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Popular Drama: The Traffic of the Stage

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Abstract

DRAMA is the cooperative creation of the author, actors, and audience. It exists, when completely realized, in a mutual relationship between these three, an intercourse from which it issues and on which it depends. Criticism which is embodied in production, like that Response of the audience which kindles and transforms the actors, is too evanescent to be captured or repeated, for all performances are different; yet it is only in such moments that the special richness, the living fullness of drama is displayed.

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Medieval Drama

Drama is the cooperative creation of the author, actors, and audience. It exists, when completely realized, in a mutual relationship between these three, an intercourse from which it issues and on which it depends. Criticism which is embodied in production, like that Response of the audience which kindles and transforms the actors, is too evanescent to be captured or repeated, for all performances are different; yet it is only in such moments that the special richness, the living fullness of drama is displayed.

Ancient drama, and the medieval English drama in part, were Acts of Faith, directed to a God who might be both subject and audience of the play. A ritual, bringing down to bare board self subsistent and eternal truths, required that actors, playwrights, and musicians should be anonymous: an individual style would be inappropriate. Nevertheless the nativity might be set on a Yorkshire moor, for here as everywhere Incarnation was daily re-enacted. To the modern eye, the tradesman who portrayed a story suitable to his trade may have been indulging in a primitive form of advertisement: to the pious of his day, he might be offering his skill in the fashion of Our Lady's Tumbler.

The governing intention is the most difficult aspect of meaning to establish, indeed some modern critics would deny the possibility of doing so.

Physical traffic on the lurching waggons ceased before Shake speare's boyhood; he might have seen a Coventry Hock Tuesday play. The memory of these performances at least would be with the first generation of his audience. When he wrote a cycle of secular history plays, depicting the Fall and Redemption of the

English monarchy, Shakespeare was adapting the forms of the old Faith to the glory of the new state, as any good Protestant would do. With the fall of Richard II, the Garden of England is despoiled.

With the casting out of the diabolic Richard III, and the triumph of the angelically supported Henry, the ghosts are led out of hell and the curse is annealed. A divine comedy is re-enacted in political terms. In this history cycle the whole overarching design does preclude a large liberty in developing individual plays.

The relation of the parts to the whole is a matter of consequences and echoes, not of a single story, Falstaff and Mak the sheep-stealer are equally irrelevant in one sense, equally necessary in another. Shakespeare's one individual creation of dramatic form, the secular history cvce has its roots in the oldest and strongest of the popular dramatic traditions, and the transition had in fact been made by the people themselves, as in the Coventry play of English and Daniel, their old storial show', which was revived for the Queen in 1575, and led by the celebrated tradesman-player, Captain Cox.

Here too the permanent validity of the action would come home to all spectators. This was the history of their own land, and a lively mirror of dangers still apprehended as present. Queen Elizabeth's portrait was often drawn enclosed in the red rose and the white: the blood of these kings ran in her veins. When she appeared in person, in such plays as England's Joy, When you see me, you know me, and The Whore of Babylon, the story of her early troubles developed into the legend of a Protestant saint, guarded by angels, miraculously delivered, and divinely strengthened and admonished. The familiar patterns of medieval hagiology glorified the Protestant Virgin, who may have inherited through meekness, but who did not find it a virtue compatible with sovereignty.

The Public Stages: Actors and Audience

The continuity of medieval and Elizabethan drama does not need to be stressed, and this continuity is not merely a literary tradition. The Elizabethan theatre, though it probably did not allow the actor to be completely surrounded by his audience, as did the old pageant waggon trundling through the streets, owed as much to triumphs, and to street theatres, as it did to the structure of the inn yard.

