

COMIC, TRAGIC, SATIRICAL

THESIS

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CHAPTER I

COMIC, TRAGIC, SATIRICAL

Theories of comedy and tragedy in the twentieth century have either been forced to ignore a large body of work that has been done in the theatre, or have lumped all the remaining plays into an "other" category of uncertain melding: tragicomedy, comic tragedy, melodrama, among countless others.¹ I find that this "Polonius-like mobilization of genres and sub-genres"² is becoming increasingly imprecise, not to mention bulky, in describing what has really happened in the theatre. For, that large third category represents not simply a blend of previous forms, but a real difference in spirit. Many modern plays are in fact anti-comedies, anti-tragedies; the implication is that it is up to the

¹Note titles of recent works, for example: Cyrus Hoy, The Hyacinth Room: An Investigation into the Nature of Comedy, Tragedy, & Tragicomedy (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964); J. L. Styan, The Dark Comedy: The Development of Modern Comic Tragedy (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1968); Robert Bechtold Heilman, Tragedy and Melodrama: Versions of Experience (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1968). To these may be added "the farcical tragedy and the pathetic comedy, the drame comique and the pseudo-drame, the 'charade' and the 'extravaganza'": Styan, Comedy, p. 1. And, to complete this list, but certainly not the possibilities, there is Rosette Lamont's "metaphysical farce," cited by Karl S. Guthke, Modern Tragicomedy: An Investigation into the Nature of the Genre (New York: Random House, 1966), p. 169.

²Styan, Comedy, p. 6.

director to make them work on stage.

It is therefore perhaps time to modernize and expand Aristotle's Poetics. We need a definition of tragedy that will include not only the models he admired so much, but also Shakespearean tragedy, French Baroque, and contemporary tragedies. We need a definition of comedy, which Aristotle promised us, but perhaps never delivered (or if he did, it has been lost). And mostly, we need clarification of "what-chacallit": all the other plays that are left, those that fall into the great dark maw that contains most of modern drama.

It would be audacious to fault Aristotle for any of our current problems in theatre and criticism. He could not have known about the essentially misguided direction that drama has taken in the last hundred years. "Drama as sociology" (as opposed to "drama as religion") would have been incomprehensible to him. However, we can still use the Poetics as a solid beginning, and proceed from there. Twenty-four centuries have not demonstrated much "progress" in respect of his criticism.

Why bother? my students petulantly ask me. A distinguished French director lamented recently in an interview, "There is a crisis in the theatre, and I don't believe it's limited to France. We have no great playwrights."³

³Patrice Chéreau, quoted in Arthur Holmberg, "Patrice Chéreau on The Screens," Performing Arts Journal 8 (1984): 75.

I doubt--though I cannot prove it--that Sophocles, Shakespeare, and Molière heard much talk of crisis in the theatre. They followed the traditions or their instincts (usually) and delivered up to the audience what satisfied them all: a celebration of life. Brockett and Findlay summarize what Stéphane Mallarmé was telling us a hundred years ago:

drama is essentially a sacred and mysterious rite which, through dream, reverie, allusion, and musicality, evokes the hidden spiritual meaning of existence. The theatre is a kind of secular religious experience in which both actor and audience participate and in which the mystery of the universe is revealed and celebrated; it is concerned with man rather than with particular men.⁴

Today very few Americans have even seen a professional theatre production. Why? Many reasons. But one of the most important, I think, is that "Alexandrian man"⁵ has been feeding them satire: that is, censure. How much more can audiences take, being told that everything they do is wrong, that everything around them is awful, that if they would only do this . . . ? We know what they do do: they stay home and watch Aristotle's favorite comic form, Menandrine New Comedy, on television. Perhaps "the Philosopher," as he was simply called in the Middle Ages, can help to put us back on track.

In proposing to categorize dramas into the comic,

⁴Oscar G. Brockett and Robert R. Findlay, Century of Innovation: A History of European and American Theatre and Drama Since 1870 (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1973), p. 123.

⁵Friedrich Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy and The Genealogy of Morals, trans. Francis Golffing (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., Anchor Books, 1956), p. 112.

the tragic, and the satiric, according to tone, I am not unaware that there are problems, not only with the seeming oversimplification, but with the word itself.

Aristotle himself mentioned only three types: the comedy, the tragedy, and the satyr-play (σατυρικόν). The Romans meanwhile developed a genre called 'medley,' 'miscellany' (satura), which was to attain its highest form of development in the poems of Horace and Juvenal. The two are not related. However, in the English Renaissance, when spelling was often quite inventive, there arose not only the confusion of spelling for satyre, in reference to a Juvenalian lyric, but also the supposition that the form came originally from Greek drama: "largely so that scholars could explain the shocking coarseness of satire by saying that it was inspired by the funny obscene satyr-folk."⁶ Etymologically, the thing is still tangled, for, while the modern English 'satire' derives from the Latin, our adjectives 'satirize' and 'satirical' are from the Greek word for those shaggy goat-men.⁷ I find it strangely cheering

⁶ Gilbert Highet, The Anatomy of Satire (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), p. 232.

⁷ Robert C. Elliott, The Power of Satire: Magic Ritual, Art (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960), p. 102. Why goats? one might ask. Jane Harrison presented a fascinating theory in 1922, which, so far as I can tell, has not been taken up: "It is an odd fact that the ancients seem to have called certain wild forms of fruits and cereals by names connecting them with the goat. The reason is not clear, but the fact is well-established. . . . Vines, when they ran wild to foliage rather than fruit, were said τραγᾶν. . . . Tragedy I believe to be not the 'goat-song,' but the 'harvest-song' of the cereal τράγος, the form of spelt known as 'the goat.'" Prolegomena to the Study of

in a way, to "return" to a three-form arrangement which includes satire; however, it must be stressed that Aristotle was absolutely not referring to satires onstage, in his third category.

In his fourth chapter, before the famous definition of tragedy, Aristotle already distinguishes briefly between comedy and tragedy, in an attempt to trace the history of these forms. And although we now reject some of his pre-suppositions (that "Homer" is the author of Margites, for example), these remarks are still essentially the basis of our own theatre history.⁸ The process that led to Aeschylus began with improvisations, he says.

Poetry then diverged in the directions of the natural dispositions of the poets. Writers of greater dignity imitated the noble actions of noble heroes; the less dignified sort of writers imitated the actions of inferior men, at first writing invectives as the former

Greek Religion (New York: Meridian Books, 1922), p. 420. Comedy, of course, is the 'Comus song,' the reveling which accompanied the Phallic procession in ancient times.

⁸O. B. Hardison, Jr., in his Commentary on the Poetics, expresses the current agreement that the Margites "most certainly was not by Homer." Aristotle, Poetics, trans. Leon Golden (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1968), p. 98. Not enjoying total agreement, but certainly worthy of respectful attention, is Gerald F. Else's questioning that Greek tragic theatre evolved in any way like Aristotle surmised: "Our survey so far has turned up no incontrovertible evidence for either the dithyramb proper or the hypothetical 'satyric dithyramb' having been the forerunner of tragedy." The Origin and Early Form of Greek Tragedy, Martin Classical Lectures, vol. 20 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), p. 26. James Hutton is aware of the debate, "but in any case [the theory of origin] is unlikely to have been Aristotle's personal inference, since the subject seems to have been widely discussed" among the ancient Greeks. Notes to Aristotle's "Poetics" (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1982), p. 86.

writers wrote hymns.⁹

Satire, we therefore discover, is one of the very oldest forms of literature--though less "dignified," in his opinion. (Among the Israelites, seventh-century Jeremiah and early sixth-century Ezekiel were contributing to the form.)¹⁰ Aristotle warms to his subject, however, when he is able to bring Homer into the pattern of development.

Some of the old poets wrote heroic, others wrote iambic [i.e., satiric: *καμβίζειν*, 'to satirize'] verse. Homer was certainly the greatest writer of serious-minded poetry; he stands alone not only because he wrote well but also because he dramatized his imitations. He was also the first to exhibit the different forms of comedy, and he dramatized the laughable [*γέλοκος* : 'foolish'], but not the personal satire [*ψόγιος* : 'censorious']. His Margites bears the same relation to comedy as the Iliad and the Odyssey do to tragedy.¹¹

Homer was showing his good sense as a "dignified" and serious-minded poet in making a distinction between comedy and satire. Perhaps he understood that the latter, although he had ample precedent for it in the history of verse prior to his composition, would not "play well."

At this point, Aristotle begins to lag; in the progress toward the golden age of the fifth century, there is a

⁹Aristotle, Poetics, trans. Golden, p. 8.

¹⁰Named respectively by Kernan and Worcester in their histories of the form. Alvin Kernan, The Cankered Muse: Satire of the English Renaissance (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), p. 7; David Worcester, The Art of Satire (New York: Russell & Russell, 1960), p. 20.

¹¹Aristotle, On Poetry and Style, trans. G. M. A. Grube (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., The Library of Liberal Arts, 1958), p. 8.

"mildly scandalous anomaly: there is no place in it for Archilochus."¹² Aristophanes likewise is not mentioned: the two giants of Greek comic writing are left out of it entirely. They do not fit the pattern. Explains Hardison:

Since Old Comedy, of the type represented today by Aristophanes, includes a great deal of bitter personal invective, and since its plots are poorly articulated by Aristotle's standards, he is evidently suggesting that Homer pointed the way for Middle and New Comedy. . . . To Aristotle [Aristophanes] must have seemed something of an anachronism, an evolutionary throwback to a phase of comedy corresponding, perhaps, to the satyr-play phase of tragedy. He receives no place in a history stressing new evolutionary developments.¹³

About the position of the satyr-play itself--with its chorus dressed as goat-men and its grotesque plots based on heroic stories--in the mainstream of evolution from Homer to Aeschylus, "he is probably wrong. The modern tendency is to regard tragedy and satyr-play as independent lines of development."¹⁴

With or without the invective, "less dignified" Aristophanes, the Philosopher has brought us to the golden age of Greek drama. Though Greek scholars continue to discuss the validity of some of his steps along the way,¹⁵ they

¹²Gerald F. Else, Aristotle's "Poetics": The Argument (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), p. 148.

¹³Commentary on the Poetics, pp. 99, 106.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 102.

¹⁵Critics and historians continue to describe the development of drama in the terms outlined by the so-called Cambridge School, though Else rejects them. Gilbert Murray, for example, in "The Ritual Forms Preserved in Greek Tragedy," outlined the basic elements of the ritual dance celebrating the spirit of Dionysus in the dithyramb, and continued by pointing out remnants of the ritual in the extant

all agree that this fabulous explosion of drama was written in celebration of Dionysus, the god of wine and fertility, to be performed at the great festivals in the first months of each year, and culminating in the City Dionysia around the vernal equinox, at which the prizes for tragedy were awarded. The ancient ritual celebration of the renewal of life, with all its magical potency, flourished through Athens' maturity.

Satire, on the other hand, does not celebrate life. It represents life, or a part of it, for the purpose of censuring it. Robert C. Elliott tells us in his study of its origins, that although those satiric improvisations and invectives Aristotle mentions led to some pretty rollicking Phallic Songs, they could also be frighteningly effective as curses. The iambics of Archilochus, the master, led to the suicide of the woman who had spurned him, and of her father too. "The Arabs thought of their satires concretely as weapons," even tossing them like spears in battle: and ancient Irish satirists "were called upon to levy taxes in areas where, presumably, the sword had proved ineffective."¹⁶

Considering the dark origins of satire, it is sur-

tragedies. In Jane Harrison, Themis: A Study of the Social Origins of Greek Religion (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1927), pp. 341-42ff. Francis M. Cornford has done the same for the association of the Phallic Songs and Aristophanes' Acharnians, in The Origins of Attic Comedy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1934), pp. 35-52.

¹⁶Robert C. Elliott, "The Satirist and Society," ELH: A Journal of English Literary History 21 (September 1954): 239.

prising that many people confuse it with comedy. But they do, and that problem must be faced. Samuel Johnson, in his famous Dictionary, said nothing of comedy: satire is a work "in which wickedness or folly is censured."¹⁷ Edgar Johnson, in the twentieth century, tried to lay the confusion to rest permanently, when he said,

. . . it cannot be too emphatically stated that satire does not have to arm or disguise itself with comedy. Tragic satire need no more involve laughter than the happy laughter of children or the tender laughter of lovers involves satire. . . .

