each other through scene after scene, till one asks: How could an audience both be clever enough to understand the story and stupid enough to be interested by it when they did?

THE PLAIN DEALER

But take his maturest work, *The Plain Dealer*, that 'magnificent play' as we are now asked to call it. No matter for his pillagings from Molière and Shakespeare! They took their own goods where they found them, and would have been the last to complain. What they might have thought of his treatment of the spoils is another matter, of an Alceste turned sadistic bully and a Viola submitted to rape! But this trenches on the moral issue. Admit the brutality of it all as a fit theme for comedy, what skill or art or wit does he show in its use?

His handling of the plot has been highly praised. It has its minor unlikelihoods, in the casual comings and goings and spyings at Olivia's lodging, and in the first discovery of Manly, returned to England, visited by all and sundry, while for no reason whatever he has kept away from his betrothed nor even had her told of his return. But these are allowable enough. Not till the middle of Act III, though, does the action really get under way. Two acts and more have been spent in as much preparation and disclosure of character as a skilled dramatist could have put through in a couple of scenes. Act IV brings us to Manly's plan for revenge upon Olivia and to

Vernish's unexpected arrival in the dark instead of the disguised Fidelity. An amusing situation; but as we have never set eyes on him before it has to be hurriedly explained in an aside:

OLIVIA: *Ha! My husband returned! And have I been throwing away so many kind kisses on my husband, and wronged my lover already?*

Not very skilfully contrived, perhaps!

The aside does Wycherley yeoman service. It was, of course, an accepted convention; but there are ways and ways of employing it. An occasional *How have I been deceived!* or *An agreeable young fellow, this—and would not be my aversion*, though possibly redundant (for the actor can compass the effect of them with a glance or a gesture), do not check the flow of the scene. But when it comes to Manly's

No, no, prithee away, be gone or—(aside) I had almost discovered my love and shame: well, if I had? that thing could not think the worse of me—or if I did?—no—yes, he shall know it—he shall. But then I must never leave him, for they are such secrets that make parasites and pimps lords of their masters; for any slavery or tyranny is easier than love's. (Aloud) Come hither . . .

wedged into a duologue with Fidelity, while she must stand waiting and watching; and to her five asides

(no less!) in the short scene of her return from her first interview with Olivia—

So, 'twill work, I see!

So it works, I find, as I expected . . .

Poor man, how uneasy is he! I have hardly the heart to give him so much pain, though withal I give him a cure, and to myself new life . . .

and for the other two—

MANLY: *So then; let's know that only; come, prithee, without delays. I'll kiss thee for that news beforehand.*

FIDELIA (aside): *So: the kiss I'm sure is welcome to me, whatsoe'er the news will be to you.*

MANLY: *Come speak, my dear volunteer.*

FIDELIA (aside): *How welcome were that kind word too, if it were not for another woman's sake!*

MANLY: *What, won't you speak? . . .*

One has only to imagine this in action to see the ineptitude of the business; Manly's proximity for the kiss, his attention fixed on her, his incongruous

"What, won't you speak?"

Accepted convention though it might be, nobody with any sense of the theatre would employ the aside so clumsily.

Vernish's discovery of Fidelity's sex is no doubt amusing, too, and made how much more effective

than the poor Elizabethans could have made it, now that one had only to write

How! a very handsome woman, I'm sure, then: here are witnesses of't, too, I confess—(pulls off her peruke and feels her breasts) . . .

And, though it takes some contriving, the double unmasking of Olivia and Vernish in the last act, and the shock to Manly, is very smartly contrived. But with this Wycherley seems to feel he has exerted ingenuity enough, and the wretched Fidelia's share of the business is finished off by her

(pulling Manly from the company) . . . my father, a gentleman of the north, of no mean extraction, whose only child I was, therefore left me in the present possession of two thousand pounds a year; which I left, with multitudes of pretenders, to follow you, sir; having in several public places seen you, and observed your actions thoroughly, with admiration, when you were too much in love to take notice of mine, which yet was but too visible. The name of my family is Grey, my other Fidelia. The rest of my story you shall know when I have fewer auditors.

Really, Henslowe's cheapest hack would have made a likelier job of it!

Why, one asks, are the soliloquies (all but Vernish's) in blank verse, why those four poverty-stricken little patches stuck upon the prose area of the play?

Was it because Wycherley, turning to *Twelfth Night* for his Fidelia, found Viola's

I left no ring with her : what means this lady?

Fortune forbid my outside have not charmed her ! . . .

and the rest—self-revealing, alive in every phrase!—so said to himself : A little poetry wanted? Well, this is how it's done!

He achieves one passable line in

And this bright world of artful beauties here . . .

but at once drops to

Might then have hoped, he would have looked on me

Amongst the sooty Indians ; and I could

To choose there live his wife, where wives are forced

To live no longer, when their husbands die.

Nay, what's yet worse, to share 'em whilst they live

With many rival wives. But here he comes,

And I must yet keep out of his sight not

To lose it for ever.

There would be many unexpected competitors for a prize for the worst blank verse line ever written, but I fancy that

And I must yet keep out of his sight not . . .

would have a chance of it.

His effort on Manly's behalf rises little higher :

How hard it is to be an hypocrite !

At least, to me, who am but newly so.

*I thought it once a kind of knavery,
Nay, cowardice to hide one's faults ; but now
The common frailty, love, becomes my shame.
He must not know I love the ungrateful still,
Lest he condemn me, more than she ; for I,
It seems can undergo a woman's scorn,
But not a man's . . .*

After that he may well have resolved that prose was his mark. Nor need one deny his mastery here, while he is steering a straight dramatic course and charging his characters—and if they are characters, not mere hobby horses—with genuine self-expression. The convention is somewhat formal, but what can be better than Manly's rating of Novel?

Then, Madam, for this gentle piece of courtesy, this man of tame honour, what could you find in him? Was it his languishing, affected tone? his mannerly look? his second-hand flattery? the refuse of the playhouse tiring rooms? or, his slavish obsequiousness in watching at the door of your box at the playhouse for your hand to your chair? or his jaunty way of playing with your fan? or was it the gunpowder spot on his hand? or the jewel in his ear, that purchased your heart?

Vigorous, pungent, and well controlled! Olivia's retort is as good:

Turn hither your rage, good captain Swaggerhuff,

and be saucy with your mistress, like a true captain ; but be civil to your rivals and betters and do not threaten anything but me here ; no, not so much as my windows ; nor do not think yourself in the lodgings of one of your suburb mistresses beyond the Tower.

And through scene after scene the vigour never slackens. His fault is, that he seldom seems to know when he has said enough for effect ; he must make his point again, and yet again—and spoil it. No surer sign that a man lacks a sense of the theatre.

But what most undoes him dramatically is the dreadful obligation to be witty, and to keep on—so he seems to feel he must!—at all costs being witty. For while Wycherley has much natural passion, he has not the fineness of mind which breeds wit, and there really is not one spontaneous flash of it in the play. But, for a substitute, he can grind this sort of stuff out by the yard, and he does !

Well, we women, like the rest of the cheats of the world, when our cullies or creditors have found us out, and will, or can trust no longer, pay debts and satisfy obligations with a quarrel, the kindest present a man can make to his mistress when he can make no more presents. For oftentimes in love, as at cards, we were forced to play foul, only to give over the game ; and use our lovers like the cards, when we can get no

more by them, throw 'em up in a pet upon the first dispute.

Or this:

MANLY: *I was only wondering why fools, rascals and desertless wretches, should still have the better of men of merit with all women; as much as with their own common mistress, Fortune.*

FREEMAN*: *Because most women, like Fortune are blind, seem to do all things in jest, and take pleasure in extravagant actions; their love deserves neither thanks, or blame, for they cannot help it: 'tis all sympathy; therefore the noisy, the finical, the talkative, the cowardly and effeminate have the better of the brave, the reasonable and man of honour; for they have no more reason in their love or kindness than Fortune herself.*

MANLY: *Yes, they have their reason. First, honour in a man they fear too much to love; and sense in a lover upbraids their want of it; and they hate anything that disturbs their admiration of themselves; but they are of that vain number who had rather show their false generosity in giving away profusely to worthless flatterers, than in paying just debts. And, in short, all women, like fortune (as you say) and rewards, are lost by too much meriting.*

It is hardly remarkable in substance, and in method it is just about everything it should not be. It lacks

clarity; the sentences are overloaded. It lacks music. . . . *who had rather show their false generosity in giving away profusely to worthless flatterers than in paying just debts!* That travelled direct from brain to pen; or if it did pass by mouth and ear, then Wycherley's ear was strangely insensitive. Worst of all, it lacks impulse and impetus, cardinal needs for dramatic speech, and of sententious speech the only salvation. Shakespeare sets us up, perhaps, an unfairly high standard; but had Wycherley turned to *As You Like It* for a hint or two as well as to *Twelfth Night* he would have found, for an instance:

I have neither the scholar's melancholy, which is emulation; nor the musician's, which is fantastical; nor the courtier's, which is proud; nor the soldier's, which is ambitious; nor the lawyer's, which is politic, nor the lady's, which is nice; nor the lover's, which is all these: but it is a melancholy of mine own, compounded of many simples, extracted from many objects, and, indeed, the sundry contemplation of my travels; which by often rumination wraps me in a most humorous sadness.

Or, for another:

No, faith, die by attorney. The poor world is almost six thousand years old, and in all this time there was not any man died in his own person, videlicet in a love cause. Troilus had his brains dashed out with

a Grecian club; yet he did what he could to die before, and he is one of the patterns of love. Leander, he would have lived many a fair year, though Hero had turned nun, if it had not been for a hot midsummer night; for, good youth, he went but forth to wash him in the Hellespont, and being taken with the cramp was drowned: and the foolish chroniclers of that age found it was—Hero of Sestos. But these are all lies; men have died from time to time, and worms have eaten them, but not for love!