The audience were brought into the play by direct address, by being invited to join in song or prayer or to bestow applause and the actors may have used the yard, and yard alleys, for entries and exits. The wooden boards set up on barrels in a country town for a one-night stand must have left the player rather in the position of a modern orator on his soap box. Investigation of the history of provincial companies in Elizabethan England has shown how extensive were their activities, which, from the end of the fifteenth century to the Civil War, covered the land like lace' Dozens of small and obscure bands of players are known only from town records, which mention the payment of ten shillings for a night's entertainment, or the bestowal of ale and sugar as payment in kind. Four or five men with a cart of costumes and a drum and trumpet to proclaim their approach might prove worthy rivals to the town waits, who were still surviving as late as 1612, when Heywood wrote in his Apology for Actors:

To this day, in divers places of England, there be towns that hold the privilege of their fairs and charters by yearly stage plays, as Manningtree in Suffolk, Kendal in the North and others.

Local players would combine their function with some other trade; the professional actors were largely recruited from among the artisans, and might in their wills describe themselves as tilers, vintners, or glaziers. The high degree of professional organization which characterized the leading London stage companies in the fifteen-nineties was akin to that of the gilds who had so persistently opposed this establishment; and

they had of course their prentices, the boys who played women's parts, as well as their hired men.

Thus, while the position of the leading actors gradually became prosperous and secure, so that they wrote themselves gentlemen, such poor strollers with forged licence and a repertory of three or four shabby plays were little better than the Rogues and Vagabonds the Statute declared them to be. The audience varied in like manner That same play which was studied by courtiers and performed before the Queen might on another day be acted before the very scum, rascality and baggage of the people, thieves, cutpurses, shifters, cozeners: briefly, an unclean generation and spawn of vipers'. Most Elizabethans, if not all, were trained listeners. They attended the law-courts as a recreation: they heard sermons by the hour: their education lay largely in the practice of disputation, which Sir Humphrey Gilbert thought necessary even for those who intended to engage only in practical affairs.

To compensate for their lofty position, the leading London companies must have developed a special familiarity with their audience. The casual customer of the modern box-office, drawn from a London of nine millions, is quite without identity; but the Eliza bethan actor and the rest of the audience would be acquainted not only with the Lords in their rooms over the stage or their stools upon it, but also with any notable wag in the twopenny gallery or among the groundlings whose interruptions had made him familiar. Appeals to the audience, soliloquies and asides directed towards them, and sudden allusions to familiar scenes of everyday events - those anachronisms which worry the solitary reader - would be varied according to the nature of the listeners.

A Puritan preacher might intervene with a denunciation as Zeal of-the-Land-Busy broke up the puppet show at Bartholomew Fair, or as Bunch and Mistress Flowerdew interrupt at Blackfriars in Randolph's Muses' Looking Glass. More congenial interference is parodied in The Knight of the Burning Pestle, where the citizen and his wife thrust their favourite prentice in to play a part. At the end of Act IV of The Staple of News, the four good gossips who have come to see the play decide how it shall end, like the audience at the conclusion of The Beggar's Opera. The courtly auditor would jeer and interrupt and draw attention to himself, for he went to see and to be seen: censurers of the play would become so vocal that in the Induction to Bartholomew Fair Ben Jonson drew up a form of agreement with them, licensing them to judge at more or less length according to the price of their seats. The actors on the other hand might use not only the standing room of the 'yard' but the groundlings themselves as part of a crowd.

Courtly, Popular, and Academic Plays

The great headstreams of Elizabethan drama are not without hidden springs: courtly plays are recorded or sometimes published, as are those which took place in the Universities and Inns of Court; but the existence of a popular romantic drama from the middle of the fifteenth century onwards can only be inferred from occasional hints, such as the play of Sir Eglamour performed at St Albans, and the one on 'a knight named Florens' given at Bermondsey in 1447 York saw a drama on Holy Wat and Malkin in 1447, and a pageant of Christmas and the twelve months was performed at Norwich a few years earlier. Lincoln, Hitchin, Coventry had plays. All great households might act at the festivals of Christmas, Easter, and White sun: country folk would put on a Whitsun pastoral, and a play of St George at Christmas. Mumming and masquing, in the hands of rustics or courtly amateurs, grew perhaps from ballads on Maid Marian and Robin Hood, or the strife of Holly and Ivy and the Flower and the Leaf. In their College Halls, students staged Latin and English ludae on some academic argument such as might have formed the basis of a disputation in the schools that very morning, Frequently their plays turned on topical matters of a social or political interest which could not have been put upon public stages. Wisdom and Wit and Science, Like Will to Like and The Longer thot Livest the more Fool thou Art are at once extremely coarse and extremely moral: scenes of