No description of satire can hold water unless it takes all the aspects of satire into account.¹⁸

But of course, he made no inroads on the popular concept. "The student of literature, reviewing what has been written about comedy, may well be dismayed. For what has been written about the subject is, except for incidental insights, not about comedy. It is about satire."¹⁹

The satiric spirit in literature has always been double, the one side taking the cosmopolitan view of life shared by Horace, the other reflecting Juvenal's dark saeva indignatio, or, as Northrop Frye puts it, "the seamy side of the tragic vision."²⁰ The bitter spirit of satire ap-

¹⁷Johnson's Dictionary: A Modern Selection, ed. E. L. McAdam, Jr. and George Milne (New York: Random House, Pantheon Books, 1963), p. 357.

¹⁸Edgar Johnson, A Treasure of Satire (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1945), p. 7.

¹⁹Benjamin Lehmann, "Comedy and Laughter," in Robert W. Corrigan, Comedy: Meaning and Form, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1981), p. 100.

²⁰"The Nature of Satire," University of Toronto Quarterly 14 (October 1944): 85.

pears everywhere, sometimes in comedy, sometimes in tragedy, in epic, lyric, and other genres that do not concern us. In fact, as Wylie Sypher points out, "if a sense of contradiction and absurdity is a cause of comedy, then Hamlet is a profoundly comic character."²¹

Perhaps all this has helped to clarify what satire is not. But how does the satirist operate? Alvin B. Kernan has faced the issue squarely and given us some good insights:

the satirist views the world pessimistically and sees little hope for reform unless violent methods are used to bring mankind to its senses. His melancholy views on the prospects for the world are best understood by contrast with the situation in tragedy and comedy. Satire shares with comedy the knowledge that fools and foolishness have gotten out of hand, but it lacks the characteristic balance of comedy and the tone of amused tolerance. . . .

Satire shares this darkly serious view of the world with tragedy. . . . Every tragic hero has pronounced satiric tendencies, but he also has additional dimensions, chief among which are his ability to ponder and to change under pressure. The satirist, however, is not so complex.²²

It appears, then, that the satiric spirit can be found everywhere, from regular, "classical" comedies ending with a marriage, as Moliere's Miser, to wicked political lampoons, as Gogol's Inspector General; from bitter, misanthropic novels, as Swift's Gulliver's Travels, to anguished, impressionistic poems, as Eliot's Waste Land. All have been labeled "satiric" in spirit.

²¹"The Meanings of Comedy," in Corrigan, Comedy, p. 42.

²²Kernan, Muse, pp. 19-21.

How then can it be helpful to identify satire as a major dramatic genre, to be placed alongside comedy and tragedy? It appears we have taken a step backwards toward Polonius. For the answer, we must return to Samuel Johnson, and to the Greeks. The tragic, the comic, the satiric are freely mixed in many of the world's great classics, it is true. But the tone of the whole work, the author's attitude, must be carefully "read"--by the actor, by the director, by the designer--to determine the nature of the play and the production. The overriding question is: is the playwright's basic attitude one of censure, or of celebration of life's myriad possibilities? These are far different spirits, and they will be found to dominate--in the play's words, in the subtext, in the symbolism.

Molière's Miser, for all its sardonic treatment of Harpagon, is essentially joyful. Shakespeare's Troilus and Cressida is not. Neither is it tragic: there is a bitter aftertaste felt upon leaving the theatre, as if one had spent the evening dodging Juvenal's surly Roman porters in narrow streets. "Contempt is a sentiment that cannot be entertained by comic intelligence," says George Meredith,²³ and the play is filled with it. It is not only in Ther-sites: he is almost too easy. But the wise Ulysses too is contemptuous of the other Greek generals; Achilles is con-

²³An Essay on Comedy and the Uses of the Comic Spirit, rev. ed. by Lane Cooper (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1918), p. 120.

temptuous of all on either side who expect him to act like a proper hero; Chaucer's romantic heroine Cressida has become contemptuous of love and lovers, whether Trojan or Greek. And the list continues. No wonder modern anthologists of Shakespeare's plays are neatly split in half on the question of whether Troilus should be included among the tragedies or the comedies. Even the First Folio had given no help in the matter, for, apparently after some trouble of their own, which resulted in omitting the play from the table of contents altogether, Heminges and Condell finally placed it neatly between the group of histories and the group of tragedies, without comment. It remains a so-called "problem play."

A satiric drama typically retains its Roman characteristic as a "medley" (satura). Thus it can roam at will, in form as well as in mood, exercising its critical, censorious spirit wherever it chooses, dividing the allegiances of the audience as it goes. "As the gap narrows so that what remains incongruous is still funny, but too close to the bone to laugh at, then we move swiftly across the frontier into the realms of the tragic."²⁴ Isn't it so in life? His truthfulness, his realism are the refuge of the satirist under attack--to which Nikos Kazantzakis counters, "realistic representation [is] a disfigurement and caricature of the eternal."²⁵

²⁴Styan, Comedy, p. 46.

²⁵Quoted in Heilman, Tragedy, p. 285.

It is that very limited nature of satire that sets it apart from the probing depth of tragedy, the open gregariousness of comedy. "What, then, does the satirist see, for he certainly sees something? Not the truth, but one aspect of the truth; not the whole man, but one side of him."²⁶ He is convinced of the righteousness of his narrow vision, and also convinced that if he can only make the audience understand it, they would feel the urge to better themselves. Man continues to prove him wrong century after century, and he continues his crusade to reform against all odds: much like Rousseau, who himself, however, was far from a satirist.

It is true that some famous satirists--Aristophanes, Persius, our own Ben Jonson and Samuel Butler--appear to have had strong but rather obvious minds. . . . Such men are not necessarily stupid, but they are rarely minds of the first order. . . .

Yet there are other satirists--Horace, Erasmus, [Shaw]--who are anything but crude, and who certainly are not blind to everything but the obvious. The quality of their minds is subtle, their satire is sharp and delicate. As long as they are being satirists, however (and of course some of them are only occasionally satirical), they must accept the limitations that the very nature of satire imposes.²⁷

A modern dramatist like Harold Pinter, for instance, shows us the foolishness of men without any of the warmth of a Chekhov. A play like Equus, of Peter Shaffer, approaches the tragic heights, with even a kind of mythical extravagance, and then pulls back to a cowardly refuge in Freud,

²⁶James Sutherland, English Satire (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1958), p. 15.

²⁷Ibid., p. 18.

who will "explain all." Dürrenmatt's Visit, as Heilman observes, "has shown its power, but this it has secured by cutting out nearly all of human nature but its corruptibility."²⁸

A satirist is critical, liberal politically, even sometimes revolutionary, though he "usually claims to be conservative, to be using his art to shore up the foundations of the established order."²⁹ He is mostly intolerant of others' views, and he tends to have a divisive effect on his audiences. In form he writes "medleys" that remain inconclusive. His is the true "mythos of winter."³⁰

It may have become apparent that in these paragraphs I have been describing much of modern drama, in its depressing journey from realism and naturalism, through expressionism and absurdism, to the Living Theatre and beyond: from Ibsen's Wild Duck to Shepard's Fool for Love; from Shaw's Pygmalion to Simon's California Suite; from Toller's Masse-Mensch to Miller's Death of a Salesman. I won't even mention Beckett's Waiting for Godot. As Sutherland satirically defines it, "much of the world's satire is undoubtedly the result of a spontaneous, or self-induced, overflow of powerful indignation, and acts as a catharsis for such

²⁸Heilman, Tragedy, p. 229.

²⁹Elliott, "Satirist," p. 248.

³⁰Northrop Frye's chapter title in Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957; paperback ed., 1971).

emotions."³¹ No wonder the audience stays away in droves; if they could get their hands on the playwright just as the curtain falls, now that might be another matter! As Horace portrays a friend's reaction, upon hearing of his latest subject, "My lad, I fear your life will be brief."³²

Walter Pater announced our current malaise in 1873, when he said, "To regard all things and principles of things as inconstant modes or fashions has more and more become the tendency of modern thought."³³ There are no absolutes. And countless theatre critics have seized that notion to rationalize the "death of tragedy," among other problems:

In Athens, in Shakespeare's England, and at Versailles, the hierarchies of worldly power were stable and manifest. . . . Tragedy presumes such a configuration. . . . After Shakespeare the master spirits of western consciousness are no longer the blind seers, the poets, or Orpheus performing his art in the face of hell. They are Descartes, Newton, and Voltaire. . . . The decline of tragedy is inseparably related to the decline of the organic world view and of its attendant context of mythological, symbolic, and ritual reference.³⁴

I do not accept this view. I think it more "realistic" to accept the proverbial French wisdom, "plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose." Many aspects of twentieth-century

³¹Sutherland, Satire, pp. 4-5.

³²Satires, 2. 1. 60, in Satires, Epistles and Ars Poetica, trans. H. Rushton Fairclough (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966).

³³Studies in the History of the Renaissance, in Critical Theory Since Plato, ed. Hazard Adams (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), p. 644.

³⁴George Steiner, The Death of Tragedy (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1961), pp. 194, 197, 292.

life would shock the ancients, to be sure. But human biology and psychology have not changed. Politics have altered, of course (but essentially little). Organized religion looks different today from what it did a hundred years ago or twenty-five hundred years ago. But Carl Jung has proved to us that man's basic religious instinct is intact--however little it may be nourished in our day.

We do not have to worship Dionysus in order to celebrate life. It is perhaps foolish to try to do so, as Richard Schechner's experimental theatre group found out:

Dionysus in 69 had no moral or religious purpose, and its psychological content was diffuse. To "celebrate" the birth of Dionysus had no significant meaning for American audiences, especially as the celebration was depicted in this production. . . .

Whether the audience felt challenged is a moot point, but it was ill-prepared for the ritual rules . . . especially when the actors attempted to involve them in a simulated sexual or physical act: strangers touching one another . . . is simply too superficial an act to have any ritual or even psychological significance.³⁵

Their motives were genuine, perhaps, but the required "leap of faith" extended over too many generations. Schechner has since disavowed his experiment.

Similarly, modern writers' attempts to create a whole mythology have failed. Yeats's attempts remain bloodless and unperformed. The Greeks, of course, had received their glittering body of mythology as a given. "But where the artist must be the architect of his own mythology, time

³⁵ Margaret Croyden, Lunatics, Lovers and Poets: The Contemporary Experimental Theatre (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974), pp. 204-5.

is against him. He cannot live long enough to impose his special vision."³⁶ It is the same with most modern attempts to steal the ancient stories and to bring them whole, or mostly whole, into our own age; the results have been at best ambivalent. Eugene O'Neill, however, succeeded in his Desire Under the Elms, by following the eighteenth-century advice of Edward Young--whether he knew it or not:

Must we then, you say, not imitate ancient authors? Imitate them, by all means; but imitate aright. He that imitates the divine Iliad, does not imitate Homer; but he who takes the same method, which Homer took, for arriving at a capacity of accomplishing a work so great. Tread in his steps to the sole fountain of immortality; drink where he drank, at the true Helicon, that is, at the breast of nature: imitate; but imitate not the composition, but the man.³⁷

The élan vital of the life force surges ahead in the twentieth century as it has always done. Those who do not celebrate it are condemned to the satiric rites of much of the modern theatre.

Not every playwright in the modern age has adopted the satiric spirit. As Maxwell Anderson tells us, "the theatre at its best is a religious affirmation, and age-old rite restating and reassuring man's belief in his own destiny and his ultimate hope."³⁸ Whether or not Mr. Anderson himself was able to translate the belief and the hope as ex-

³⁶Steiner, Death, p. 322.

³⁷Edward Young, "Conjectures on Original Composition," in Critical Theory Since Plato, ed. Hazard Adams (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), p. 341.

³⁸"The Essence of Tragedy," in The Idea of Tragedy, ed. Carl Benson and Taylor Littleton (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, & Co., 1966), p. 36.

citingly as he needed to is a question. But Abbie and Eben are urged on by the life force, the affirmation, when they defy the stultifying death symbols in Ephraim's Puritanism and greed, and act according to the dictates of their love for each other. Their acts are exhilarating--and essentially religious--in contrast to Willy Loman's depressing flirtation with the gas tubing.