And he might have noted the difference.

He had, we may admit, a most demoralizing audience to work for. Its fuglemen were professed wits themselves, who wanted the wares they dealt in spread on the counter before them—an assortment to appraise—and were insensitive to anything else. And the popular themes were few, the changes to be rung on them not very various. Pimping and the pox, whoring and cuckoldry, smut and sham prudery, there is a limit to the humour that can be extracted from them. Even Manly's abuse of *decorums, supercilious forms and slavish ceremonies*—by the end of the first act he seems to have said all there is to be said on the subject twice over at least.

We have the widow Blackacre and her minor and the scene in Westminster Hall for a diversion. Certainly it is a change of subject and provides Manly

with a fresh range of abuse.* This is the Jonsonian comedy of Humours, for which there may be something to be said when it is Jonson's own cathartic spirit which informs it. But mere exhibition of a monomania, even the most comic, must inevitably become monotonous. Character you can develop, but not caricature. And the puppet show of lawyers in Act III, though it makes bustle enough, is pretty jejune foolery; while neither Manly—nor Wycherley—can find anything much more amusing to say about the law than that the lawyers do better by it than their clients.

THE DAMNATION OF THE THEATRE

Wit—veritable wit—cannot, of course, be manufactured in this way. It is a rare flower, which springs from deep thought, and from something deeper; great wits have ever been the most serious of men. You cannot fill five acts of a play with it, and if you could the result would be intolerable. Three hours' continuous lightning will suffice to blind a man. Quote to the contrary plays which are feasts of wit, and it will be found to be harmless, tricky, fantastic

* Voltaire's praise of the widow as the most comical character ever brought on the stage has been widely quoted. But there have been better judges of the English drama than Voltaire. One could also quote, however, his disapproving astonishment at the licence of Wycherley's speech.

stuff—summer lightning, in fact. Even so, the never-ceasing flicker will weary us.

But wit, with King Charles come home again, was the order of the day. The cynical impudence that the fashionable dramatists had to offer was not much of a substitute, but in the glamorous excitement of a theatre it could be counted on—it still can!—to take most people in. And Restoration audiences, emerging from the shadow of Puritanism, were probably very ready to laugh. But mark the candid Pepys, who on Saturday, May 2nd, 1668, sees the first performance of Shadwell's *Sullen Lovers*, and finds it to have "many good humours in it, but the play tedious and no design at all in it." He goes again on the Monday and see it "with less pleasure than before, it being but a very contemptible play, though there are many little witty expressions in it, and the pit did generally say that of it." Nevertheless the very next day he and Creed go again; this time "up to the balcony box where we find my lady Castlemayne and several great ladies: and there we sat and I saw the Impertinents [its second title] once more. . . . And to see the folly how the house do this day cry up the play more than yesterday, *and I for that reason like it, I find, the better too.*" The italics, as one says, are mine.

No doubt there was in Restoration comedy a cer-

tain vitality, which the theatres, before the Puritans came to close them, may have largely lost. And it was topical in a distorted fashion and within its narrow range; and the smart chatter of the best of it is given a literary turn. But what other virtues has it? The plundering of plots and even characters from the French and the Elizabethans is no matter. Shakespeare and Molière had been plunderers too. But they turned their booty to better account, gave likelihood to the stories and life to the characters. Wycherley and his fellows do neither. Their plots are clock-work and their characters are puppets. To the art of the theatre they bring nothing. There is no single sign in these comedies of the artist's enquiring love for his work, few enough of the mere craftsman's pleasure in it. For these gentlemen the stage and its actors are just a gaudy means to the exhibiting of their precious wit.

THE HEROIC PLAY

There was no Restoration tragedy except in name. With such a theatre to work for, how could there be? For tragedy (the question of its deeper promptings apart) asks devotion. The dramatic innocence of the days of Marlowe had favoured it. The conscious seriousness of the Greeks could foster it; so can the fierce intellectual integrity to which the French mind

may be roused. As a fit companion to meretricious comedy there was evolved the blend of violent action and exalted sentiment called (rather oddly) the heroic play.

This was taken seriously enough—by its authors at any rate; and could it have been argued into life Dryden and his fellow disputants would have made it immortal. As it is, the arguments remain; tolerable as dialectic, interesting (as to Dryden's share in them) for the side-lights they throw on his unbiased taste, but living on chiefly by the virtue of the vigour and ease of their writing. If Dryden's plays had been as good as their prefaces he would have been a dramatist indeed.

It is odd—but significant perhaps!—how detached preface and play may sometimes be. In the preface to *The Rival Ladies* he argues against blank verse and in favour of rhyme, but the play itself contains far more of the first than the second. Is the preface self-criticism? As the play has presented us with this sort of thing:

*All things shall be so clear there shall be left
No room for any scruple. I was born
In Seville, of the best house in that city :
My name Gonsalvo de Peralta : being
A younger brother, 'twas my uncle's care
To take me with him in a voyage to*

*The Indies, where, since dying he has left me
A fortune not contemptible ; returning
From thence with all my wealth in the Plate Fleet
A furious storm almost within the port
Of Seville took us, scattered all the navy.
My ship, by the unruly tempest borne
Quite through the straits, as far as Barcelona,
There first cast anchor ; there I slept ashore :
Three days I stayed, in which small time I made
A little love, which vanished as it came . . .*

—we might well think so. Three lines out of the sixteen have a touch of music in them and some slight dramatic impulse. But for the rest!

One must not, of course, pass judgment upon Dryden by evidence of such early work, and he himself is, both now and later, disarmingly modest—if occasionally mock-modest—about his own achievement. But clearly, as a tightening up of the loose versifying of the Jacobean decadence—if this is the claim to be made for it, and even this is not a very valid claim—clearly it brings little dramatic gain. Nor does the rhyme make much better showing—in this scene, say, of what Saintsbury in his fine edition calls “amatory battledore and shuttlecock.”

GONSALVO : *O stay ! I can with less regret bequeath
My love to Rodorick than you to death :
And yet—*

JULIA: *What new objection can you find?*

GONSALVO: *But are you sure you never shall be kind?*

JULIA: *Never.*

GONSALVO: *What! never?**

JULIA: *Never to remove.*

GONSALVO: *O, fatal never to souls damned in love!*

JULIA: *Lead me to Rodorick.*

GONSALVO: *If it must be so—*

JULIA: *Here, take my hand; swear on it thou wilt go.*

That may not be quite so dull; skilled speakers might save it from sounding ridiculous; but it is dialogue, surely, for the marionette, not the actor.

We see well enough why Dryden and the rest felt they must make a fresh start. Now that the black frost of Puritan domination had lifted, it was for them to match the political restoration with a cultural one. They had respect for the past. Dryden never tires of praising the charm of Fletcher, the learning and judgment of Jonson and the genius of Shakespeare, nor is his enthusiasm dimmed by its sanity. He can be severely critical. As Jonson with the 'Rule of the Ancients,' so he—both with this and these reputations—admits no "absolute resignation of himself" nor "perpetual captivity." Somewhere he quotes the very passage from the

* How one wishes she would answer "Well, hardly ever"!

Discoveries. When it comes to taking example from them he says very pertinently: "They are honoured, and almost adored by us, as they deserve; neither do I know any so presumptuous of themselves as to contend with them . . . we acknowledge them our fathers in art; but they have ruined their estates themselves before they came to their children's hands. There is scarce a humour or a character or any kind of plot which they have not blown upon. . . . This therefore will be a good argument to us, either not to write at all or to attempt some other way."

What was the other way to be? The Elizabethans had allowed themselves every licence in planning and writing, had always been critically condemned for it, and the one considerable critic among them had resisted and deplored it. Nobody seemed to see in this freedom of expression the vitality which means more to a crescent art than all the discipline in the world, and to this particular art, with its medium of humanity, more at any time; vitality, while one may trouble about many things, being ever the one thing needful. But Dryden (we must remember) had under his eyes the lesser men too, whose work was the very water-gruel of drama, and such stuff would at least be more tolerable for being mixed stiffer. Then there was the French achievement. He was a little envious

of it. Corneille had triumphantly reconciled himself—on terms!—to the ‘Rule of the Ancients’; it would be purblind not to take account of that! Now, once you begin to argue out these matters you must frame the problems that you pose in more or less logical terms. And the danger, with this instinctive art of the theatre, is that you may soon find yourself arguing *in vacuo*, divorced from its natural practice and from the lessening that alone can give you, without the tests for your arguments which that alone can provide.

This should not, you may say, have happened with Dryden of all men, a diligently practising dramatist for the best part of twenty years. But he had, I think, little or no instinct for drama (he took to it, because it was the thing to do and because it paid him) and what instinct he had his reason stifled. I doubt if he ever had even very much liking for it. He writes at best to satisfy his self-respect; and that he thought he had his pains for nothing, also that he did not always take them, we may judge—allowing for irony and the weariness of the ageing man—by the prefaces to *The Spanish Friar* and *Don Sebastian*. “I remember some verses of my own Maximin and Almanzor which cry vengeance upon me for their extravagance. . . . All I can say is . . . that I knew they were bad enough to please even when I writ

hem. . . ." He could bring a virile critical intelligence to bear on his own work as on other. But no amount of intelligence will make up for lack of sympathy. Perhaps a few illusions are needed too. If you despise the theatre you should not work for it, and there's an end.