good advice and of gay riot are mingled in an attempt to provide both doctrine and mirth. The young lawyers or clerics often framed their plays as debates between four or more disputants. Arguments were in themselves exhilarating, especially the fallacious arguments of the Vices. Plays staged in crowded Hall with the actors elbowing their way to the dais and coming on through the audience could only be given with the participation of the bystanders. Cries of 'Room' come chicly tro the comic characters, as they push the spectators back and indulge in a little horseplay to cover the change of costume for a doubled part.

Sometimes a stooge was planted in the audience, and according to the well-known story of Sir Thomas More, sometimes a gifted member of it would improvise a part for himself, and graduate actor on the spot. When the common actors came to play at court, there must have been similar crowding up to the stage, as the play scenes of Hamlet imply. It appears that an arena stage i.e. one completely encircled by the audience - was used at Whitehall. In Love's Labour Lost and Midsummer Night's Dream, the amateur actors are mercilessly baited, whereas in Middleton's A Mad World, My Masters and The Mayor of Queenborough the players' turn the tables on the stage audience.

Courtly shows might range from a fully independent drama, transplanted from the public boards at the Queen's request, to a masque or device in which players had minor parts. Frequently the Queen would be drawn into the action, being required to receive a gift, judge a contest, guess a riddle, or name a ship'. The gap between art and ordinary life narrowed here, not by an allegorical shadowing of real events, but rather by the culmination of the action in the present moment, the present situation.

In her frequent progresses the sovereign brought something of the courtly activity into the countryside. In the Cotswolds, Elizabeth saw the local sports: the pageants at great houses linked on naturally to festivals both public and private- at wakes, fairs, and great wed dings - so that a whole network of dramatic activities joined the common life and the stage. With the founding of the great com panies of the last years of Elizabeth's reign, a degree of specialization grew up: the Admiral's may have excelled in heavy tragedy, the Children certainly specialized in witty satire and fantastic horrors: the Chamberlain's was a general utility company, and it is clear that they succeeded in pleasing a wide variety of people than most theatres. Some attempt has recently been made to distinguish the expensive, fashionable private theatres in which the Children played, as 'the theatre of a coterie' where Italianate plots, risqué personalities, and salacious epigrams were purveyed; while the public theatres showed genial and honest characters, in comedies that were cleanly and tragedies that were noble, ruled by traditional virtues, In general it may be hazarded that the public theatres evolved from the old gild play, the civic procession, and the public show: while the private theatres reproduced the conditions of courtly and university acting and would draw their audiences from the classes who had been accustomed to such performances. However this may be Shakespeare could rely upon his audience for an imaginative re sponsor, as the bold appeal at the beginning of the third act of Henry V makes plain.

This is not, like Ben Jonson's prologue to Every Man in his Humour, an ironic underlining of the public stage imperfections, which would be very poor tactics, but an appeal for sympathy. The events to be depicted were part of English history, of a great victory, in which was for the audience a living part of themselves, in which perhaps they saw the reflections of a recent expedition. Such appeals recall the moments in pantomime when the audience are invited to join in the songs, or the moment in Peter Pan in which they are asked to save the life of Tinker Bell by clapping their hands. Appeals for applause at the end of a play are often made by characters who step out of their roles to speak the epilogue. Those moments when the characters directly address the audience are usually either at the beginning, the end or the climax; that is, at the time when sympathetic contact is most necessary.

South-west of London in the city of Westminster and the Temple, more amateur playacting flourished under royal and legal patronage, but often with the players' advice and collaboration. Across the water was the Globe Theatre, together with the Swan, the Rose, and the Bear Garden: here too was an actors' colony, and St Saviour's, now Southwark Cathedral, was the actors' church of the day. Hen slowe was at one time churchwarden, and Alleyn vestryman.