How, then, are we to define tragedy and comedy in the modern age? Aristotle's definition of tragedy is well known (chapter 6). His treatment of comedy in chapter 5 is not a full definition, but perhaps it is all he gave us: certainly the one found in the so-called Tractatus Coislinianus, which may or may not be from Aristotle, is not very revealing.³⁹

³⁹Lane Cooper has translated the definition in his Aristotelian Theory of Comedy (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1922; reprint ed., New York: Kraus Reprint Co., 1969), p. 224. He is hesitant, however, about speaking for its authenticity. "Comedy is an imitation of an action that is ludicrous and imperfect, of sufficient length, [in embellished language,] the several kinds [of embellishment being] separately [found] in the [several] parts [of the play]; [directly presented] by persons acting, and not [given] through narrative; through pleasure and laughter effecting the purgation of the like emotions. It has laughter for its mother." Though it follows the pattern of the famous tragedy definition, it does not appear to be very well reasoned, even on Aristotle's model: laughter, like tears, are effects, not emotions, and it has no place here as a parallel to pity and fear. And, as we see in Aristotle's chap. 4, pleasure is the end of all art, not just the comic: "Thus, men find pleasure in viewing representations because it turns out that they learn." (Golden trans., p. 7.) In chap. 5, of course, he gives us this much: "Comedy is an imitation of baser men. These are characterized not by every kind of vice but specifically by 'the ridiculous,' which is a subdivision of the category of 'deformity.' What we mean by 'the ridiculous' is some error or ugliness that is painless and has no harmful effects." (Golden

I have attempted to speak to the modern age, from what I believe to be an Aristotelian point of view. Both tragedy and comedy, then, are celebrations of life (the god Dionysus), in opposition to what the sciences tell us are the basic motives of the universe: entropy, inertia, irrationality, and death. In comedy the life force is expressed in the sexual instinct, often through foolish actions, but the ending can be scored as a victory (often marriage). In tragedy, the life force is expressed in spiritual struggle; the ending can often be scored as a loss physically for the hero, but as a victory for the human race (nobility). Both involve a catharsis, or transformation, of the feelings called up by their respective situations: in tragedy through pity and fear, in comedy through camaraderie and superiority. We in the audience unite ourselves to the situation by the first of these emotional pairs (pity/camaraderie). And at the same time, we distance ourselves from the situation by the second pair of feelings: tragic fear, which makes us recoil from the power of necessity found in the cosmic order, and comic superiority, which makes us step aside proudly from the absurdities of human folly.

Comedy and tragedy, as is evident, are linked very closely by their celebration of life in opposition to the

trans., p. 9.) It has often been noted that Aristotle's hamartema ("error") here is to be identified with the tragic hamartia. Perhaps he felt he had defined the form, and that actually no further work has been lost to us, as some modern critics have surmised. At any rate, that is all we get in the Poetics.

basic motives of the universe; the other dramas, which do not celebrate life, but in fact find themselves caught in those very motives of entropy, inertia, irrationality, and death, must be labeled satiric. For satire displays life, analyzes it, portrays it, dissects it, all for the purpose of disapproving of it. There may be a vague sense that if life is shown caught in the negative mode, that is a first step toward improving it. But there is no real plan, and no real sense of understanding of the inevitable cosmic order of the universe. "Realism" is an oddly ironic word for this way of seeing the world. The Greeks would have enjoyed the joke.

It may be surprising to find comedy and tragedy linked so closely when much of critical effort through the centuries has gone toward distinguishing them. It is said, for example, that tragedy is optimistic, while comedy is pessimistic:

Comedy is not just a happy as opposed to an unhappy ending, but a way of surveying life so that happy endings must prevail. But it is not to be confused, on that account, with optimism, any more than a happy ending is to be confused with happiness. Comedy is much more reasonably associated with pessimism--with at any rate a belief in the smallness that survives, as against the greatness that is scarred or destroyed.⁴⁰

There is no quarrel with 'smallness' and 'greatness.' But the celebration of life in its great depth and breadth and fullness, which is found in both comedy and tragedy should

⁴⁰ Louis Kronenberger, The Thread of Laughter: Chapters on English Stage Comedy from Jonson to Maugham (New York: Hill & Wang, A Dramabook, 1952), p. 3.

lead us instead to find them both optimistic. It is satire, on the other hand, which is pessimistic: those modern and not so modern dramas where "mean misery piles on mean misery, petty misfortune follows petty misfortune, and despair becomes intolerable because it is no longer even significant or important."⁴¹

As for the question that often vexes students--how can a tragedy be considered optimistic, or exhilarating, with all of its suffering?--no one who has experienced a good production of Hamlet or any of the other great tragedies on stage would be troubled by it.

It must be a paradox that the happiest, most vigorous, and most confident ages which the world has ever known--the Periclean and the Elizabethan--should be exactly those which created and which most relished the mightiest tragedies; but the paradox is, of course, resolved by the fact that tragedy is essentially an expression, not of despair, but of the triumph over despair and of confidence in the value of human life. . . . The sturdy soul of the tragic author seizes upon suffering and uses it only as a means by which joy may be wrung out of existence.⁴²

Socrates was not troubled by the seeming paradox, no matter how much he had had to drink by the end of the symposium--though by that time, Aristophanes and Agathon were having a bit of trouble following the argument:

Socrates was compelling them to admit that the same man ought to understand how to compose both comedy and tragedy, and that he who has skill as a tragic poet has skill for a comic poet. While they were being forced to this, and not following very well, they began

⁴¹ Joseph Wood Krutch, The Modern Temper (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & Co., 1929), p. 129.

⁴² Ibid., p. 123.

to nod, and first Aristophanes fell asleep, and while the day was dawning, Agathon too.⁴³

Neither poet was able to prove Socrates' theory, so far as we know, nor any other Greek. We have since, of course, enjoyed the supreme example of Shakespeare; and various remarks by modern playwrights such as Christopher Fry and critics such as Northrop Frye, contend that the tragic and the comic are very close indeed. "Tragedy is really implicit or uncompleted comedy . . . ; comedy contains a potential tragedy within itself."⁴⁴ Still, that is not to say that they can be combined with impunity, as in the hapless "tragicomedy." Albert Cook has presented twenty pages of reasoned distinctions between the two genres in his "Nature of Comedy and Tragedy."⁴⁵ But we in the audience can easily distinguish them for ourselves, if we are reading correctly the tone of the whole play.

A study of tone is crucial. In the middle of the eighteenth century, according to Richard Sewall, "evil was reduced to evils, which were looked upon as institutional and therefore remediable."⁴⁶ That is a view to be expected

⁴³Plato, Symposium, in Great Dialogues, trans. W. H. D. Rouse (New York: New American Library, A Mentor Book, 1956), p. 117.

⁴⁴Northrop Frye, "The Argument of Comedy," in Theories of Comedy, ed. Paul Lauter (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., Anchor Books, 1964), p. 455.

⁴⁵In The Dark Voyage and the Golden Mean: A Philosophy of Comedy (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1966), pp. 475-96.

⁴⁶The Vision of Tragedy (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), p. 84.

from the Age of Enlightenment, when verse satire flourished. It may be how evil was "looked upon," but any real alteration in the cosmic order of things will have come as a real surprise to Dionysus, or whoever was currently operating! The visionary playwright of today, who can still deal with large issues, does not look upon his profession that way:

The playwright today must dig at the roots of the sickness of today as he feels it--the death of the Old God and the failure of science and materialism to give any satisfying new One for the surviving primitive religious instinct to find a meaning for life in, and to comfort its fears of death with. It seems to me that anyone trying to do big work nowadays must have this big subject behind all the little subjects of his plays or novels, or he is simply scribbling around on the surface of things, and has no more real status than a parlor entertainer.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Eugene O'Neill, "On the Playwright Today," in Modern Drama, ed. Anthony Caputi (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1966), p. 450. An author's statement of his purposes is not always so reliable, however. "Poets are human too, and what they say about their work is often far from being the best word on the subject." C. G. Jung, The Spirit in Man, Art, and Literature, trans. R. F. C. Hull, Bollingen Series, vol. 20 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), p. 104. The history of criticism is sadly littered with the statements of writers proclaiming what they were doing, from Wordsworth's claim about the "language of ordinary men," and Zola's tranche de vie, to Arthur Miller's "Tragedy and the Common Man." As Tyrone Guthrie warned directors, "With regard to what the script is about, the last person who, in my opinion, should be consulted, even if he is alive or around, is the author. If the author is a wise man, he will admit straight away that he does not know. . . . He will probably know what he thinks he has written, but that will be the least important part of it." "An Audience of One," in Directors on Directing: A Source Book of the Modern Theatre, ed. Toby Cole and Helen Krich Chinoy (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1963), p. 246. Chekhov, however, is another who did know what he was about--though he could not get Stanislavsky to understand at first that his plays were comedies. It is difficult now, in post-Komissarzhevsky, post-Guthrie days, to imagine more gentle laughter and warmth, more assurance in the life force, than in a well-produced comedy of Chekhov.

Sometimes the author's tone is stated quite explicitly, as above in the remarks of Eugene O'Neill. Most of the time we will observe it for ourselves in the plays. Where, for example, are the giants of dramatic characterization to be found? Rarely in the pallid satires of today, with "Zero as hero."⁴⁸ There is too much life in the likes of Shaw's Jack Tanner, O'Neill's Brutus Jones, Mozart's Don Giovanni, Giraudoux' madwoman Aurélie, to be restricted to the limited mold. Whatever the individual fates of these exciting personalities, they are the heroes of comedy and tragedy; they have contributed to our celebration in the Dionysiac manner. They do not see life as something to be deplored. They are not small and distasteful.

As F. L. Lucas observes, "it is less often wickedness than weakness that breaks the hearts of modern tragedy."⁴⁹ A glance at the master will show us how true this is. The giant villain Iago may not be a man one would want to trust or accept as a roommate, but one certainly would never be fatigued or bored by him, as one is by Willy, by Blanche, or even Shakespeare's Achilles. With tragedy and comedy we are in the presence of the ultimate splendors of man and the universe, which include all things, both good and evil. And we can win. Even Job, "without knowing it

⁴⁸Heilman, *Tragedy*, p. 230. Some exceptions may be found, however, in characters like the exciting Hedda Gabler or Pirandello's Henry IV, who find themselves inextricably trapped in their creator's view of life.

⁴⁹*Tragedy: Serious Drama in Relation to Aristotle's "Poetics,"* rev. ed. (New York: Collier Books, 1962), p. 109.

or wanting it . . . shows himself superior to his divine partner both intellectually and morally. Yahweh fails to notice. . . ."⁵⁰ And so it is with Prometheus.

It is in this realization that we find the famous tragic catharsis which has been expounded at such great length: actually "a simpler matter than the critics have made of it."⁵¹ At the end of a satire, do we feel cleansed [κάθαρσις : 'cleansing, purification'], transformed--or merely oppressed? In a true tragedy, we would have involved ourselves totally. "Pity and terror notwithstanding, we realize our great good fortune in having life--not as individuals, but as part of the life force with whose procreative lust we have become one."⁵² But our involvement is not primarily with the characters. We feel pity not through someone, or in place of someone onstage (the so-called and much overused 'empathy'); but rather it is "through the representation of pitiable [ἔλεος : 'pity, mercy, compassion'] and fearful [φόβος : 'fear, terror'] incidents,"⁵³ that we come to an understanding of the cosmic

⁵⁰C. G. Jung, Answer to Job, trans. R. G. C. Hull, Bollingen Series (New York: Pantheon Books, 1954; reprint ed., Cleveland: World Publishing Co., Meridian Books, 1960), p. 32.

⁵¹Lane Cooper, The "Poetics" of Aristotle: Its Meaning and Influence (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1963), pp. 30-31.

⁵²Nietzsche, Birth, p. 103.

⁵³Aristotle, Poetics, trans. Golden, p. 11. S. H. Butcher has stated beautifully the "classic" modern view of it: the spectator "passes out of himself, but it is through the enlarging power of sympathy. He forgets his

order. In tragedy, of course, that understanding is not altogether comforting, but it carries the clean integrity of the whole truth. The comic catharsis, on the other hand, "is something that grows out of the joy that we take in the discovery of how stout and gamy the human thing really is."⁵⁴

What have we gained by a division of drama into the comic, the tragic, and the satiric? If the idea works, we have gained an insight into what, by and large, modern dramas have lost: a kind of clarity of purpose. These plays have lost the thread, lost the ancient spirit. And lest a loss so "classical" might not be mourned universally, it must also be recognized that modern dramas have for the most part lost their audiences. The necessity of our understanding is not only practical in terms of box office receipts, however; it is crucial to our "health" as well:

Whenever conscious life becomes one-sided or adopts a false attitude, these [archetypal] images "instinctively" rise to the surface in dreams and in the visions of artists and seers to restore the psychic balance, whether of the individual or of the epoch.⁵⁵

These mythic products of "psychic balance," nevertheless, must be actively received by us, and encouraged, else the tenuous connection is endangered. "Every culture that has

own petty sufferings. He quits the narrow sphere of the individual. He identifies himself with the fate of mankind." Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art, 4th ed. (New York: Dover Publications, 1951), p. 266.