He does, indeed, discuss his problems in terms of the theatre, protests against the laying down of abstract law, and he has a shrewd, almost a managerial eye towards the taste of his audience and his call to please them. For all this, the discussion stays academic. He says sensible things about Unity of Place, but never seems aware that painted scenes and the localized stage, the establishment of place in the eye and consciousness of the audience, have made this a practical issue in a sense it was not—nor does he see that it was not and why—for the playwrights of the Globe.

The long dispute upon the respective merits of blank verse and rhyme is a literary dispute. We find, at any rate, no examining of the dramatic claims of developed blank verse with its freedom of rhythm, which so fits it to express individual character and shades of emotion. Did Dryden ever recognize that here, in the creating and expressing of character, was the dominant achievement of the earlier drama; whether it was greatly done by Shakespeare,

judiciously by Jonson, delicately by Fletcher, crudely by Webster, or cheaply and coarsely by any of a dozen others—that this had made it the lively art it was? If he did not, naturally he would not look very closely into the means by which the thing was done. Yet he knows Shakespeare, not for a great poet only, but a great dramatist, too; he speaks of his “universal mind which comprehended all characters and passions. . . .” But it never occurs to him to look and see how the two were combined. And he had, of course, no apprehension whatever of the development of method which we study so carefully now. *A Winter's Tale*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, and *Measure for Measure* he lumps together as “meanly written” and there are “bombast speeches” in *Macbeth* “which are not to be understood.” He could only have concluded, you may say, as we do, that Shakespeare at his best is inimitable and not to be imitated at his worst. Even so there were lessons to be learnt on the way to that wise verdict.

JONSON'S LEGACY

I fancy it was the judicious Jonson who stood in his light. Easy to see why Jonson bulked so authoritatively in the critical opinion of that day. He had written good plays and had written them *imitably*

Well. Moreover he had carefully explained what he did and why he did so. He had preferred blank verse to rhyme; but he had never played Old Harry with it. He had neither need nor temptation to, just because this creating of individual character was not the thing he could best do. Seldom or never could he consummate the business—it is the final creative act—by setting a character free. His men and women (as Mr. T. S. Eliot has remarked in his most acute essay) live a curiously limited existence. As a substitute for the individual, he invented to dominate his comedies—or is it not truer to say he adapted from the old embodied abstractions of the Moralities?—what he called Humours, typical figures, moved by some obsessing humour or prejudice.

Such figures will naturally revolve in a well-defined pattern of action; and it is fatally easy to devise minor characters, so called—Cutbeard, a barber; Lickfinger, a master-cook; Madrigal, a poetaster and the like—who can be guaranteed to do no more than the story asks of them. There may be something to be said for the comedy of Humours when it has Jonson's intellectual drive and grim satiric purpose behind it (though he often drives too hard for our mere enjoyment), somewhat less when it has Congreve's wit for its decoration (the play's fabric in

this case is apt to be too tenuous and brittle); but unluckily it is a recipe by which anyone, mastering besides a few tricks of the stage, can dish up a comedy of sorts. And for two hundred years the formula was followed by hacks and dabblers with neither purpose nor wit in them, and by better men too; till comedy became a formula and little else, a game to be played by First Old Men and Walking Gentlemen, the Light and the Low Comedian, the Leading Lady and the Singing Chambermaid. So fixed were the rules and so unchanging was the pattern that actors forgetting the words of one play would substitute a passage from another and leave the audience none the wiser. This (as the phrase once went in fiction) is a fact. The comedy of Humours was Jonson's direst legacy to the theatre.

His comedies beside (his Masks hardly counting in this connection), Roman history was his chief resource. He had not to create character there either. We might call his studies of Sejanus and Catiline historical Humours and not be far out. Nothing in fact obliged him to enlarge the boundaries of his form and to disintegrate the method of his verse as Shakespeare so triumphantly and the lesser men more roughly or flaccidly did. He stood, an exemplar of artistic discipline; and, inspiration

lacking, discipline was what it now seemed the serious drama needed.

THE FAILURE OF RHYME

There was the French example too; and (with Waller's and Denham's achievements) this tempted Dryden to the yet stricter discipline of rhyme. But here again he theorizes and ignores the practical test. A rhymed and regular line, which will do very well in a regularly and lightly stressed language like the French, may reduce our heavily, most irregularly stressed English to dramatic impotence. With that constant, ever so slight accent upon the last syllable of each word a French dramatic poet may, I should guess (though perhaps I guess wrong), as well have a very regular metre to write to as not; for accent alone is in any case of small use to the speaker of it for expressing variety of emotion. He must depend on change of pitch, tone and pace—and this is what French actors most skilfully do. But in English it will, to begin with, be far harder for the dramatist to fit heavily accented words into such a metre; therefore the natural flow of language will be disturbed, the choice of words will be narrowed, and inversions and circumlocutions will creep in. Then the actor, in his turn, will be occupied in making

what is left of the irregular regular—the picturesquely crooked straight and the pregnantly rough places plain—and he will lose one of the most potent means our speech provides for the expressing of conviction or emotion, a violent accentuating of the stressed syllable. It is a question of approach. If you are a dramatist casting passionate speech into poetic mould you may hope to be delivered of such a line as Hamlet's

Remorseless, lech'rous, treach'rous, kindless vill'n.

(I write it as it must be spoken.) If your approach is a versifier's you are more likely to write, most correctly,

Remorseless lecherous kindless villain

—and how much of the dramatic force is left?

Though later they left rhyming they were still for regularity; and Dryden and the rest here entered into an unconscious conspiracy to destroy the native dramatic virtues of the English language. The actors helped them. It is easier to declaim sounding verse than to speak passionate and subtle poetry, and the effect to be made is more obvious. Passionate speech had been the very life of the Elizabethan drama, and so splendidly did it live that for mere moments of this its grossnesses and stupidities will still be forgiven. In its decadence the form which this force had carved for itself (as the sea carves

patterns in rock) remained when the force had gone out of it. The men of the Restoration were right to question its use to them. But by considering the form only and not how the form came to be, by thinking of effect and not cause, they were little likely to evolve another as potent.

Here indeed is the chief weakness of English poetic drama—and of much of the prose!—from Dryden's almost to our own day: it may be called the drama of effect without cause. In place of the presenting of the play's story we have the contriving of a plot into which story and its likelihoods must be twisted, if need be, for the sake of arbitrary effects—as in *Venice Preserved*. And instead of passionate speech which illuminates character we have declamation, effective speech imposed upon character. Nor—sometimes the dramatist seems to feel—if the speech itself is effective enough, need there be any actuality of character behind it at all. For an example read *The Mourning Bride*.

Long before these admired works were written the rhymed couplet had gone under. Dryden himself, having given it a good trial, abandoned it with *All For Love*, in which, his preface tells us, “in my style I have professed to imitate the divine Shakespeare, which that I might perform more freely, I have disencumbered myself from rhyme. Not that

I condemn my former way, but that this is more proper to my present purpose." A neat escape from the argument! And Otway soon followed suit, going one better—or worse!—not in imitating, but by calmly pilfering from *Romeo and Juliet* and mutilating to taste some hundreds of lines, which he used up in a concoction called *Caius Marius*; another masterpiece we are now called on to admire!

AURUNG-ZEBE

But Dryden, before he gave up the tussle, had managed, by sheer literary skill, to produce a kind of play with a certain integrity of its own. The true dramatist would not have attempted the thing at all, but by one who was not it could hardly have been better done. Of *Aurung-zebe*, which immediately ante-dates *All For Love*, Saintsbury says, "This fine play worthily closes the 'Heroic' series," and no less a critic than Charles II thought it, Dryden tells us, the best thing he had done so far, and, seeing it unfinished, even advised upon the modelling of "the most considerable event in it"—whichever that is! That Charles did not pointedly advise him to cut out Morat's lines to Nourmahal—

*From wars, and from affairs of state abstain;
Women emasculate a monarch's reign,*

*And murmuring crowds, who see them shine with gold,
That pomp, as their own ravished spoils, behold.*

—says something for the royal sense of humour. It is hard to believe though, despite his defence of these plays and their method—indeed by witness of it, for the prefaces, up to now, all show secret misgivings—that Dryden did not know he was in a blind alley.

The action is mechanical from beginning' to end. Surely, however formal the convention, at some moment the material should seem, so to speak, to repay the artist's pains and shape itself to an inevitable end! But here is Dryden contriving his effects to the last—and at the last worst.

The premises of the plot are not strained; the Emperor's infatuation for the captive Indamora, who loves and is beloved by his son, Aurung-zebe, and the Empress's infatuation for Aurung-zebe (who is her step-son), make a reasonable—if rather too reasonable—dramatic pattern. But when Morat, her son by the Emperor, is called in by his father to be his step-brother's political rival and he falls a victim to Indamora too, the problem becomes all but mathematical. There is also Melesinda, who is Morat's devoted wife, and Arimant, who also adores Indamora. Through five acts these interests are woven in and out and out and in, and a civil war waged 'off' makes one complication more. The characters dance through

the action as if it were a set of Lancers, explaining glibly as they do it why they do what they do (except the Emperor, who has the Eastern monarch's privileges of caprice), but very obviously doing it because it is to Dryden's convenience that they should. It is better, on the whole, when occasionally they don't explain. Morat's prompt capitulation to Indamora's charms may leave us, as it leaves her, amazed beyond expression; but when an author simply says 'this did happen' and goes ahead he at least gives us no chance of protesting 'it couldn't have.' Her conversion of him in Act V from the wicked tyrant to the noble prince by half a dozen sententious speeches is not convincing, and is only made less so by his handsome acknowledgment:

Now you have given me virtue for my guide;

And, with true honour, ballasted my pride,

Unjust dominion I no more pursue;

I quit all other claims, but those to you.

It is not that human beings never speak so, but that human emotion does not operate by these rectangles.