Within this little world, the city comedy of Jacobean times found its material. Dekker at times openly glorified the tradesman, while the wit of his Westward Ho! and Northward Hol is directed against the citizens, but the scheme of these plays is based on exact local topography. In spite of the Aretine satire and cosmopolitan flavour wings of Marston, Middleton, and the other followers of Jonson, they were reflecting that same world which Greene and Dekker had described in coney-catching pamphlets. It is only with the drama of Chapman and Fletcher that an impersonal scene and characters merely literally appear.

The Oral Tradition

Within an oceanic tide of sympathy, irony, and delight, Elizabethan plays had their only being. Books were one thing, plays were another. The modern audience may go to see a play which they already know on the printed page; a film may draw a demand for 'the book of the film'. The difference which the printed text makes to an audience is small compared with the difference for the poet between composing for the car and composing for the eye. The integrity of an Elizabethan play was less stable than that of printed literature. There is some evidence that the Italian habit of extemporizing comedy was not quite unknown. In The Travails of Three English Brothers, Will Kempe is brought on the stage, and offers to 'extemporize 'a merriment with an Italian team consisting of 'Harleken' and his wife.

In the sixteenth century, literature and especially poetry was still predominantly an oral art. Ballads, songs, and the courtly romance, sonnets, and above all plays were written to be transmitted through speech. The printing press, established in England some eighty years before the beginning of Elizabeth's reign, had not killed the older tradition of poetry, the spoken tradition which Chaucer had used, and which lingered on particularly at the two social extremes. In the Court, verses recited for a special occasion and directed to a particular person were discarded when their hour was past; while, the broadside or popular song, cheaply printed and sold by peddlers, was only a means of implanting its material in the longer-lived memories of the country folk. Even Shakespeare's First Folio, handsome and dignified as it was, bore the marks of 'spoken words which had strayed into the page' in its typography and layout, as a recent technical analysis has made clear.

Authors, especially the nobility, made little attempt to cla their work as their own, in spite of the poet's habit of promising immortality to a patron or a mistress. The Elizabethan is the last age in which any large body of anonymous literature survives. Fifty years later only the scurrilous, the politically dangerous, or the very ephemeral was so likely to go unfathered.

Even printing did not stabilize the plays. There were perna alternative versions of others than The Spanish Tragedy and Hamlet, Every Man in his Humour and 'York and Lancasters long jars'. It is not reasonable to expect that a play should remain on the boards for thirty years without modification. The life of Shakespeare's plays, as of his lesser contemporaries, must have been fluid, amorphous, not unlike the life of a ballad. On the other hand, theatrical tradition included much that was not in the text - details of product of tion such as alternative ways doubling parts, business and effects, songs.

With Ben Jonson's publication of his plays in folio in 1616, the density of plays was asserted. There was

much ribald comment at his raising of common stage plays to the status of Works. Frequently in his prologues he appeals to those who come to listen as against those who come to see.

Seven years later, Shakespeare's friends claimed for him what he had never attempted to claim for himself, and the First Folio, his "Monument', marked the end of the oral tradition. 'Our first duty as critics is to examine the words of which the play is composed, then the total effect which this combination of words produces in our minds' is the observation of a twentieth-century critic. It could never have been made in Shakespeare's working life.

Although retaining traces, in more ways than one, of the oral tradition behind it, the Folio was a completely different thing from the flimsy little quartos: it was printing on the grand scale reserved for religious, legal, and educational works. The very existence of the Bad Quartos shows how uncritical were the simple public who bought them. The cheap little twopenny or sixpenny books which appeared from Wynkyn de Worde day onward, most of which have been thumbed out of existence, prove a taste for entertainment on the part of the humble. Even if a good many stage plays were printed - and it is on the whole probable that the majority were not" - they were composed in the manner deter ned by the players, and thought of primarily, like sermons and law-pleading, as oratory. Just as the older form of publishing with the help of a patron was still considered the most natural way to produce a dignified work, though it was really a survival from the age of manuscripts, so the status of print gave to popular works the means for transmission to the popular memory.

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