⁵⁴Nathan A. Scott, Jr., "The Bias of Comedy and the Narrow Escape into Faith," Christian Scholar 44 (Spring, 1961): 32.

⁵⁵Jung, Spirit, p. 104.

lost myth has lost, by the same token, its natural, healthy creativity."⁵⁶ All is not necessarily lost in the modern centuries, however, if Nietzsche's "myth" is understood in the broadest sense. Hamlet and Miranda are not strictly speaking "mythical," but their archetypes reach deep within us, and they elicit a powerful response. So it is with Jack Tanner and his fellows.

Ritual theatre and its archetypes are constantly being rediscovered and tried, as in Roger Planchon's exciting "morality play" of Gilles de Rais a few years back, or in Ariane Mnouchkine's recent Oriental productions of Shakespeare, brought to Los Angeles in 1984. As she herself explains, "The history plays are about ritual, about divine legitimacy. Western theater doesn't have a form to depict this. It only has one convention: realism. . . . Realism makes nothing flower. Realism hides what is already hidden."⁵⁷ But myth (as opposed to specific Greek myths) refuses to be hidden. Myth will surface in some way when we have lost the track and become confused. The theatre is its appropriate home.

The satiric spirit knows none of this direct power to the psyche. Styan quotes Lorca as saying to his brother, "If in certain scenes the audience doesn't know what to do,

⁵⁶Nietzsche, Birth, p. 136.

⁵⁷Quoted in Anne Tremblay, "A French Director Gives Shakespeare a New Look," New York Times, 10 June 1984, sec. 2, p. 6.

whether to laugh or to cry, that will be a success for me."⁵⁸ Perhaps--though the testimony of Lorca's plays may indicate otherwise. On the other hand, I believe that in much of life and art, our enjoyment comes from the predictable, from the inevitable. This is true in the whole range of experience, from the sublime (do we not know, with the Delphic oracle, of the doom of Oedipus, even before his birth?)--to the ridiculous (supply here any irresistible situation from a "Lucy" rerun). Is there any question in our minds after the first scene of A Midsummer Night's Dream that, whatever complications are to come, the lovers will be united happily? The plot unfolds as we expect it to, and it ends as we expect it to, and the pleasure we derive from it is double. Never fear: there is still enough complexity and ambiguity in a great work of art to render Aristotle's "pleasure in learning" (chapter 4). But the point is this: our pleasure will be increased if we can "read"--in the dialogue, in the characterization, in the symbolism, in the palette of colors, in the lighting design, in every element of production--whether we are watching a proper comedy, a true tragedy, or an "other," a satire. Our enjoyment will not diminish if we know it. Why should it be thought sophisticated to mislead the audience? What's the point?

I am not trying to resurrect the neo-classical

⁵⁸Styan, Comedy, p. 1.

phobia concerning the mixing of genres; that has been done since the beginning. (Did Aristophanes ever write a funnier scene than the one toward the end of Agamemnon where the members of the chorus scramble to find rationalizations, after the screams of pain are heard, for not entering the palace?) I am not even trying to say that a "good satire" is a contradiction in terms--for such plays have provided great enjoyment in the theatre, from The Clouds to Hurly-burly. And sometimes even the same author may surprise us: Ibsen's satiric Hedda Gabler is superior to his tragedy of Ghosts, for example, while Shaw's comic Man and Superman far exceeds the satire of Major Barbara. Albee gave us a powerful tragedy in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? but all he could manage in A Delicate Balance was a wary satiric truce. And in poetry, among the Romans only Vergil and Catullus surpassed the fine satiric craft of Horace and Juvenal.

What I am saying, rather, is that these days we have far more satire than we need. For as a genre, it is still basically "destructive."⁵⁹ As Nietzsche reminds us, "Art is not an imitation of nature but its metaphysical supplement, raised up beside it in order to overcome it."⁶⁰ The burgeoning current of life neither censures nor celebrates; it simply reproduces itself endlessly, prodigally. It is up to us to make some order out of this chaos, as Camus

⁵⁹Sutherland, Satire, p. 1.

⁶⁰Birth, p. 142.

incites us to do so eloquently in his Myth of Sisyphus,
 Modern drama has sporadically excited us and satisfied our
 deepest needs; and it will continue to do so, perhaps even
 more, if it finds the right track.

Whoever speaks in primordial images speaks with a thousand voices; he enthralls and overpowers, while at the same time he lifts the idea he is seeking to express out of the occasional and the transitory into the realms of the ever-enduring. He transmutes our personal destiny into the destiny of mankind, and evokes in us all those beneficent forces that ever and anon have enabled humanity to find a refuge from every peril and to outlive the longest night.⁶¹

One cannot hope for a better goal in the modern theatre.⁶²

⁶¹Jung, Spirit, p. 82.

⁶²I have chosen four plays for analysis in each of the following chapters: comedy, tragedy, and satire. The apparently symmetrical arrangement is somewhat misleading, since Death of a Salesman will be found in the "tragedy" chapter on the basis of its author's claims. By the end of my discussion, however, the reader will discover that I consider it rather to be satiric. Thus in its place, it forms a transition from tragedy (Chapter III) to satire (Chapter IV).

CHAPTER II

COMEDY

Comedy seems to be the easiest of the genres to identify with security. The tone of celebration is usually clear; the piece often ends with a marriage. There is not the problem of demonstrating that a character is "worthy" to be seen as a hero of comedy as there is with the tragic genre, for the comic range of character is as wide as life itself. In fact, one feels a bit silly setting out to "prove" that such plays as The Tempest and Man and Superman are comedies. It is perhaps better to approach the problem in this chapter by demonstrating how closely the comic can come to tragedy or to satire without subverting its basically cheerful tone.

The Tempest

There is much in Shakespeare's last major play that is dark. In its first scene, the play plunges into the tempest of the title, with all of its attendant chaos, spectacular effects, and threats of death. The ship is sunk, as Miranda looks on:

O, I have suffered
With those that I saw suffer! a brave vessel
(Who had no doubt some noble creature in her)
Dash'd all to pieces!

Miranda's sadness (one hesitates to call it 'suffering') and ours end immediately with Prospero's reply:

Be collected.
No more amazement. Tell your piteous heart
There's no harm done.¹

Thus, we are encouraged to understand from the very beginning that what we see is not necessarily to be believed (advice which might benefit many of the characters, as the plot unfolds), and that we have entered a special world where threats are not to be taken seriously.

Prospero then moves on to the next of the play's dark elements, the memory of ancient betrayals. This story dominates the surface of the play's action: his wicked brother Antonio, the present Duke of Milan, had conspired long ago with the King of Naples to overthrow his power. The revolt succeeded, and Prospero was set adrift on the sea with his daughter. But now the ancient story is about to have its proper ending, for

By accident most strange, bountiful Fortune
(Now my dear lady) hath mine enemies
Brought to this shore; and by my prescience
I find my zenith doth depend upon
A most auspicious star. . . .²

Prospero takes full advantage of the astrological opportunity offered him, by employing not only his powers of "white magic," but his own goodness of character to effect the conclusion (of which more later). As soon as the

¹William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, in *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, Ribner ed., I. 2. 5-8, 13-15.

²*Ibid.*, I. 2. 178-82.

people from the ship arrive on the island--for none has drowned--new betrayals are planned. Antonio, having succeeded so well in Milan, now encourages his "pupil" Sebastian to kill his own brother and to replace him as King of Naples. Meanwhile, yet another threat is developing: with the "freckled whelp, hag-born" Caliban,³ the drunken butler Stephano plots to murder Prospero and become king of this mysterious island.

I have treated these dark elements in such a summary survey because, as with the shipwreck, it is made clear in each case that the threats are not real: here in this enchanted place, "some subtleties o' the isle"⁴ are at work as charms to bring about the inevitable comic conclusion. Though at one point Sebastian and Antonio even have their swords drawn, and though "they would be terrifying in any other world,"⁵ they are stopped by Ariel's song, which wakes the "honest old councillor" Gonzago and the king, and the mutineers must quickly invent some nonsense about "a whole herd of lions" on the attack.⁶ Likewise, the plot of Stephano can hardly be taken any more seriously, though Prospero appears greatly disturbed when suddenly he remembers it in the midst of the wedding

³Ibid., 1. 2. 283. ⁴Ibid., 5. 1. 124.

⁵Bertrand Evans, Shakespeare's Comedies (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 330.

⁶Shakespeare, Tempest, *dramatis personae*, and 2. 1. 309.

masque:

FERDINAND: This is strange. Your father's in
 some passion
 That works him strongly.

MIRANDA: Never till this day
 Saw I him touch'd with anger so distemper'd.

It is likely, however, that this "passion" is not fear, but rather only exasperation that the child of the devil and the "foul witch Sycorax" had been allowed to advance to such a point, Prospero having been busy with other things.⁷ The wedding party is in no real danger: as Trinculo says, "They say there's but five upon this isle. We are three of them. If th'other two be brain'd like us, the state totters."⁸

Still, Caliban (an anagram of 'cannibal') does represent a disturbing force in Paradise--one that Prospero, for all of his powers of intellect and imagination, has not been able to integrate as he would have liked. Peter Brook, in his fanciful production for Jean-Louis Barrault at the Théâtre des Nations (1968), deciding to "work on ideas from" The Tempest, chose to emphasize the "power and violence" hidden beneath the easy surface of the drama. The result was a "deverbalized" version, with Caliban threatening to take over the central emphasis. His birth to the obscene Sycorax, "like a female King Kong," is shown onstage, high overhead on the scaffolding. His education is begun by Prospero; but very quickly the

⁷Ibid., 4. 1. 143-45; 1. 1. 268.

⁸Ibid., 3. 2. 4-6.

creature rebels, escapes, and "the takeover of the island begins":

The slave Caliban is now monster-master; he and his mother dominate the scene, enacting a wild orgy. . . . Caliban, large and fat, but somehow acrobatic, stands on his head, legs spread; Sycorax stands behind him, her mouth on his genitals. Then they reverse positions. The others follow suit: . . . the Garden of Delights has been transformed into the Garden of Hell. . . . Prospero is pursued and captured. He is wheeled in on an operating table and then thrown to the floor. Now the group seems a pyramid of dogs: they are on top of him, they bite him, suck on him, and chew him. The leading image, as Caliban and Prospero are locked in another's arms, is homosexual rape.⁹

Eventually, Ariel arrives with the trinkets, and the comedy, more or less recognizable, continues to its conclusion.

As fascinating as this concept may be, I am afraid I do not agree that the play "demanded this extension."¹⁰ Shakespeare had already demonstrated in his career, with Macbeth, that if he had wanted to deal with the dark powers of witches, he was perfectly capable of doing so. If the desired subject was power surrendered or lost and the resultant sexual aberrations of those less worthy, there is no better example of this than in Measure for Measure. In The Tempest, the poet's aim is different.

Prospero does not, in fact, lose control. And although Caliban does his best to take over the island, there is still something rather sweet about his character. To his new "god" he offers:

⁹The whole description from Croyden, Lunatics, pp. 245-50.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 245.

I prithee let me bring thee where crabs grow;
 And I with my long nails will dig thee pignuts,
 Show thee a jay's nest. . . .

There is something of TV sitcom's favorite "naughty child" about him. And no matter how colorfully he curses,

All the infections that the sun sucks up
 From the bogs, fens, flats, on Prosper fall
 and make him
 By inchmeal a disease!

--or threatens,

I'll yield him thee asleep,
 Where thou mayst knock a nail into his head

--it is hard to take anyone seriously who has a line like "I shall be pinch'd to death"! It has often been noted that Caliban has a highly lyrical imagination; he is as much a poet of the enchanted island as Ariel or Prospero:

Be not afeard. The isle is full of noises,
 Sounds and sweet airs that give delight and
 hurt not.
 . . . in dreaming,
 The clouds methought would open and show riches
 Ready to drop upon me.¹¹

The darkness of the island is but a mysterious background, the more to appreciate the brilliance of the festivities. Suddenly we realize that Shakespeare, "in whose presence we all become pygmies," according to fellow playwright Hugo von Hofmannsthal,¹² is performing an amazing bit of dramatic wizardry himself: he has "intro-

¹¹Shakespeare, *Tempest*, 2. 2. 162-63; 1. 1. 1-3; 3. 2. 58-59; 5. 1. 276; 3. 2. 129-36.