For all their professed passion the characters have secreted so little dramatic life that in this last act Dryden has to devise a false report of Aurung-zebe's death, then, when he re-appears, to continue a preposterous misunderstanding with Indamora begun

an act or so earlier, not to mention the reporting by various messengers of the complications of the civil war fought 'off,' if he is to keep his set of Lancers going to the end. For a final 'effect' he even brings in the Empress, "*distracted and dying of poison*," to indulge her in "an extravagant and ludicrous rhapsody," which Saintsbury (who calls it so) wishes his editor's duty had allowed him to omit. It would be unfair to quote it. Mr. Bayes here leaves Buckingham nothing to burlesque. How Dryden ever came to write it is a mystery. Was *this* by chance King Charles's contribution?

The play is modelled upon French methods, admittedly or no. And the renunciation of the French and all their works in the preface to *All For Love*, when he has taken service under Shakespeare, owes something, one fancies, to the notion that adherence to them had at last proved, in *Aurung-zebe*, a mistake. But then he had *not* adhered to them. Corneille and Racine would have been shocked at the supposition that they should stand sponsors to such goings-on. His British self-respect tells him not to follow them slavishly, and when it comes to putting theory into practice, he is yet more British in his love of a compromise. He sees, for instance, that there is something to be said for Unity of Place. But the "genius of the English cannot bear too regular a

play.”* So instead of definitely ordering his action in a definite spot, be it only the conventional Hall of a Palace, organizing it there and gaining coherence and strength and tensity from the concentration, he sets his scene nowhere in particular (Indamora is a captive, Aurung-zebe is put under arrest, but they wander about neither in prison nor out of it), and, losing the benefit of the old Elizabethan freedom, gets in exchange only vagueness and confusion.

So it is too with his use of the rhymed couplet. This not only suits the French language, its expository qualities give perfect expression to the clarity of thought in which the French delight, to the ‘intellectual excitement’ which is (says Mr. Lytton Strachey) the great virtue in Corneille’s verse. The very same qualities unsuit it to express our cryptic English emotions.

Upon count after count his use of the rhymed couplet betrays him. It is easy enough to pitch the tone of it heroically high (for which ‘nobility’ it is that Dryden most values it), but by no means so easy to lower it, as the dramatist must lower it sometimes if the ordinary traffic of life is to be presented at all.

* This, it must be confessed, is quoted from the preface to the later *Don Sebastian*, but it stands, I think, for his settled opinion.

Here, as we saw, blank verse has great advantage; it can be keyed up and down at will. The French solved the difficulty for themselves by refusing ever to lower the tone at all. They rejected all mention of commonplace things; a dog must be referred to only as a *serviteur fidèle de la race humaine* or something of that sort. And they were æsthetically and dramatically right, for once you have lowered the tone a sudden re-raising of it may well seem ridiculous.

Dryden does his skilful literary best. He has no difficulty in leading off with

*Heaven seems the empire of the East to lay
On the success of this important day;
Their arms are to the last decision bent
And fortune labours with the vast event . . .*

or in leading up to

*O, Indamora, hide those fatal eyes!
Too deep they wound whom they too soon surprise;
My virtue, prudence, honour, interest, all
Before this universal monarch fall.
Beauty, like ice, our footing does betray;
Who can tread sure on the smooth the slippery way?
Pleased with the passage, we glide swiftly on,
And see the dangers which we cannot shun.*

But when it comes to Solyman, one of those courtiers of all work which no such play can do without, entering to Arimant with

*The princess Melesinda, bathed in tears,
And tossed alternately with hopes and fears,
If your affairs such leisure can afford,
Would learn from you the fortunes of her lord,*

to which he replies

*Tell her that I some certainty may bring,
I go this minute to attend the king.*

—while it could not well be more discreetly done, quite obviously it does not do, and it never could have sounded anything but comic. Is it perhaps that the English language itself refuses to be gracefully and correctly null?

Nor does the climatic moment of Aurung-zebe's horrified discovery of the dying Morat in Indamora's arms show off the method much better.

AURUNG-ZEBE: *Ha! Do I dream? Is this my hoped success?*

I grow a statue, stiff and motionless.

*Look, Dianet; for I dare not trust these eyes;
They dance in mists and dazzle with surprise.*

DIANET: *Sir, 'tis Morat; dying he seems, or dead;
And Indamora's hand—*

AURUNG-ZEBE (looking): *Supports his head!*

Colley Cibber tells us (though he is writing of thirty to forty years later) that actors had to treat certain passages in *Aurung-zebe* with much discretion. One is not surprised to hear it.

The virtues of the play's writing—and they are many—are undramatic, even anti-dramatic. We need ask for nothing better than the Emperor's reproach to Indamora (they all, as we said, fall in love with her in turn, and all, when she disappoints them, rate her somewhat to this effect):

*Ah, traitress! ah ingrate! ah faithless mind!
Ah, sex, invented first to damn mankind!
Nature took care to dress you up for sin;
Adorned without, unfinished left within,
Hence by no judgment you your loves direct,
Talk much, ne'er think, and still the wrong affect.
So much self-love in your composure's mixed,
That love to others still remains unfixed:
Greatness and noise and show are your delight;
Yet wise men love you in their own despite:
And finding in their native wit no ease,
Are forced to put your folly on, to please.*

It is altogether excellent; but its proper place is in *Absalom and Achitophel*. And so Dryden himself seems to have thought, for, having written this and the rest, “. . . I desire to be no longer the Sisyphus of the stage,” he tells us “to roll up a stone with endless labour (which, to follow the proverb, gathers no moss) and which is perpetually falling down again.” He means instead to “make the world some part of amends for many ill plays by an heroic poem.”

It was to have been about the Black Prince and his exploits, and he more than hints a hope that the king will, so to speak, collaborate with him financially this time. But Charles, apparently, did not respond. He may have thought the Black Prince a dull dog better left unsung, or he may have wished him another sort of singer—in which he was probably right. So, before he does turn triumphantly to satire, Dryden rolls up yet one more stone in the shape of *All For Love*.

BACK TO SHAKESPEARE!

He had never adhered strictly to the couplet, had always allowed himself an occasional alexandrine or triplet, even a length of blank verse. And now that he reconciles himself altogether to Shakespeare's master metre, it is instructive to see to what phase of it he turns—not to the most, but to the least dramatic, needless to say. For when in the first act we encounter Antony's vision of himself

Stretched at my length beneath some blasted oak,

. . . the herd come jumping by me,

And, fearless, quench their thirst, while I look on,

And take me for their fellow citizen . . .

and hear him, thirty lines later, apostrophize Ventidius with

By heaven, he weeps! poor good old man, he weeps!
The big round drops course one another down . . .
(they are diverted just in time from *his innocent nose to the furrows of his cheeks*) we can give a good guess at one play he had been reading lately. Yet even by this example the dramatic life of his dialogue is increased out of all knowledge. Blank verse has won again.

He is still, however, for the 'well-made' play, as we can now call it, and, the classic sternness of his subject helping him, this specimen is very well made indeed. He is, as usual, modestly critical of his achievement, only pluming himself a little upon what is, in fact, his chief mistake, the encounter between Cleopatra and Octavia. For, having brought them together, all he can think of is to set them to a short sneering match; after which they part, leaving the situation and our knowledge of the pair of them exactly where it was before. A common result, this, of such planning for planning's sake.

THE DRAMA OF SOUND AND FURY

Dryden's influence was as potent as Jonson's had been, and more. It spread rather from his opinions than from his work, and it lasted long after it could be exercised in his name. Blank verse and the well-

made play were to be common form for 'serious' English drama for nearly two centuries to come. The type varies with the dramatist himself and his temperament, ranges from Lee's rantings and Otway's agonies, to Addison's highly classic *Cato* (written, as Mr. Bonamy Dobrée observes, in rhymed couplets without the rhyme) and so on to Sheridan Knowles and Bulwer Lytton. It is not all bad, but even in the best of it (as far as I know it) the dramatist seems to be working to pattern, never using his medium as an instinctive means of expression. It is the drama of formula, of effect without cause; and so, having served its immediate turn, it lies dead.

Doctor Johnson, as usual, can put his finger on the weak spot. In his prologue, written for Garrick's opening of Drury Lane in 1747 (where Garrick did something to shatter for a time the consequent dead formulæ of acting), he lets fly.

*Then crushed by rules, and weaken'd as refin'd,
For years the power of tragedy declin'd,
From bard to bard the frigid caution crept
And declamation roar'd while passion slept.*

Often, too, as with Dryden, the best things in a play would be specifically undramatic. When Johnson said that the description of the temple in *The Mourning Bride* was the finest poetical passage he had ever read, he "recollected none in Shakespeare

to equal it" (I fancy, incidentally, that he said it to vex Garrick and draw him in Shakespeare's defence), note that he only praised its poetry. What would he have said of the dramatic 'propriety' of Osmyn's speech to Almeria, one of twenty of the sort?

*Think how I am when thou shalt wed with Garcia!
Then will I smear these walls with blood, dash my
Disfigured face, and rive my clotted hair,
Break on the ground my throbbing breast,
And grovel with gashed hands to scratch a grave,
Stripping my nails to tear this pavement up,
And bury me alive; where I will bite the ground
Till gorged with suffocating earth.*

Mr. Congreve was in poor health when he wrote *The Mourning Bride*. One sees him at Tunbridge Wells, sitting, after his morning glass and his cup of chocolate, wrapped in his flowered dressing-gown, and delicately penning these desperate sentiments. The company at Lincoln's Inn Fields is plaguing him for the play. He knows just what they want and what their public wants—and here it is. He seems to have brought the wheel full circle. For this is indeed lofty, this is Ercles vein. It is the drama which Bottom the Weaver loved and which Shakespeare laughed at, not unkindly, and purged of dross, to make great drama from it. But the wheel has not come full circle. There was crude honest strength in the old plays. In

this there is no virtue at all. It has lost its innocence, and what has it gained? Nothing can come of such fraud. Nothing did.

One pertinent question remains. How was it that generations of presumably intelligent people were able to enjoy this sort of thing? I think the answer is a simple one. Take, for a parallel, our Italian opera. We enjoy it (those of us that do), if only it is well sung, by some peculiar process of ignoring its obvious absurdities. Audiences, almost to our own day, must have viewed these plays with much the same eyes. The parallel is indeed very close. There was the great actor, as to-day the great singer, and interest was concentrated upon him and upon the fine vocal and emotional effects he could make. The play was so much material for these, and so to be judged.

If much in this chapter savours more of a speech for the prosecution than a judgment, well, I think it time that another one was made.

V

A WORD ABOUT FORM

THE well-made play connotes 'construction,' for long a bugbear to all earnest students of the mysteries of dramatic art. There were those laws that must never be transgressed; the plot must be unfolded thus or thus, the *scène à faire* placed here or—possibly—there, some element of surprise must be included, and catastrophe and peripety stand ready to answer the bell! By my thesis these things matter not at all. There are no such arbitrarily right ways and wrong ways. There will (we said) be the physical conditions of the theatre for which the play is written. The dramatist must take account of these as the sculptor of his material, as an architect of the site on which he builds. For the rest, a play can be well put together or ill, as a story may be told clearly or a picture clumsily composed. There will be the best way (more or less) to do it; but this will be innate in the theme, and should be proper and peculiar to the theme, as much so as anything else about it.

CONVENTIONS: THEIR USE AND MISUSE

That at least is the ideal to aim for; but there is more to be said. The physical conditions of a theatre offer lines of least resistance; some effects will be easier to make there than others, and dramatists get into habits, and their audiences grow used to these habits. Now habit means economy of effort; and so far as this will mean a husbanding for more profitable expenditure of the dramatist's efforts and the audience's limited power of attention, it may be a good thing. Here is the advantage of an accepted convention; it provides common ground on which dramatist and audience are mutually at ease. Without knowing what he is about to do they know within a little how he is about to do it, and their attention can be concentrated on the 'what' with much of the 'how' taken for granted.

But the disadvantages are obvious. A convention—of unity of place, of the use of blank verse or what not—may be most expressive of a play; but because it is a convention this will pass unnoticed. And the dramatist, who accepts a convention because it is one, will use it automatically and unprofitably. Blank verse, when it was in the making, was an admirable emotional medium, and even when it was in the rather too conscious re-making there was something

to be said for it; but as a mere 'mumpsimus' ritual it has been death and damnation to English tragic drama. Unity of place has its purpose and advantages; but to accept it as a 'Rule of the Ancients' is not the way to discover them.

FORM OF ONE KIND AND ANOTHER

Though there may be no fixed laws of construction, yet a play can have beauty of form. Every artist feels after form and fine proportion, if for no other reason than that they make for clarity of expression. And the maturer the artist, the more concerned he is likely to be with this, for he will have more to put into his play or his picture or his symphony, and the greater need, therefore, to order it clearly. This beauty in drama is, I think, manifested very much as it is in other arts, the peculiar means allowed for. It is a question of harmony mainly, of just proportions, significant emphasis, congruities and arresting contrasts, of an ultimate integrity. The likening of one art to another is a tricky business; but in the beauty and power of their form, and so far as this may be isolated, instructive comparisons could be made between the *Agamemnon*, the temple at Pæstum, the Delphi charioteer, Leon Cathedral, *King Lear*, Michelangelo's 'Last Judgment' and Beethoven's Mass in D, and a fuller understanding of

them be reached than by measuring each against some lesser achievement of its own kind.

Form and the meaning of it will certainly differ greatly as between one kind of play and another. Shakespeare's concern with it is not so obvious as Racine's or Ibsen's; but we had better not conclude from this that he is not concerned with it at all. *Ghosts* and the *Agamemnon* have structurally more than a little in common. But Ibsen is not consciously imitating Aeschylus. Both likeness and difference belong to the plays' themes and to the nature of the theatres, with their points of difference and likeness, for which they were destined.

Shakespeare's form is apparent mainly in terms of power. He works by means of contrast between character and character, by tension and relaxation, climax and anti-climax, by changes of tone and pace, by every sort of variation between scene and scene. We could illustrate the form of *King Lear* by a chart, a sort of temperature chart, with plot and sub-plot and characters marked by ink lines of different colours, zigzagging up and down and crossing and re-crossing; the rise and fall to show volume of emotion, while a separate line could mark increase and decrease of pace. We can rightly call this form, I think, for all that it is form in motion. We are conscious also, in these maturer plays, of a fairly

elaborate character scheme of likenesses and contrasts, but this is the nearest we seem to get to any spatial plan.

Any kind of play, of course, could be charted in this fashion, but not many so eloquently. Take one of Racine's. The character zigzags would be less abrupt and significant. The single plot-line would run on a curve. But what we may call architecturally the play's 'lay out'—an important factor both for plot and character scheme—could not be shown at all. The simplicity of the method, the few characters, the unity of subject and place, and the so-called unity of time, all enable Racine to give us, as the action proceeds, a sense of the plan of the play as a whole. He can space it out effectively, proportion becomes of value, and less immediate contrasts can be made to tell. He can appeal a little to our judgment as well as to our imagination and feeling.

THE PLANNING OF GREEK DRAMA*

This conveying of a sense of plan is, of course, his chief legacy from classic Greek tragedy. To the Greeks, we are told, right proportion in dramatic structure was everything. If it is the physical conditions of the theatre which largely determine the

* My knowledge of Greek drama comes almost wholly, I should premise, from Gilbert Murray's translations.

method of the play, what was it in the Greek theatre which gave dominance to form?

We have the chorus and its orchestra to begin with. The constant presence of the chorus will alone make for regularity of structure in a play. The actors are few and their effective action is limited, so this will not much disturb it. (There is also the influence of the play's subject; one cannot tell a well-known tale for the sake of sudden turns and surprises.) We can see, I think, the natural law of such a theatre developing towards straightforward simplicity, clarity, and breadth of effect. No artist works against a natural law, for his work gains strength only by obedience to it. Here will be the masses of the play; chorus and dialogue. The dramatist's art will lie in giving the regularity proportion, and to the monotony as much variety as will not decrease its strength.

Much can be done within the scope of such a scheme. Already in *The Suppliants* the alternation of lyric and dramatic—and, within the dramatic, change between set speech, stichomythia, and choric exclamation—is quite elaborately devised. And in the *Oresteia* the variety of effect is remarkable. One could show, I believe, that throughout the trilogy Aeschylus never repeats a combination, unless (as with some of the chorus repetitions) there is dramatic gain in doing so. But the main rhythm of the action

is never disturbed, the relation between choric and dramatic never becomes lop-sided.

The character interest is carefully balanced. In the *Agamemnon* Clytemnestra and Cassandra are given weight against the man's side of the play by length of speech and by the emphasis of the occasions of their appearance, and as against each other by the variety of the treatment of their scenes.

CASSANDRA'S SCENE IN THE *AGAMEMNON*

I have been puzzled by the length of the famous scene between Cassandra and the chorus, while the murder is in hand. We, the audience, know that it is in hand; therefore ought we to be held, and can we be effectively held, in suspense so long? For an answer one must look closely into the scene's dramatic purpose, and analyse its structure in the light of this. Cassandra, both in herself and what she stands for (she is the pitiful emblem of the triumph over Troy, which the Herald and Agamemnon have celebrated each in turn), is far too important a figure to be lost in a minute or two's tense waiting for the news of a murder. But it will be hard to find a better occasion for setting her dominantly before us than this, so important in itself. To create another and set her to give it importance will expand the action unduly.

The problem is, then, to employ her to enhance both the occasion and her own significance, and let neither discount the other. How does Aeschylus solve it?

It is to this juncture that every line in the play has been leading, and by a scheme of suspense outdoing suspense—first, for the news from Troy, then for Agamemnon's return, then for the issue of his first meeting with Clytemnestra, and now while we wait for news of the murder. When your story is a familiar one, and cannot depend on surprise, this creating of suspense in the telling of it is an important matter and not an easy one to compass. But here, besides, some variation of method is wanted, for the effect made must be the most signal yet. The murder itself may not be presented; and all the elaborate preparation for something which might seem an empty pause while the thing prepared for is accomplished unseen—there would be a most risky relaxing of your hold upon the audience! Now, Cassandra can do for the scene all that needs doing; and by what other agency, one asks, could so much be done? Her madness will unsettle our nerves, so that the sight of the murder achieved may strike more sharply on them. The chorus could hardly have been set to this task; nor Clytemnestra certainly—she must be kept a cryptic figure yet awhile, we are given a bare glimpse

of the sharp edge of her desperation. But in this strange prophesying of a ravished priestess there will be a horror something akin to the sort of horror the murder should arouse. It sounds too a needed note, the complementary note to Clytemnestra's tense resolution, accords with that other aspect of her which she herself cannot yet show us, saves the tragic vengeance from seeming brute butchery. It is, besides, innate and imminent in Cassandra herself. Another advantage; for there is no more time now for preparation, and

The bitter, thrilling music of her pain

can sound on till she herself stands fully significant to us, and till it has searched far back into the darkness from which the doom of the Atreidae springs.