¹²"Eugene O'Neill," in *Theatre in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Robert W. Corrigan (New York: Grove Press, 1963), p. 126.

duced at the outset of action a benevolent force of such enormous power that it [denies] the possibility of true dramatic conflict as a source of dramatic interest."¹³ And further, the plots of ancient and ongoing treacheries have been a decoy to the real progress of the myth; for "except for Prospero, Ariel and Caliban, the people scarcely exist in their own right."¹⁴ The essential story is of the reconciliation of the darkness within Prospero himself. He will not make his enemies answer for his past suffering, as perhaps he had at one time been tempted to do:

The rarer action is
In virtue than in vengeance.¹⁵

The concord of ancient enmities will restore him his throne, but far more importantly, it will unite the houses of Milan and Naples in the wedding of Miranda and Ferdinand.

At the center of the play is not Caliban's rebellion, but the wedding masque, and the song of Juno and Ceres:

Honour, riches, marriage blessing,
Long continuance, and increasing . . .
Earth's increase, foison plenty,
Barns and garners never empty . . .
Spring come to you at the farthest

¹³Evans, Comedies, p. 331.

¹⁴G. Wilson Knight, The Crown of Life: Essays in Interpretation of Shakespeare's Final Plays (London: Methuen & Co., 1948), p. 220.

¹⁵Shakespeare, Tempest, 5. 1. 27-28.

In the very end of harvest.¹⁶

It is known that the play was performed in London in connection with the wedding ceremonies of the daughter of James I. How could we have allowed ourselves to have been bedazzled by the comic plotting of the underlings, or by the lush imagery of the island, though it displays even "an increase in variety and richness" over the preceding plays?¹⁷ In fact, the tone was set at the beginning, when Ferdinand, only four lines after meeting Miranda, proposed to her:

O, if a virgin,
And your affection not gone forth, I'll
 make you
The Queen of Naples.¹⁸

The whole play has been moving, with the courtly majesty of a masque, toward a new golden age, where, as Ceres says above, there will be no winter. Gonzago, whom Antonio and Sebastian consider a fool, was inspired by the island to such a vision. If he were ruler, he says,

All things in common nature should produce
Without sweat or endeavor.
 . . . nature should bring forth,
Of it [sic] own kind, all foison, all abundance,
To feed my innocent people. . . .
I would with such perfection govern, sir,
T' excel the golden age.¹⁹

¹⁶Ibid., 4. 1. 106-15.

¹⁷Wolfgang H. Clemen, The Development of Shakespeare's Imagery (New York: Hill & Wang, A Dramabook, 1962), p. 179.

¹⁸Shakespeare, Tempest, 1. 2. 447-49.

¹⁹Ibid., 2. 1. 154-63.

There may be another life, not so magical, after they all return to Milan, but not much is made of that--as is appropriate to comedy. Here we are too busy celebrating "the rituals marking the great rising rhythms of life: marriage, spring-time, harvest, dawn, and rebirth."²⁰ The spirit of Dionysus, whose dark side as god of wine and drunkenness had momentarily threatened to take over, has prevailed as god of fertility, and we are all invited to rejoice, in Shakespeare's epithalamion for the race. The darkness is set aside by the magic, as we celebrate the nuptials of Miranda in her "brave new world."²¹

Tartuffe

In approaching a play where the main character's name suggests the Italian tartufo, 'truffle,'--a secretive delicacy whose presence can only be scented and snouted out by hogs--and whose character is unabashedly and quite successfully hypocritical, we are alerted to expect a study in satire. But if we know anything of Molière's other plays, with their warm, broad lovingkindness for the human race in all its variety and folly, we know that it is not appropriate to associate him with those playwrights of the censorious tone. Molière's gentle tolerance extends to everyone in his plays, here even to the vil-

²⁰Northrop Frye, Introduction to The Tempest (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1959), p. 26.

²¹Shakespeare, Tempest, 5. 1. 183.

lainous Tartuffe. We may deplore the character and the methods of this man, but one cannot help admiring his successes. It is a bit like watching Ronald Reagan pick his way deftly through the mine field of the Presidency: however much we may disagree with the policies, it is fascinating to watch him manipulate nearly every occasion into a triumph.

The main scaffolding of the comedy Tartuffe is entirely conventional, reaching back through the Italian commedia dell'arte to the Roman and Greek stock characters. We are introduced to the young lovers, and to the man--or in this case, men: the twin forces of Orgon and Tartuffe--who will be an obstacle to this love. The wily servant Dorine is shown to be at work behind the scenes to effect the eventual happy ending in the Dionysiac celebration of a marriage. Everything seems to be in its place. The lovers' spat in the second act elicits a reminiscence of Puck's "Lord, what fools these mortals be!" in Dorine's comment, "To tell the truth, lovers are all crazy."²²

But that remark is bound to have sinister undertones in this play, for in the first act, we have already heard about the "affair" of Orgon from her:

. . . he has become a perfect dolt since he got so fond of his Tartuffe. He calls him brother and loves

²²Molière, Tartuffe: The Hypocrite, trans. Renée Waldinger (Woodbury, NY: Barron's Educational Series, 1959), p. 47.

him in his heart a hundred times more than his mother, his son, his daughter or his wife. He is the sole confidant of all his secrets and wise director of all his actions. He caresses him, embraces him; and it seems to me, he couldn't show more tenderness to a mistress.

Lest we think Dorine is exaggerating, we hear an echo of that speech barely four pages later from Orgon himself: "Were I to see my brother, children, mother, and wife die, it wouldn't bother me any more than that,"²³ with a snap of the fingers, we presume. The healthy urge toward the procreation of the race has taken a turn underground, we feel. Roger Planchon's concept in his recent productions of the play in France, where he made "the persuasive hypocrite of the title a young, attractive man" and "gave greater force to the element of homosexuality,"²⁴ although at first found to be shocking, has gained acceptance in that country by wide imitation. But the idea of perversion need not be pressed too far, for we have all made fools of ourselves for the sake of a beloved object of our affections. Our dialogue may not have engaged the brilliant artificial formulas of the following exchange, so typical of Molière, and repeated twice more with variations:

ORGON: How is everyone?

DORINE: The day before yesterday, my mistress was feverish the whole day and had a terrible headache.

²³ Ibid., pp. 20, 24.

²⁴ Henry Popkin, "A French 'Titan' Comes to New York," New York Times, 25 January 1981, sec. 2, p. 20.

ORGON: And Tartuffe?

DORINE: Tartuffe? He's fine, stout and fat, with a good complexion and a rosy mouth.

ORGON: Poor man!²⁵

But if we ourselves have not fallen into such obvious traps, we have been no less ridiculous. Orgon is so blind, so stupid, that we know instinctively, since we are in familiar comic territory, that he can do no harm. We do not know how it will all work out, exactly, but we know that we have the combined powers of his servant Dorine, his wife Elmire, and his brother Cléante aligned against his obtuse tyranny.

But what of Tartuffe himself? He is so clever at manipulation, so adept at "covering his tracks," it is difficult to imagine how he may be defeated. Molière arranges the plot so that the man eludes us, while all continue to talk of him, until the third act--a daring trick of theatre that risks anti-climax in a less assured playwright--until we are nearly at the point of screaming to see this paragon of virtue and hypocrisy! We are not disappointed. His first line is outrageous. Seeing Dorine, he calls offstage to his valet (this noble ascetic has a valet?): "Laurent, put away my hair shirt and my scourge and pray that Heaven may ever enlighten you." And without missing a beat, he busies himself with covering the woman's bosom, so that it will not "give rise to sinful thoughts."²⁶ In short order, he proves himself to

²⁵ Molière, Tartuffe, p. 22. ²⁶ Ibid., pp. 50, 51.

be every bit as talented in duplicity as Iago. They even share some of the same devices. When confronted in the presence of Orgon with having attempted to seduce Elmire, he admits it with a flourish, and thereby ironically acquires his staunchest defender in her husband. Later when he has him alone, Tartuffe offers his grandest gesture, knowing full well the effect that his negative psychology will produce: "I realize what uneasiness I have brought into this house and I think, brother, that I have to leave it."²⁷ Recall the earlier ironic interchange in Shakespeare's tragedy:

IAGO: . . . but I am much to blame.
 I humbly do beseech you of your pardon
 For too much loving you.
 OTHELLO: I am bound to thee for ever.
 IAGO: I see this hath a little dash'd your spirits.
 OTHELLO: Not a jot, not a jot.
 IAGO: I' faith, I fear it has.
 I hope you will consider what is spoke
 Comes from my love. But I do see y'are mov'd.
 I am to pray you not to strain my speech
 To grosser issues nor to larger reach
 Than to suspicion,
 OTHELLO: I will not.²⁸

Orgon ends his scene by signing over to Tartuffe his whole estate. Othello, on the other hand, is not a fool, but a hero. What we feel for Iago may be fascination, but we cannot call it admiration: our fear for the noble Othello gets in the way of that. Orgon, however, needs to be deflated. We feel that Tartuffe is doing our job for us, and in a strange way, we are aligned with him

²⁷Ibid., p. 63.

²⁸Shakespeare, Othello, Ribner ed., 3. 3. 211-21.

temporarily. The problem is, of course (and it nearly proves too much for the master craftsman): who will do the same with Tartuffe, when the time comes? As Ramon Fernandez rightly points out, the hypocrite acquires such power--not the least from his statements, which are often indistinguishable from genuine piety--that "comic discernment comes into conflict with comic convention."

Usually the ridiculous character arouses

that feeling of slight superiority [in the audience] that we require of comedy. In Tartuffe and Don Juan it is not the ridiculous character that boasts the impunity, and in them the comic lesson can therefore not be inexorably derived from the comic principle.²⁹

Until the very last moments, Tartuffe seems destined to succeed, because one by one, those symbols of right thinking, which we thought we held in reserve--Dorine, Elmire, Cléante--prove powerless against him.³⁰

By the fifth act, Orgon's problem has become so knotty that powers from beyond are required to unravel it.

²⁹Ramon Fernandez, Molière: The Man Seen Through His Plays, trans. Wilson Follett (New York: Hill & Wang, A Dramabook, .960), pp. 138-39.

³⁰Still, if we are reading the tone correctly, it is impossible not to follow Molière's inner logic, which will take us safely to the conclusion we expect. During the seduction of Act 4, with Orgon under the table, Tartuffe's statement of the most insidious kind of casuistry is followed immediately by the most deliciously silly of exchanges (pp. 76-77):

TARTUFFE: I know the art of easing scruples. . . .
There is a science which . . . rectifies the immorality of our action with the purity of our intentions. . . . You are coughing very much, Madam.

ELMIRE: Yes, I am very uncomfortable.

TARTUFFE: Would you like a piece of this licorice?
After such "vintage Molière" irony, it becomes impossible to take the threat of the man seriously.

Molière has been much criticized for his rex ex machina, as it has been called.³¹ Commentators have complained that the play is not plotted well, that we have not been prepared for the radical dénouement. But that is simply not true. Already in the first act, we have heard that, during the recent troubles of the Fronde, Orgon had "acted like a man of sense and showed courage in the service of the king." In the middle of the play, Cléante warns Tartuffe that "great and small are scandalized by" Orgon's disinheritance of his son Damis in favor of the holy man, and yet later Cléante warns Damis not to lose control over himself: for "we live under a government, and in an age, in which violence only makes matters worse."³² Though the clever servant Dorine, the usual Latin vehicle for comic resolution, has been "outclassed," and though nobody listens to the voice of reason in the speeches of Cléante or Elmire, the solution in this comedy is still purely conventional. The man who has effectively duped them all finishes by overplaying his hand and calling in the "big guns": he dupes himself as well. Elmire had known it, though her attempts ultimately proved ineffective: "conceit drives us to deceive ourselves,"³³ she had said.

³¹Robert Hogan and Sven Eric Molin, "Discussion of Tartuffe," in Drama: The Major Genres (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1968), p. 311.

³²Molière, Tartuffe, pp. 20, 65, 83.

³³Ibid., p. 71.

Tartuffe accuses Orgon to the king. But the king is "an enemy of fraud," one "whom the art of impostors cannot deceive."³⁴ Forget for a moment that in 1669, after five years of pressure against the French church, the king was also the single man in France upon whom production of the play depended.³⁵ Is not his still the voice of reason, which has been embodied in Cléante all the while? Those who criticize the ending usually invoke the name of Scribe and the well-made play. But Scribe himself was not unimpressed by it:

First of all, [the ending] has one great merit: without it we should not have had the piece, for Molière would probably never have been allowed to produce it, had he not made the king an actor in it. Then, what a startling picture of the period this ending gives us! Here is an honest man who has bravely served his country, and who, when deceived by the most open and odious of machinations, does not find anywhere, in society or in law, a single weapon with which to defend himself. To save him the sovereign himself must needs intervene. Where can a more terrible condemnation of the reign be found than in this immense eulogy of the king?³⁶

One need not accept the politics of the last part of this statement to agree that Orgon is in fact left without a

³⁴Ibid., p. 95.

³⁵The play's first version saw the light in 1664, and it was forbidden. By August 11, 1667, the Archbishop of Paris had become so incensed against the revision that "it was forbidden under penalty of excommunication to read or hear the comedy, whether in public or private and under any title or pretext whatsoever." Joseph Seronde and Henri Peyre, eds., Nine Classic French Plays (Boston: D. C. Heath & Co., 1936), p. 394.

³⁶Quoted in Brander Matthews, Molière: His Life and Works (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1916), pp. 157-58.

single weapon. Even Cléante, who had invoked Aristotle ("Men, for the most part, are strange creatures! They never keep the golden mean. The bounds of reason are too narrow for them."),³⁷ is by this time powerless. Molière had even cleverly--or cynically, depending on how one interprets the playwright's "religion"--introduced scriptural allusions into Cléante's reasonable attempts to reform the religious Orgon:

There are hypocrites in religion as well as in courage; and, as we never see truly brave men make a lot of noise wherever honor leads them, so the good and truly pious whom we ought to imitate are not the ones who make such demonstrations.

The sincerely devout . . . do not censure all our actions; they . . . leaving big words to others, reprove our actions by their own. . . . They never persecute a sinner, they hate sin only.

And to Tartuffe, he had said,

Why do you take into your hands the interests of Heaven? Does it need us to punish the guilty? Leave the care of Its own vengeance to itself.³⁸

³⁷ Molière, Tartuffe, p. 26.

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 25, 27-28, 66. Those offended devout in the audience would have recognized in the above passages echoes of the following:

1) "'And when you pray, do not imitate the hypocrites: they love to say their prayers standing up in the synagogues and at the street corners for people to see them. I tell you solemnly, they have had their reward.'" Jesus, quoted in Matthew, 6:5 (Jerusalem Bible).

2) "They said to Jesus, 'Master, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery, and Moses has ordered us in the Law to condemn women like this to death by stoning. What have you to say?' They asked him this as a test, looking for something to use against him. But Jesus . . . looked up and said, 'If there is one of you who has not sinned, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.'" John 8:4-8 (Jerusalem Bible).

3) "As scripture says: 'Vengeance is mine--I will pay

Contemporary audiences were much discomfited to see that Orgon did not take the Biblical advice, and worse, that Tartuffe knew very well "how to make himself a cloak of all that is sacred."³⁹ Cléante is no fool, but he has proven no more effective in reforming the Pharisees than was Jesus.

Surely Molière had no illusions on this point either; there is no need to presume a satirical stance in this play, notwithstanding the upright sentiments of his famous preface. Comedy, he says there, is "an ingenious poem which tries to reform men's faults by agreeable lessons." And "if the purpose of comedy is to correct men's vices, then I see no reason for any privileged class."⁴⁰ How disillusioned he must have become (if he really believed this!) when he found the French church aligned solidly against him.⁴¹ We need not take those statements

them back,' the Lord promises." Paul, quoting Deut. 32:35, in Romans 12:19 (Jerusalem Bible).

³⁹Molière, Tartuffe, p. 94.

⁴⁰Molière, Preface to Tartuffe, in Hogan and Molin, Drama, pp. 305, 304.

⁴¹Not the Roman, however. The papal legate, Cardinal Chigi, reacted to the play with "generous humanism." Matthews, Molière, p. 337. Molière demonstrates the extent of his ironic understanding of the situation in which he found himself, through the play. In 1666, the President of the Parliament of Paris had told him in an interview, "I have a very high opinion of your deserts. . . . But with all my good will toward you I am unable to permit you to perform your comedy. I am convinced that it is very fine, very instructive; but it is not fitting for actors to be giving people instruction in matters of Christian morality and religion." Molière, who could only

too literally, however. "Molière would never have claimed to reform the world if his enemies had not charged him with corrupting the world."⁴² And we need not take the biographer's word for it either; the play itself shows us that Tartuffe has learned nothing from his painful experience, and neither has Orgon:

ORGON: It is all over. I renounce all pious people.

CLÉANTE: . . . Well! now you exaggerate again! You never preserve a moderate temper in anything.⁴³

It is unlikely, having failed with the church and nearly with the state, that Molière had any designs upon his audience.

For, instead of the dark, reforming spirit of satire, we get here the laughter of comedy. Fernandez' analysis of the cathartic effect of laughter explains also why the church, though perhaps without having understood all the implications of it, was probably so strong in its reaction:

Laughter has the inherent function of discharging the emotions. . . . Consequently, it is a wonderful transcription of pain. All the themes of comedy are in-

stammer in disbelief, was summarily dismissed: "As you see, monsieur, it is almost noon; I should be missing mass if I were to linger any longer." Quoted in Fernandez, Molière, p. 130. One can imagine whether the president was amused to hear, in the 1669 version, Tartuffe interrupting Cléante's pleas for justice in the same way: "It is half past three, sir; certain pious duties call me upstairs, and you will excuse my leaving you so soon." (P. 68.)

⁴² John Palmer, Molière (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1970), p. 350.

⁴³ Molière, Tartuffe, p. 82.

herently painful or distressing or vexatious . . . everyday pain that plagues us not immoderately but chronically--such pain as laughter makes it possible to endure. . . . Once you make serious use of it to render this earth supportable, you set up a competition with religion.⁴⁴

Make that organized religion. French Catholic religion. For Molière, in the same preface quoted above, also points out that "comedy among the ancient writers originated in religion."⁴⁵ And Molière's own religion is very Greek in that respect. It is of this world. Tartuffe is no more anti-religious in essence than those tragedies of Euripides which offended the sensibilities of conservative Greeks in the audience at the festivals of Dionysus.

Meanwhile, we have almost forgotten the comedy--that genre generally leading to marriage. Tartuffe's pyrotechnics have almost blinded us to the fact that, in his suspicious attractiveness to Orgon, his abortive attempt upon Elmire, his force has been basically anti-Dionysiac. We realize now that, if we had been reading the myth correctly, we would have known that this is the real reason he cannot succeed. His is not the way to celebrate the procreation of the race; rather it is "by a sweet union [which will] crown in Valère the flame of a generous and sincere lover."⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Fernandez, Molière, p. 137.

⁴⁵ p. 304.

⁴⁶ The last line of the play. Molière, Tartuffe, p. 97.

Man and Superman

George Bernard Shaw prided himself on his dramas of ideas, and none of his plays is so packed with them as the double-length Man and Superman. In fact, the man to whom it is dedicated, Arthur Bingham Walkley, once wrote, "Mr. Bernard Shaw fails as a dramatist because he is always trying to prove something."⁴⁷ But one hardly knows what to make of such a statement, since Walkley was a friend--the one, in fact, who challenged him to write a play on the Don Juan theme--and a man who often wrote in praise of his comedies. At least as far as this one is concerned, the comment need not be taken seriously for, notwithstanding its length, the play has been successfully arousing "thoughtful laughter" in the theatre for decades.

The subtitle immediately announces the playwright's intention: it is "A Comedy and A Philosophy." Man and Superman is "conspicuous" above all for "his active proselytizing for Utopian ideals":

Those who dislike Shaw's work generally dislike it on these grounds. . . . Apparently unable to let a work exist in isolation from his comments about it, he is forever weaving the thread of his art into a skein of verbose argument--prattling, theorizing, exhorting, tirelessly loquacious. One does not simply experience a play by Shaw. One is also pelted by a hailstorm of prefaces, postscripts, disquisitions, chatty stage directions, and other prose addenda, advising him how to regard the play, the cast of characters, even the playwright who created them, in addi-

⁴⁷Quoted in James Huneker, "The Quintessence of Shaw," in George Bernard Shaw: A Critical Survey, ed Louis Kronenberger (Cleveland: World Publishing Co., 1953), p. 20.

tion to how to lead his life, rule the state, and advance the race.⁴⁸

Of no play is this more true. Arms and the Man and Candida, which share the volume of the collected works with it, each occupy about 70 pages of text. Man and Superman occupies the last 263 pages, when one counts the dedicatory epistle to Walkley and the appended "Revolutionist's Handbook and Pocket Companion," by John Tanner, M.I.R.C. (Member of the Idle Rich Class). Tanner, in fact, as himself and also as his alter ego Don Juan Tenorio, is a true child of his creator. Several times, including the final curtain line, he is chided for his incessant love--and length--of talking. At one point, after a particularly vehement lecture, Ann, stunned into silence, can only say, "I suppose you will go in seriously for politics some day, Jack."⁴⁹ In this discussion I will try to deal with the play only, as an audience would enjoy it in the theatre, and not with its "hailstorm" of Shavian commentary. My analysis must include the long dream sequence of the third act, however, for it was meant to be included in production, no matter how often in actuality it is cut or played separately.

As the audience settles into its seats, they are

⁴⁸Robert Brustein, The Theatre of Revolt: An Approach to the Modern Drama (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., An Atlantic Monthly Press Book, 1964), pp. 183-84.

⁴⁹Bernard Shaw, Man and Superman, in Complete Plays with Prefaces, vol. 3 (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1963), p. 574.

greeted by a normal box set, showing the study of a pompous gentleman, possibly the Pantalone of the piece. Immediately a young man is announced, and we see what Shaw, in one of his typically loquacious stage directions, describes:

MR ROBINSON is really an uncommonly nice looking young fellow. He must, one thinks, be the jeune premier; for it is not in reason to suppose that a second such attractive male figure should appear in one story. The slim, shapely frame, the elegant suit . . . the pretty little moustache, the frank clear eyes . . . all announce the man who will love and suffer later on.⁵⁰

As we advance further through the first few minutes, we feel we are on solid turf: "the play bears every sign of careful workmanship--all of it School of Scribe,"⁵¹ as Eric Bentley observes.

It does not take long to realize, however, that the playwright is playing with us as well as with his characters. He may be stealing the best of Scribe (a playwright he deplored as shallow in various of his commentaries)⁵² as a kind of private joke on himself, but we are in for a jolt if we get too comfortable in our expectations. For, as Bentley too must admit, this is Scribe

⁵⁰ Ibid., pp. 518-19.

⁵¹ "The Making of a Dramatist (1892-1903)," in G. B. Shaw: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. R. J. Kaufmann (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Twentieth Century Views, A Spectrum Book, 1965), p. 64.

⁵² Most notably "How to Write a Popular Play," in his Preface to Three Plays by Brieux (New York: Brentano's 1911).

with a difference. The play's interest lies not in its predictability, but in the depth of its symbolic element, and in the fascinating sleight of hand with which Shaw dazzles us in his main plot.

Mr. Robinson, or Ricky-Ticky-Tavy, as Ann calls him, seems to have been maneuvered into the perfect position to be the bridegroom at the end of the piece. As an incurable romantic, he hopes desperately to marry Ann. The old gentleman, Ramsden, expects it. Tanner, although he appears at first to be the conventional obstacle to the match, agrees to it very early in the first act, out of desperation:

Tavy: you must marry her after all and take her off my hands. And I had set my heart on saving you from her!⁵³

All, in fact, seem to agree that the match is perfect--except the docile Ann herself, who has expressed no opinion, except that she will be happy to obey the wishes of her parents. In fact, all of this seems too easy. Where, then, are the complications to be solved, if they are not to come from the "Olympian . . . restless, excitable" Tanner?⁵⁴ What need will we have of wily servants to make it all come out right? Suddenly a bomb is dropped and the focus shifts. Tavy's sister Violet is pregnant, and she will not reveal who the father is. Now, this is a switch from the conventional comedy--but we are living in the modern age, after all. Tanner picks up the cue and

⁵³Shaw, Superman, p. 527.