With these clues to its function the fitness of the scene's structure becomes plain. The first part of it is lyrical. This sets the contrast with Clytemnestra, who has just disappeared, and it is the due medium of Cassandra's agony, and for her broken pitiful visions of the deed being done. But you cannot carry through a lengthy scene by such insubstantial means. So first the share of the chorus is made more important, Cassandra responding and attuning herself to it till a steadier balance of lyric exchange is attained; then, from that backing, the dramatic part begins.

This is a long upbuilding of prophetic speech, which is split into four sections by stichomythia. These answer a double purpose; they relieve the actor from the intolerable task of reaching his climax at one stretch, and, by bringing in the chorus, they strengthen the dramatic effect—for the short sharp exchanges produce a tension which single speech cannot. But here one other thing puzzled me for a while. The climax—and it is a magnificent one—is reached at the end of the third section of Cassandra's speech, not the fourth and last. Why does not the scene finish and she go to her death at this point? I think the answer is that if she did, if she were given a 'strong exit,' the effect of it would be—other reasons apart—too like one of Clytemnestra's. So Aeschylus provides, not—mark—an anti-climax, which would belittle her going, but, first, fourteen verses of stichomythia to sustain the tension, and then eighteen verses of subdued emotion, which bring back the scene to its initial tone and make an end far more fitting to her, a quiet end.

One can, I believe, so analyse the structure of every scene in the trilogy and detect its dramatic purpose. Often the balancing of the parts will be a far more delicate and elaborate business. Look, for instance, at the forty-one exchanges between Orestes, Electra and the chorus, which make up the great

lament over Agamemnon's tomb in *The Libation Bearers*, and note the extraordinary variety of the treatment: a most subtle and complex scheme of antiphony. When the simple planning of a play in every scene can be made so pertinent to its theme, and so fruitful of effects great and small, something like dramatic life may be claimed for it.

THE RETROSPECTIVE METHOD

It is a far journey from Aeschylus to Ibsen and his school, and one could make instructive pauses by the way. But it is interesting—without teasing the comparison—to place the two sorts of play side by side; because Ibsen, inheriting the mechanically well-made play, once again gives it vital form. With him, from *Ghosts* to *John Gabriel Borkman*, the scheme of the action is legitimately born of the matter of it.

William Archer, in a preface to *Ghosts*, remarks his employment of the retrospective method of Greek drama, by which a situation is developed rather than a story told. The difference, strictly speaking, will always be in degree, not in kind. Few dramatists, or novelists either, set out to tell a story explicitly and consecutively from A to Z. They may begin at, say, D; and, backwards to A,

what has happened will be implied. By the normal retrospective method one begins perhaps at M (measuring, of course, rather by the importance of the events in the story than by the mere number of them, or by time) and has as much to recall as to recount. Its advantages are obvious. It makes for concentration (a great advantage in a play, where space is limited), and for the relating of causes to effects very immediately and pertinently. But the difficulties involved are considerable. One may evade some of them with a

*Good now, sit down, and tell me, he that knows,
Why this same strict and most observant watch
So nightly toils the subject of the land . . .*

—but this will be to miss most of the advantages too. The method is not Shakespeare's; still, when he does need reminiscence and it is intrinsic to his theme he seldom disposes of it so cavalierly as this. He gets value for character out of it, as in Horatio's intimate exchanges with Hamlet or as in the retrospective passages in Othello.

The Greeks contrived matters more elaborately. The *Oedipus Rex* is the most quoted example of the method in its perfection; but the *Agamemnon* (again) makes almost as good a one, and such other of the plays as I know all follow it more or less. The main lines of the story, both as it is to be acted out and

retrospectively told, being fairly familiar to the audience already, the mere telling of it will not be such a tricky business. One may suspect that to this familiarity the method itself may be owing, for it is as dull work as needless to tell a well-known tale straight through from beginning to end; far better begin in the middle. Then the chorus is a great help, with its inability to do very much, its consequent readiness to listen, and its occasional thirst for information. But this obvious use of it is bettered. Note, in the *Agamemnon* at least, how much of the reminiscence of fact is otherwise provided for, and how the chorus is set free for the more æsthetic business of painting in poetry a moral and a remoter historical background to the play. There we have the method in its full, and in something finer by far than mere technical development.

But Ibsen has to deal with a story which nobody knows. In place of the helpful chorus he inherited the confidant, a device long clung to, nakedly and logically by the French, familiar in England as 'Charles, his friend' (the female of the species, a Lucy or Maria, as vapid as the male), latterly tricked out with varying disguises and excuses for existence. A stale device, for which Ibsen soon had no use. He could not spare space nor dissipate his

play's strength upon characters with no vital interest in the action; he allows himself a parlourmaid or so at most. He is the great dramatic economist. His plays are fairly short, you may say. Yes, but so highly charged with dramatic purpose, with his peculiar blend of thought and feeling, that not much more of it at a time would be bearable.

THE PROBLEM OF POWERFUL SPEECH

Here, in parenthesis, let us glance at two difficulties—though they are not usually counted so—in which the modern dramatist is involved in his illusionary, realistic theatre. (These adjectives, by the way, are never accurately descriptive, but they have to serve.) In May 1883 Ibsen writes from Rome to Lucie Wolf, a well-known Christiania actress, who has asked him for a prologue to be spoken at some theatre festival there. He won't write it, and he takes the opportunity to damn the use of verse in the theatre generally. "The stage is for dramatic art alone, and declamation is not dramatic art. . . . Verse has done immense injury to the art of the theatre. . . . It is most unlikely that the verse form will be employed to any extent worth mentioning in the drama of the immediate future; for the dramatic aims of the future will pretty certainly be

'incompatible with it. It is therefore doomed to extinction. For art forms die out, just as the preposterous animal forms of prehistoric times died out when their day was over. . . . "I myself, for the last seven or eight years, have hardly written a single verse, but have cultivated exclusively the incomparably more difficult art of poetic creation in the plain, unvarnished speech of reality. . . ."'

Note that it is not poetry he condemns but verse, the artificial form, and declamation, or its artificial delivery. This is not a quibble. He was a poet, and he never ceased to be, though he wrote prose plays. And the problem he set himself was, as he says, to give to an apparently commonplace form of speech all the dramatic force and, when need be, all the emotional suggestion that poetry could give. How far he succeeded one cannot judge without knowing and more than merely knowing the language he wrote in; for no translator can hope to fit accurate sense and equivalent sound into another. But one cannot, even ignorantly, hear certain passages of *Rosmersholm* without feeling sure that he did succeed. It is a desperate problem—of which most prose dramatists seem simply unaware. The form must be that of current speech, often quite casual speech; but how challenge Aeschylus or Shakespeare, or even the pigmies of their tribe, denied the dynamic power

of poetry? And without this, what has the art of the theatre ever been?

THE PROBLEM OF THE REALISTIC SCENE

The prose realist suffers another loss which he must somehow make good. Aeschylus and Shakespeare could enscene their plays in a very atmosphere of poetry. This ambience to the action the modern theatre provides in terms of canvas and paint, which can never have the same dramatic value. Why not, if the painted picture is good enough? Because if it is so good it will be too good for the actors; it will compete with them, a thing that cannot happen when they paint the background themselves in terms of poetic speech.

It will be found, indeed, that any grandiose circumstances, if they cannot be so assimilated to the characters, will be dangerous competitors for them. Consider *Emperor and Galilean*, which is written more or less in terms of realism. There has to be so much about Byzantium, its politics and its splendours, that at the end of two long plays we are far less familiar with Julian himself than we are with Johannes Rosmer by the end of two acts. If that is too arbitrary a comparison, take any play in which the background and circumstances of the action have to be elaborated and explained; it is obvious how much

time and attention this must steal from the characters. In the sort of room we all know, peopled by the men and women we may meet any day in the street, the business of a play can be tackled at once. Save for climatic moments, what happens there—if we are to picture life as it is and people as they are—will not apparently be very exciting. Yet poignant drama may be pulsing beneath the commonplace event, its burden only heard in the thing hinted or half said, its springs of action hidden in the actors' secret minds. Ibsen's retrospective method takes account of this, and to the full. He begins his story, not at M, but somewhere about S or T, and lifts his curtain to an imminent crisis. The dull *externals* of the rest of it, back to A—here is the great gain—can all be omitted. He gives us, in reminiscence cunningly contrived, only the *inner* drama which they hid, the drama of the mind and spirit. This can show a conflict as magnificent as any in the *Agamemnon* or the *Oedipus*, *Othello* or *King Lear*. Set Rebecca West beside Clytemnestra or Iago; Ibsen need by no means lower his colours.

IBSEN'S DRAMATIC ECONOMY

The resources of his theatre are fairly homogeneous; dialogue, action, and painted scene are keyed together to the same sort of prose exactitude.

This is a convention like any other, though we call it realism. His task is to develop its expressiveness without breaking its integrity. By simplifying the scheme of a play's visible action (its reminiscent action will be another matter), in its scenic setting, in the number of the characters, in singleness of subject, he can make both its plan and its atmosphere effective. In *Rosmersholm*, for instance, we have the picture of the spacious old house constantly before our eyes, and the simple rhythm of the action—we soon become conscious of it—itself speaks of the quiet life that is led there; Rebecca's constant presence (she has conquered this city of her siege to find it a dead city and she moves about it like a ghost), Rosmer's aimless coming and going, the solitary visits paid by Kroll, Brendel, and Mortensgård—all this, without a word spoken, is eloquent. The simpler the scheme the more sensitive we shall be to its working, and form and proportion, then, are as important to Ibsen as to Aeschylus. They will indeed be more important, for in this theatre the focusing of the action is far sharper, and the slightest emphasis tells. If a Greek play could be said to have some of the attributes of sculpture, with few of these lost there is added now to dramatic art something of the quality of a picture, the least touches of light and shade can be made to tell.