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 523.

creates a sensation by his broadminded reaction, and we perhaps feel inclined to agree with him:

I congratulate you, with the sincerest respect, on having the courage to do what you have done. . . . I know, and the whole world really knows, though it dare not say so, that you were right to follow your instinct; that vitality and bravery are the greatest qualities a woman can have, and motherhood her solemn initiation into womanhood; and that the fact of your not being legally married matters not one scrap.⁵⁵

Early in the second act, we meet the young man, Hector Malone, an American, and the question of the play now seems to have become, how will these young lovers work things out so that they can join Tavy and Ann, hand in hand, in the last scene?

. All this is flowing along smoothly, but we have not accounted for Ann Whitefield, "one of the vital geniuses" of the play's world.⁵⁶ She has quite other plans. At the very beginning, we have heard a wary Jack Tanner, upon discovering that he is to become one of her guardians, pleading:

Ramsden: get me out of it somehow. You dont know Ann as well as I do. She'll commit every crime a respectable woman can; and she'll justify every one of them by saying that it was the wish of her guardians. She'll put everything on us; and we shall have no more control over her than a couple of mice over a cat.⁵⁷

Thus alerted, it is easy for us to see that, as the scene progresses, despite Ann's apparently demure and unassuming manner, things are going exactly as she wishes. Jack's

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 558.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 530.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 524. On principle, Shaw disdained the use of apostrophes in common contractions.

description has been apt. Later on, he calls her a "boa constrictor";⁵⁸ he knows her well. What he does not know, for he too has been blinded by Tavy's love for her, is that the coils are meant for him. And therein lies the comedy.

One of Shaw's biographers grouses that Ann's "methods are more virile than feline," and that "inability to portray sexual passion convincingly is a limitation of Shaw's art: he is no flesh painter."⁵⁹ But this is an unfair judgment, based, probably, on too much knowledge of the playwright's own much-discussed sex life. She is a perfect Millamant to Tanner's reluctant Mirabell. (Congreve was not much of a "flesh painter" either!) It is a delight to watch the two wriggle in the throes of Shaw's Life Force. Or, to put it more properly, to watch Ann make the Life Force work for her--for, although she claims not to understand the language ("it sounds like the Life Guards"),⁶⁰ she certainly understands the principle instinctively. Ramsden sets us all up for a surprise in the first minutes, if we believe him:

What does she know about the real value of men at her age? . . . she is only a woman, and a young and inexperienced woman at that.⁶¹

To which Tanner can only shake his head and reply, "Rams-

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 526.

⁵⁹Archibald Henderson, George Bernard Shaw: Man of the Century (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1956), p. 580.

⁶⁰Shaw, Superman, p. 681. ⁶¹Ibid., pp. 520, 528.

den: I begin to pity you." He cannot help but admire her "magnificent audacity,"⁶² but it will still be a long time before he can detect the direction Life is leading him, poor mouse. Ann seems genuinely surprised, for she knows he prides himself on being intelligent, unconventional, revolutionary.

ANN: Do you think I have designs on Tavy?

TANNER: I know you have. . . . Never fear: he will not escape you.

ANN: I wonder are you really a clever man!

TANNER: Why this sudden misgiving on the subject?

ANN: You seem to understand all the things I dont understand; but you are a perfect baby in the things I do understand.⁶³

The "really clever" man is Tanner's chauffeur Enry, who, having failed to reveal the truth of the matter by indirect hints, after two full acts must finally be blunt:

STRAKER: . . . she's arter summun else.

TANNER: Bosh! who else?

STRAKER: You.

TANNER: Me!!!

STRAKER: Mean to tell me you didnt know? Oh, come, Mr Tanner!⁶⁴

And the chase is on. If they are lucky, all the way to "Marseilles, Gibraltar, Genoa, any port from which we can sail to a Mahometan country where men are protected from women."⁶⁵ The boa constrictor, of course, follows, and we now sit back with pleasure to watch how she entices, entangles the man she has chosen to be the father of her children. But there is nothing mannish about it. She is as much a "coquette" as a "bully," as Tanner says to

⁶²Ibid., p. 554.

⁶³Ibid.

⁶⁴Ibid., p. 583.

⁶⁵Ibid., p. 584.

her mother, and even "almost something for which I know no polite name."⁶⁶ But when they enter the lists for the final battle, she is all woman. Playful:

TANNER: (Explosively) Ann: I will not marry you. Do you hear? I won't, wont, wont, wont, WONT marry you.

ANN: (Placidly) Well, nobody axd you, sir she said.

Shy:

ANN: (Suddenly losing her courage) . . . Well, I made a mistake: you do not love me.

TANNER: (Seizing her in his arms) It is false: I love you. The Life Force enchants me. . . . But I am fighting for my freedom, for my honor, for my self, one and indivisible.

Weak:

Jack, let me go. I have dared so frightfully--it is lasting longer than I thought. Let me go: I cant bear it.

Triumphant:

ANN: I have promised to marry Jack. (She swoons)

TANNER: . . . I never asked her. It is a trap.

And utterly realistic:

ANN: (In VIOLET'S ear, clutching her round the neck) Violet: did Jack say anything when I fainted?

VIOLET: No.

ANN: Ah! (With a sign of intense relief she relapses)

MRS WHITEFIELD: Oh, she's fainted again. . . .⁶⁷

ANN: (Supine) No, I havnt. I'm quite happy.

Shaw appears to have stood comic convention on its head. The male pursuer has become the pursued; the female pursuer has become more womanly than ever. Meanwhile, the demure Violet--so appropriately named, as we had thought--

⁶⁶ Ibid., pp. 676-77.

⁶⁷ Ibid., pp. 680, 683, 684, 685.

is discovered to be ruthlessly practical. To her astonished father-in-law, who has arrived to break up her marriage, she says candidly,

VIOLET: Then you dont know Hector as I do. He is romantic and faddy--he gets it from you, I fancy--and he wants [needs] a certain sort of wife to take care of him.

MALONE: Somebody like you, perhaps?

VIOLET: (Quietly) Well, yes. But you cannot very well ask me to undertake this with absolutely no means of keeping up his position.

Malone, spinning, can only reply, "we seem to have got off the straight track somehow."⁶⁸ Tanner too is amazed, and full of admiration:

And that poor devil is a billionaire! . . . Led in a string like a pug dog by the first girl who takes the trouble to despise him! I wonder will it ever come to that with me.⁶⁹

This poor devil is the only one who does not know by this time that it already has. And although the twists and turns of the plot have warned us not to expect a curtain line like Oberon's

Sweet friends, to bed.
A fortnight hold we this solemnity
In nightly revels and new jollity⁷⁰

we are still probably unprepared for Tanner's final blast:

I solemnly say that I am not a happy man. Ann looks happy, but she is only triumphant. . . . What we have both done this afternoon is to renounce happiness, renounce freedom, renounce tranquillity, above all, renounce the romantic possibilities of an unknown future. . . .

Violet has become conventional enough again to be shocked

⁶⁸ Ibid., pp. 662-63. ⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 668.

⁷⁰ Shakespeare, A Midsummer Night's Dream, Ribner ed., 5. 1. 351-53.

at this display: "You are a brute, Jack," she says. But the wise mother of the future Superman, "looking at him with fond pride," only replies, "Never mind her, dear. Go on talking."⁷¹

The third act is, as Maurice Valency observes, a metaphorical corollary to what we have just seen.

In the critical position in which Tanner is placed at the end of the second act, he finds himself torn by contrary impulses, doubts, and fears. It is this state of mental turmoil which the dream sequence represents. In the portion of Man and Superman which takes place on the plane of contemporary reality, this critical moment is effectively dramatized in terms of freedom and the loss of individuality. But in the aspect of eternity the problem of marriage is seen to center on much wider issues, on the nature of men and the purpose of life.⁷²

In this, "one of the most dazzling examples of conversational dialogue in any language,"⁷³ the idea of the Life Force is explored philosophically, at leisure. But an important new strain is also added: the necessity of conscious striving to effect the success of life's evolutionary development. Don Juan understands it, even though Tanner does not:

I tell you that as long as I can conceive something better than myself I cannot be easy unless I am striving to bring it into existence or clearing the way for it. . . . That is the working within me of Life's incessant aspiration. . . . It is the absence of this

⁷¹Shaw, Superman, pp. 685-86.

⁷²Maurice Valency, The Cart and the Trumpet: The Plays of George Bernard Shaw (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 226.

⁷³John Gassner, Masters of the Drama, 3rd ed. (New York: Dover Publications, 1954), p. 607.

instinct in you that makes you that strange monster called a Devil. It is the success with which you have diverted the attention of men from their real purpose.⁷⁴

The act ends with Doña Ana calling,

I believe in the Life to Come. (Crying to the universe)
A father! a father for the Superman!⁷⁵

That rallying cry is an ironic commentary on the main action, which is not "lightweight," as Brustein accuses,⁷⁶ but delightfully pregnant with the mythical significance we have found in all comedy. For, by the end of the fourth act, we understand that the final irony Shaw will leave us with is in his title. "Man and Superman" surely refers not just to Jack and His Son, but, as we should have known all along, to Jack and The Eternal Feminine, the victorious Ann herself.⁷⁷

The Cherry Orchard

The Cherry Orchard is an exquisite autumnal comedy, in which Anton Chekhov has sought to revise or reinterpret many of the standard comic devices we have come to expect in this discussion. Though it has been much misunderstood through the years, beginning even with his own director Stanislavsky, who was in close correspondence with him, the play remains nevertheless squarely within the comic

⁷⁴Shaw, Superman, pp. 641-42. ⁷⁵Ibid., p. 649.

⁷⁶Revolt, p. 218.

⁷⁷Don Juan has already referred to Faust's lines, in Act 3, p. 617.

vein. To conclude this chapter, I will demonstrate how it corresponds to my definition of the first chapter.

Chekhov had much to say about his play, and in this case, it is instructive to listen to the playwright, for he understood not only the inner workings of the drama, but its pitfalls for directors. Before it was even finished, he wrote to Stanislavsky's wife, an actress with the Moscow Art Theatre, "The play has turned out not a drama, but a comedy, in parts even a farce, and I fear I am in for it from Vladimir Ivanovich [Nemirovich-Danchenko]."⁷⁸ When Stanislavsky had received the new play, he sent back a long telegram, in which his depth of feeling for it is mixed equally with his misunderstanding:

According to me your Cherry Orchard is your best play. I have fallen in love with it even more deeply than with our dear Seagull. It is not a comedy, not a farce, as you wrote--it is a tragedy no matter if you do indicate a way out in a better world in the last act. It makes a tremendous impression, and this by means of half tones, tender water-color tints. There is a poetic and lyric quality to it. . . . If I were to choose one of the parts to suit my taste, I would be in a quandary, for every one of them is most alluring. I fear this is all too subtle for the public. It will take time for it to understand all the shadings. Alas, how many stupidities we will have to hear about this play! . . . When I read it for the second time . . . I wept like a woman, I tried to control myself, but could not. I can hear you say: "But please, this is a farce. . . ." No, for the ordinary person this is a tragedy.

Three days later, Chekhov was already expressing his con-

⁷⁸This, and the following exchanges of correspondence are from the collection in Chekhov's The Cherry Orchard, ed. Herbert Goldstone (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, Case-book Series, 1965). pp. 55. 63-64. 56. 59.

cern to Nemirovich-Danchenko:

Anya doesn't once shed tears; nowhere does she speak in a weeping tone; in Act II, though she has tears in her eyes, her tone is cheerful and lively. Why do you say in your telegram that there are many tearful people in the play? Where are they? Varya is the only one, and that is because she is a cry-baby by nature, and her tears should not provoke depression in the spectator. Frequently one meets the remark "through tears," but that merely denotes the mood of the character, not tears.

After many such exchanges, including further hints about characterization and tone, as well as staging and costumes, Chekhov joined them for the opening night. The company, grateful for the play and aware of the precarious state of his health, celebrated the occasion: "I was fêted so lavishly, so warmly, and above all so unexpectedly, that I have not yet recovered from it." But within two months, news arrived from relatives who had seen it more recently, that the Moscow production was slipping back into bathos. To his wife Olga Knipper, who was playing Madame Ranevsky, he wrote:

How awful this is. An act [the fourth] that ought to take no more than twelve minutes lasts forty with you people. I can say one thing: Stanislavsky has ruined my play.

Here he ended the letter with a statement showing why all who spoke of this man loved him: "But there, bless the man."