Take a passage at the very opening of the play. Rebecca sits crocheting "*a large white woollen shawl which is nearly finished.*" Even in this (and even in the fact that it is a '*large*' shawl and '*nearly finished*') there is a touch of dramatic significance; for it is the occupation of a woman—of such a woman as we see before us, at least—who sits and waits and watches and thinks, and has been so sitting (since it is a '*large*' shawl '*nearly finished*') through long hours. She is waiting now and watching, her eyes turning every few seconds or so to the window. It is open, so that she may hear if not see the Pastor coming; she is listening intently too. She must not stand openly watching; when Madame Helseth tells her he is coming we find that she only "*peeps out between the curtains.*" This is our first sight of Rebecca, in repose but for the competent fingers busy at the crochet, yet with every sense alert. And the actress, without a word to say on the subject, will tell us plainly (if she is fit to play the part at all) that this man she is waiting for means much to her; and if she is a Duse (alack, I never saw Duse play it!) she can be trusted to suggest to us considerably more. Now comes the two women's curiosity to see if Rosmer will cross the footbridge. The effect is better gained by the two, for the curiosity itself is thus underlined, and it must arouse

ours—which is not to be satisfied yet awhile. Next comes Rebecca's hope that he will cross it, since he did start to the day before yesterday (not yesterday, but the day before; what a hawk's eye she has on him!); then the disappointment—

No, he is turning, he is going by the upper road again . . .

then • the sadly bitter, slightly ironical, ever so slightly supercilious, and (for us) quite stimulatingly cryptic

They cling to their dead here in Rosmersholm . . .
countered by Madam Helseth's simple

Now I'd say, Miss, that it's the dead that clings to Rosmersholm . . .

which, as such unintentional blows will, hits her hard.

The dead? (she says) *What makes you fancy that?*—for, as we shall learn, the dead are clinging to her. Then she shrugs with weary impatience at the tale of the family spectre of the White Horse. Madam Helseth is a little proud of it; a family spectre is a mark of distinction. But she is to be told no more of this; she is too superior—and a stranger here, what is more!—to believe in such things. Now we learn that, in place of Rosmer, Rector Kroll is arriving; and (she is left alone on the stage for this purpose) under our eyes Rebecca changes from the possessed

creature we have been shown so far into the pleasantly resolute young woman—an honest Iago indeed!—who could win her bewitching way into poor Rosmer's home and heart, and into Kroll's too. All of which is accomplished in the first three hundred words, the first five minutes of the play!

The main retrospective action is the building up of the character and tragic story of Beata, whom Rebecca has driven to her death; they are pictured to us through the eyes of her husband, her brother, Madam Helseth, Mortensgård, and at last in Rebecca's own confession.* The immediate action gives us Rosmer's disillusioning, his loss of faith in his creed, in Rebecca, in himself; into it is blended the disclosure of her loss of faith in her 'free and fearless will' to do whatever was right in her own eyes, and a closer reminiscence (seen in the middle distance of the picture as it were) of her winning, through the fever of her love for him, to the moment when

. . . the horrible, sense-intoxicated desire, passed far, far away from me. All the whirling passions settled down into quiet and silence. Rest descended on my soul, a stillness as on one of our northern bird-cliffs

* So dramatic a revelation that, when the play had been produced in England, a certain Mr. 'Austin Fryers' made this part of the story into another play, which he called *Beata*; the play, it was implied, that Ibsen would have written had he really known his business!

under the midnight sun . . . it was love that was born in me. The great self-denying love, that is content with life as we two have lived it together

—but only to find that they must always face each other now across the chasm in which the dead Beata lies. Loving him, she confesses her guilt to him to set him free of her; for, though he loves her and because he loves her, she cannot profit by her sin. Life with him and with his ideals has ennobled her:

The Rosmer view of life ennoble, but . . . it kills happiness.

So, stripped of their faith, he of his—thanks to her!—in the goodness of the human heart, she of hers—thanks to him!—in the will to live ‘beyond good and evil,’ the two go to their death.

THE LINKING OF PAST AND PRESENT

Notice that this retrospective method not only involves something more than the telling of a story, but, as Ibsen practises it, something far subtler than the subsequent piecing of circumstance with circumstance, which is the technique of the highbrow-delighting detective tale. He so contrives that each revelation of the past event is linked (by cause or effect) to some turn in the revelation of character which forwards the immediate action of the play.

This is a dramatic necessity. Progressive revelation of character alone, scene after scene of mutual confession, might not be a very seizing and would certainly prove far too self-conscious a business to be more than comically convincing. Action alone can reveal character in outline only, and may even obscure for the moment what is within; not to mention that with more than a very little character to reveal opportunities for action will give out. But relate the revelation to *past* action; and however enthralling, even in retrospect, this may be, it cannot obscure, it can only heighten and enrich the colours of the character now reflecting it.

Take the plainest instance in this play of *Rosmersholm*, Rebecca's confession. We learn at last from her who should best know how Beata was lured along the . . . *paths of delusion . . . the paths that led to the mill-race*. But while Rebecca tells us this she tells us more about herself than we have yet known, and far more than she ever could have told us but for the long delay, which lets her see the deed, and herself the doer, in the clear perspective of time.

You think then that I was cool and calculating and self-possessed all the time! I was not the same woman then that I am now, as I stand here telling it all. Besides there are two sorts of will in us, I believe. I wanted Beata away, by one means or another; but

I never really believed that it would come to pass. As I felt my way forward, at each step I ventured, I seemed to hear something within me cry out: No farther, not a step farther. And yet I could not stop. I had to venture the least little bit farther. Only one hair's breadth more! And then one more— And always one more! And then it happened! That is the way such things come about.

This neither belittles the past event, nor lets it diminish the immediate drama of its revelation. Both, indeed, are enhanced by it.

Ibsen at once caps this great 'positive' stroke, so to call it, with a minor 'negative' one, almost as effective in its kind, if the actor knows how to make it so. There is a short silence. What is Rosmer thinking of? Of his dead wife? He has shown horrified pity enough for her during the tale. No, he turns to Rebecca with

What do you think lies before you now? After this? And though in another moment he leaves her without looking at her again, we know by this that he is in the toils of his love for her still.

THE IMPORTANCE OF EMPHASIS

Balance and emphasis in the revelation of past events will be as important as in the ordering of the immediate action. Let us see how a side issue in the

story is pursued, how far and no further, and why: Rebecca's relations to that sinister person, dead long before the play begins, her foster-father, Dr. West. The dramatic value of the account of them is that they make a moral background—and a rather murky one—to her childhood and youth. Kroll has tried to ferret out the truth of the matter; he thinks that her questionable behaviour would be quite accounted for if she had been—he puts it to her—the doctor's illegitimate child. At which we may smile and she can laugh. But quick upon the laughter comes an agonized protest against the notion that West could have been her father, so vehement a protest that Kroll, with suspicious blandness, asks her for an explanation of it; and she gives him one, which, coming from Rebecca, is very obviously not the true one. What does he suspect, and what are we meant to? Whatever it may be, about past or present, he is now only anxious that this child of sin should, for the sake of appearances, marry his brother-in-law, so that the two of them may become a moral force again, a force on his side—all of which is very like Kroll. After this we hear no more of Dr. West. But towards the play's end, when Rosmer himself, in spite of all, would be begging Rebecca to marry him, she says she has a past behind her, something different and something more than she has told him of,

and she offers to tell him. But he will not hear; and we, again, hear no more.

The thing to remark is the nicely calculated emphasis Ibsen gives to the matter. As a rule questions had better not be raised in a play to be left unanswered or half answered, the audience set fruitlessly guessing, its attention distracted. But were he explicit about this he would have to give it more prominence and more space, it would compete with matters more important to the main issue, and, if the worst is true, too painfully. As it is he gets just the value he needs out of the hinted infamy. And see how he turns it and his treatment of it to psychological account. This is just the sort of subject that Kroll and his kind like to leave to insinuation. What a vivid little light on him his manœuvring with it shows! While Rosmer, too, thinking far less evil, says:

Some such idea has crossed my mind now and then.

. . . I never believed it. I only played with it—in my thoughts, you understand.

That last sentence, and the attitude of mind, how typical of the visionary!

It is the sharp focus of his stage that lets Ibsen employ these delicate gradations of effect. Study the rest of Rebecca's scenes with Kroll. He has only these in which to show us—and he needs to show us—the siren Rebecca that was, since her relation to

'Rosmer has utterly changed before ever the play begins. But as she cares not a straw for Kroll, despises him indeed, she takes a mischievous pleasure in reminding him of the time when he had—she . . . *might almost call it a warm faith* . . . in her. He remembers it too well, poor man!

Who couldn't you bewitch if you tried?

he says; and here, it grows plain, is one reason he has not been near Rosmersholm lately, and why Mrs. Kroll never had too much love for her. By dozens of such slight strokes this aspect of Rebecca is filled in. But they must not be over-stressed, for this is not the tragically changed woman of the immediate action. What is more, to rouse our curiosity about her without fully satisfying it is the shrewdest portraiture; for there is the essential Rebecca, who can rouse, now as ever, curiosity she does not satisfy (though it is of a more rueful kind now), and in that has lain her power.

The simplicity of his plan of the play makes the pattern of its character scheme easily effective too. There is the setting, one against the other, of Rosmer the idealist and Brendel the idealist self-burlesqued—the one reflected in the other. Kroll, the practical moralist, has his counterpart in Mortensgård, the branded immoralist—who takes a lesson from the Krolls of the world, and betters his instruction:

I don't know why an emancipated man should refrain from living his life out as fully as possible. But, as I said before, be exceedingly cautious in future. If anything should get abroad that conflicts with current prejudices you may be sure that the whole liberal movement will have to suffer from it.

And the respectable Madam Helseth, it appears, was quite ready to believe that Rebecca was no better than she should be:

Lord preserve us, Miss—I don't see that there's much to be said against you. It's not so easy for a lone woman to be always on her guard, that's certain.

We're all of us human, Miss West . . .

—which may well be the last word worth saying on the subject.

THE DRAMA OF 'BEING'

Out of this retrospective stagecraft, with its absorbing of action into the revelation of character—and as the chief fruit—comes a drama rather of being than doing. But Ibsen, we notice, in his development of it, takes care to keep the essential qualities of the drama of doing too, the constant conflict, the minute-to-minute progress, the use of suspense and surprise, the ordering of the action towards climax and catastrophe. His purely technical triumph lies in converting all this to new use, while

he sacrifices none of it. He screws it up, indeed, to a more rigid efficiency. He rejects the soliloquy. When the actor in the old theatre was in intimate personal touch with his audience soliloquy increased the intimacy and served admirably for self-revelation. It had long become a mechanical convention, employed by the playwright mainly to save himself trouble. It did not fit well into the realistic picture; people do not talk aloud to themselves, except at moments of over-mastering excitement, and then not connectedly. But this, I fancy, was not Ibsen's decisive reason for abandoning it. The solitary, self-communing figure, speaking plain prose, removed from the audience and ignoring it in that other world of illusion, will lower the tension of the action; that will be one objection when a play's construction is close knit. And with such a play as *Rosmersholm*, where the drama lies in the slow relentless revelation of the truth and the effect upon its hearers and on us—the confidences of soliloquy would discount its whole purpose, even to absurdity.

But the play of being rather than doing will in its nature tend to a looser, less synthetic structure than Ibsen chose to allow it. A story of what people do, with its beginning and middle and end, its climax and catastrophe, may not be the best way of showing us what they far less definitely, if far more inher-

ently, are. It would not be true to say that Ibsen's catastrophes are ever arbitrary; he is too great a master of his art. But, in *Rosmersholm* certainly, one does feel him mustering all his psychological skill for the manœuvring of Rosmer and Rebecca to their death at that particular moment, the necessary moment, if the play's action is to be neatly founded off. The last scene between them is a marvel of close-packed and exhaustive spiritual dialectic, but so close packed that if you miss one link in the argument you may come away not quite convinced that the catastrophe was then and there inevitable. One could indeed extend this criticism to the whole play, and contend, never against the truth of the picture, but now and then against the manner of its presenting. Does not Ibsen keep his characters a little too strictly to their job for us to be able to feel quite at ease with them? Is not he himself, perhaps, rather more at ease with his medium in (say) *The Wild Duck*, and do not we yield ourselves more readily and completely to the illusion in consequence? It may be finally only a question of æsthetic taste. Austerity of form is a fine thing in art, and bracing, if we can stand up to the demands it makes on us.

TCHEKOV

Ibsen's followers in the drama of 'being rather than doing' did very sensibly relax their form; Hauptmann in such plays as *Friedensfest* and *der Biberpelz*, Brieux and, in particular, Tchekov. His technical achievement was to find, after much experimenting, a form and method admirably expressive of his play's content. He is no exemplar of realism as it has often been defined. He employs the soliloquy freely, but so discreetly that (in the later plays certainly) it does not destroy the illusion. His object is to show us people as they are, living—and necessarily moving; but action, in the usual sense of the term, is reduced to a minimum. Form of some sort he must have; he seeks it first in pattern and later in the relating of his characters to some central idea. In *The Seagull* the pattern is crude, the character combinations are repeated. In *Uncle Vanya* and *The Three Sisters* they are varied and suggestive. In *The Three Sisters* and *The Cherry Orchard* each character is related to and has a definite share in elucidating the play's central idea. With Tchekov we seem to reach something very like static drama. Action, however, has not been eliminated. As with Ibsen, it is thrust into the past, but a more fitful and diversified light is thrown on it.

This is a form and a method less separable than most others from its origins. Comparable *matter* to the theme of *The Cherry Orchard* and to the stuff of its characters can no doubt be found anywhere in the world. But it is by their *manner* of being so typically themselves and leading under our eyes a dramatic life which is the essence of their life that the characters shape and vitalize the play. And in all this, surely, they are peculiarly Russian. The same manner, and the same dramatic method and form will not then be so eloquent of English character or life, or of French or German; it will even falsify it.

NATIONALITY IN DRAMA

Here opens a significant extension of the doctrine that the dramatist should find a form suitable to his play's content. Drama in presentation is the most national of the arts. This hardly needs argument. Not only are the actors speaking a vernacular, they are re-inforcing it by gesture, behaviour and personality in general, by an allied language even more native to them and to their audience—as any translator will find when his work comes to be staged and the mere words take their proportionate place in the body of the living play. Does it not follow, then, that the form of a play should be somewhat national too;

less the skeleton perhaps, than its sinews and nerves, its system of articulation? This tends to be so, we find, the more national in its inspiration a drama is (the modern Spaniards have a method if not a form of their own and the Irish school began to develop something of the sort), and when the relation between dramatist and actor is close enough for them to be consciously sharing in the practice of their art. By this combination of conditions, at any rate, was produced in the Elizabethan theatre the only typically English form of drama of striking value so far. That great impulse exhausted, comedy revives (so I contended) to a riot of slipshod animal vitality, and, when this stales, takes refuge in a formula in which, save for a few flutterings, it stays imprisoned for a century or more. Tragedy, when some mistaken efforts have been made to galvanize it into life again, is left the prey of the poetaster, the pedant and the hack, while the poet looks on estranged, or, at most, doubtfully ventures and thankfully retires. And over it all hangs foreign influence—French influence in effect.

From the mid-seventeenth to the mid-nineteenth century and beyond French influence was dominant upon European drama in general as upon other arts, and it is still strong. The well-made play, if not a French invention, is most expressively French in the

logic and balance and order of its methods. It may well not be, then, the best possible form for the expression of English life and habit. For this we should no more turn to Scribe and Sardou than to Tchekov. Its influence prevailed and endures partly because it is in itself a very workmanlike and economical form, but chiefly and rather fatally because it can so easily be reduced to a formula. And when an art lacks spontaneous life, a formula is always in demand.

THE REVOLT AGAINST THE WELL-MADE PLAY

There has lately been much revolt against the well-made play, a revolt often too violent and wilful to lead to anything but re-action. It will be interesting to see whether in France, where it is as marked as anywhere, the new school evolve any form as typically French as the one they have abandoned. In England the movement—to those who affect ‘movements’—has seemed tardy and timid. The playwrights of my own generation came into an inheritance of revolt against the choking of English drama with French matter (honestly bought or dishonestly stolen); but, occupied enough in devising themes of their own and in drawing English character, they mostly took over the form they found. It was the natural thing to do; they were learning their craft,

and the form in itself, as we said, was a very sound one. But after a while we may discern a feeling after more individual freedom of expression. Bernard Shaw writes at large in *Man and Superman*, strains the old method to breaking-point in *Major Barbara* then finds a form pretty well suited to his discursive purpose in *Getting Married*. John Galsworthy tries this plan and that without prejudice, then, his subjects fitting in, gives a try or two to the simply episodic play. John Masefield experiments with *Philip the King*, with *The Death of Jesus* and, more remarkably, with *The Faithful*, a very noble piece of work. And J. M. Barrie, the subtlest if not the boldest craftsman of them all, suits manner to matter perfectly in *A Kiss for Cinderella* and *Dear Brutus*, triumphantly in *Peter Pan* (that play of primitive passions; there lies its attraction for children!) and, setting himself an almost impossible task, perhaps just fails to invent a way of giving clear and full expression to the bitter spiritual tragedy of *Mary Rose*.

THE LAST THIRTY YEARS AND THE NEXT?

For all this, however—and one should bring into the account besides much enterprising work done by other and younger men—is English dramatic art very spontaneously alive to-day, and, in so far as it

fails to be, where does the fault lie? Fifty years back we were promised a renaissance, thirty years back the cry was that it had come. No one measuring the quality of the plays written between 1880 and 1895, and from then to 1914, will deny that the development was amazing. But how far was it a development of the art as a whole? It seemed to be so; new matter for drama, and keen minds at work evolving it, called out fresh energies for its interpretation. Looking back, however, one is conscious of more care for matter than method—this was inevitable, when matter had before been so negligible that method was all, and the order of consideration at least was the right one—and of certain discrepancies of aim, some lack of complete mutual confidence between dramatists and actors. This last is not a thing to be noticed at once by the public, for whom the united battlefront of a performance will be faithfully arrayed, but it will always be a dangerous flaw. The theatre is a body politic and the art of it a single art, though the contributors to each display of it must be many. Here is its strength, its weakness and the problem it presents.

Will the years following the war make better showing or as good as the years before, and if not, why not? It used to be said that the dramatic revival was an anomaly, that the impulse of the age is to-

wards other forms of expression. The acting of plays to-day in almost every parish in England, in schools and universities, in factories and churches, would seem to give the lie to that. Whatever else may be lacking, dramatic instinct and love for the drama are not dead in the people themselves. The professional theatre? There come in tiresome economic questions, which it is not my purpose to discuss; but, unhappily, of all the arts, the theatre is most at their mercy. This much is clear. We have a drama, old and new, of some quality. The best of the old sprang from a close collaboration between dramatists and actors. Those conditions are not to be repeated, and the new drama has another scope. But in the gist of them the life of the theatre abides. The dramatist must work in a medium made familiar to him by the actor's art, the actor must contribute more than his moment's success. The riddle, if it be one, is worth solving.