I have quoted at such length because the people involved here are such giants of modern theatre history that their thoughts are of interest. But also because the same skirmish in the theatre continues. As translator and

critic David Magarshack concludes,

So many unnecessary tears have been shed in this play both on the stage and in the auditorium that it would seem almost hopeless to re-establish it as a comedy. It is much easier to misrepresent it as a tragedy than to present it for what it really is, namely "a comedy, and in places almost a farce." But unless it is treated as such, it will never be Chekhov's play.⁷⁹

I must hasten to add, that it will never be a very good play either. For if one tries to apply the principles of tragedy to it, it becomes pale indeed.

It must be admitted that Chekhov was not entirely correct (or did not remember it well), when he said that Varya is the only one in the play who weeps. At least four times in the first act, Madame Ranevsky speaks through, or pauses for her tears. And so, at one point, does Feers. It is all this first-act weeping which threatens to set the wrong tone in a careless production. What can be done to explain it and to deal with it on the stage? The playwright has already indicated that Varya should not be taken seriously, and that her tears would certainly not provoke the same response in us. Feers is a servant, a former slave, eighty-seven years old, who is greeting his mistress after an absence of five years. As for Lyubov (Ranevsky), she has returned from an upsetting love affair in Paris to her ancestral home, which she must surely lose. She has little money left, and no hope of

⁷⁹Chekhov the Dramatist (New York: Hill & Wang, A Dramabook, 1960), p. 286.

any; she is meeting old friends and relatives whom she has not seen in those five years, and everything about the place reminds her either of her carefree childhood, or of the drowning of her seven-year-old son, the reason she had fled. Why not allow the poor woman some tears? It will be seen that she offers equally as much laughter, and far more kisses, interspersed among her speeches, for she is not subdued. She is simply overcome with the emotions of her arrival. From then on, the tears come only twice more, at the news of the sale of the orchard, and at their final departure.

Still, in describing this scene, I have alluded to some unhappy events which do not normally appear in comedy. Robert Brustein has noticed that the plot has several elements in common with The Octoroon, Dion Boucicault's highly popular melodrama of the late nineteenth century. Both plays involve the threatened loss of an old family estate because the mortgage cannot be paid. Both involve the central character of an aristocratic woman who expresses her feelings for the genteel life which is fast disappearing forever. The difference is that in the melodrama, the villain is foiled and the property is saved.⁸⁰ In The Cherry Orchard, which we have been calling comedy, the land is lost, and all are forced to move away. What's funny about that? is hardly a question that is going to

⁸⁰ Brustein, Revolt, p. 168.

help us when analyzing Chekhov's real motives.

It should be emphasized that Ranevsky's sentimental memories are not all that is heard about the orchard in this play. The eternal student Trofimov, Anya's "lover," remembers the past (though not personally) with a tinge of bitterness:

ANYA: What have you done to me, Petya? Why don't I love the cherry orchard like I used to? . . .

TROFIMOV: The whole of Russia is our orchard. Just think, Anya: your grandfather, and your great grandfather, and all your ancestors were serf owners--they owned living souls. Don't you see human beings staring at you from every tree in the orchard, from every leaf and every trunk? Don't you hear their voices?⁸¹

And Lopahin sees in it a possible promise for the future. Before he has even a thought that the place could belong to him, he tries to convince the aristocrats that the estate, though different, could be bright and productive:

LOPAHIN: You see, you're saved! . . . Of course, the land will have to be cleared and cleaned up a bit. . . . And then, the old cherry orchard will have to be cut down. . . .

LYUBOV: Cut down? My good man, forgive me, but you don't seem to understand. If there's one thing that's interesting and really valuable in this whole part of the country, it's our cherry orchard. . . .

GAEV: Why, this orchard is even mentioned in the Encyclopedia. . . .

LOPAHIN: There's no other way out, I promise you. . . . Lots of people come out for the summer. . . . later on they might begin to grow a few things, and then your cherry orchard would be full of life again . . . rich and prosperous.⁸²

⁸¹Anton Chekhov, *The Cherry Orchard*, trans. Robert W. Corrigan, in *The Modern Theatre*, ed. Robert W. Corrigan (New York: Macmillan Co., 1964), p. 508.

⁸²*Ibid.*, p. 499.

Our sentiments may be with the woman at first, if for no other than aesthetic reasons. But gradually, as we see her and her family foolishly taking no steps to help themselves, we begin to lose our patience, along with Lopahin, who has been offering to help them in various ways:

Forgive me for saying it, but really, in my whole life I've never met such unrealistic, unbusiness-like, queer people as you. You're told in plain language that your estate's going to be sold, and you don't seem to understand it at all.⁸³

Whose side is the playwright on? And where does he expect us to align our sympathies? It is impossible to tell. For this man, who has "deeper humanity than any other modern dramatist,"⁸⁴ has stated the case so evenly, so clinically (he was a medical doctor before a playwright), that we find ourselves first on the one side and then on the other. There are no villains in this piece--and no heroes either. An actress who had played Ranevsky stated the perplexing case perfectly: "Well, of course, the poor dears, they do suffer, but honestly, you can't take 'em seriously! Or can you?"⁸⁵

Talk of suffering raises another problem, for that is of course one of the touchstones of tragic theory. Francis Fergusson speaks of the play as "a realistic ensemble pathos," one which strikes a "rich chord of feel-

⁸³Ibid., p. 504. ⁸⁴Brustein, Revolt, p. 178.

⁸⁵Quoted in Carl H. Klaus, Miriam Gilbert, and Bradford S. Field, Jr., eds. Stages of Drama: Classical to Contemporary Theater (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1981), p. 579.

ing."⁸⁶ Echoes of Horace Walpole's epigram jump into our minds: life is a comedy to the man who thinks and a tragedy to the man who feels. But whether or not that is true in life (I find it rather silly myself), it is certainly too simplistic a statement to be taken as a definition of comedy or tragedy on the stage. One has only to consider the ultimate fate of Falstaff--undeniably one of theatre's greatest comic characters--and our reaction to it, to understand how possible it is to feel for the characters of comedy. In fact, the comic response, as I have defined it, is an equal amount of superiority, which distances us from the characters, and camaraderie, which brings us close to them. It is of course dangerous to get too close to them: Rousseau's feeling that Alceste was unjustly treated by Molière shows how easy it is to miss the point in comedy. The same could be said if too much sympathy is felt for the tricked Malvolio. But Molière and Shakespeare have been careful to show us at the same time that these characters are foolish--not heroic. And Chekhov has done the same. Camaraderie is an appropriate response to both Madame Ranevsky and Lopahin: for their gentleness and good will as well as their foibles. Pity and fear are not.

This is a comedy of middle age. The setting runs from May to October, not the reverse. The passions have

⁸⁶The Idea of a Theater (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949), pp. 163-64.

calmed. Ranevsky asks for no pity ("Well, what can you do with a silly woman like me?") and Lopahin has no illusions ("The whole thing's so strange. . . . If there's still time, I'm ready to. . . . Let's settle it at once--and get it over with! Without you here, I don't feel I'll ever propose to her.")⁸⁷ At the end, Lyubov returns to her lover in Paris--not the best of arrangements, but one she must accept:

why should I hide it, or keep quiet about it? I love him; yes, I love him. I do, I do. . . . He's a stone around my neck, and I'm sinking to the bottom with him --but I love him and I can't live without him.⁸⁸

It is not; perhaps, the best fulfillment of the Dionysiac myth, but it is a possibility--and a foreshadowing of what is one of the most popular forms of today's modern romance novel, the so-called "Second Chance at Love" series.

There are also young or "youngish" couples in abundance, as is appropriate in comedy, though their effect is certainly muted, at best. Dunyasha has received a proposal from Epihodov, "two-and-twenty misfortunes," but she prefers to be scorned by the pompous little brat Yasha. Semyonov-Pishchik is fascinated by the governess of the card tricks, Charlotta. Both are of uncertain age. And Varya has waited so long for Lopahin's proposal that she has turned nasty. When they are left alone for their big moment at the end, Varya ignores her "beau," who stutters

⁸⁷ Chekhov, Orchard, pp. 507, 517.

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 511.

some comments about the weather and then gratefully flees, when the first opportunity presents itself. More promise is shown in the younger daughter Anya and her perennial student. Chekhov contrives his plot so that the endings of each of the first three acts bring them together in a way. And by the end of the fourth, they are both going off "to study." Their future together is never clarified, but all signs point to it.

Chekhov is clearly working to stretch the bounds of formal comedy as far as it is possible. Still, it could easily be The Cherry Orchard which Aristotle is describing in his fifth chapter: an imitation of lesser men, characterized by their ridiculous actions. As regards the delicate mosaic of the plot, this play certainly is "an imitation of an action in the strictest sense."⁸⁹ And in his Monet-like canvás, there is plenty of room for the farcical elements to shine through. In the first few minutes, amidst all that weeping, Charlotta has said, in reference to nothing at all, "And my dog eats nuts, too." In the middle of the first tense interchange about the mortgage, Lopahin sticks his head in the door and moos like a cow. To Lyubov's greeting, "I'm so glad you're still alive," Feers responds, "The day before yesterday." And Pishchik, while leading up to an important loan request, "drops asleep and snores, but wakes up again at

⁸⁹Fergusson, Idea, p. 161.

once." ⁹⁰ This is no stuff of tragedy. Neither is it the harsh, critical tone of satire. The playwright's love for these unfortunate people extends too broadly for that; instead, he is asking us to celebrate, with him, "how stout and gamy the human thing really is."⁹¹

⁹⁰ Chekhov, Orchard, pp. 496, 497, 498, 500.

⁹¹ Scott, "Comedy," p. 32.

CHAPTER III

TRAGEDY

The first three plays of this chapter demonstrate the tragic celebration of life. But despite Miller's own claims that the fourth, Death of a Salesman, is tragic, I think it is better regarded as satire--as explained below.

Othello

Othello is chosen because it is the least political of Shakespeare's great tragedies; it is not necessary to distract ourselves with questions of kings and rights of succession. Although the hero is a "worthy governor" and commanding general of the Venetian forces in Cyprus, although in his own mysterious land he is descended "from men of royal siege" and easily faces in the Senate a man who has in his "voice potential--/ As double as the Duke's":

Let him do his spite.
My services which I have done the signiory
Shall outtongue his complaints

--even so, these public qualities figure only incidentally in the tragedy.¹ The kernel of the tragic action is to be found in Iago's cynical description of "a frail vow betwixt

¹William Shakespeare, Othello, in The Complete Works of Shakespeare, ed. Irving Ribner and George Lyman Kittredge (Waltham, MA: Ginn & Co., 1971), 2. 1. 30; 1. 2. 22; 1. 2. 13-14; 1. 2. 17-19.

an erring barbarian and a supersubtle Venetian," and the tragedy is not that his is an accurate statement, but that the devil is able to make a giant, of "constant, loving, noble nature," think it is so.²

At the deepest level of Othello's descent into hell is the fact that he is a black man, a fact that has made producers uncomfortable in various centuries. The poet minces no words. In the very first scene, Roderigo, in order to bolster his shaky opinion of himself, refers to him scornfully as "the thick-lips." He tells Desdemona's father that she is at that moment in "the gross clasps of a lascivious Moor," to which Iago gleefully adds, "an old black ram/ Is tuppung your white ewe," and that they "are now making the beast with two backs."³ But this is not a tragedy of racial problems. Othello, for all the exotic imagery that comes so easily to him, represents any man whose passionate jealousy has taken over his more reasonable nature. He is no noble black savage attempting hopelessly to match the intrigues of a wily Venetian courtesan. In fact, it is Desdemona, who, although she has shown great courage to make this match against the will of her father and the conventions of her fatherland, is the real innocent. In the fourth act, bewildered by Othello's violent behavior toward her, she is barely able to speak:

²Ibid., 1. 3. 352-53; 2. 1. 283.

³Ibid., 1. 1. 66; 1. 1. 125; 1. 1. 88-89; 1. 1. 116.

Those that do teach young babes
 Do it with gentle means and easy tasks.
 He might have chid me so; for, in good faith,
 I am a child to chiding.⁴

For sheer villainy, we have quite enough in the "motiveless malignity" of the Florentine.⁵

Othello has succeeded by virtue of his talents to the highest positions that Venice has to offer an outsider. But the jungle is still just below the elegant veneer of civilization in this play, precariously held in check, as it is in all of us. Images of violent, mysterious, exotic nature fall easily from the hero's lips. When he explains to the court why Desdemona has fallen in love with him, he says that she had merely asked him to repeat the stories he had told to her father

of antres vast and deserts idle,
 Rough quarries, rocks, and hills whose heads
 touch heaven . . .
 And of the Cannibals that each other eat,
 The Anthropophagi, and men whose heads
 Do grow beneath their shoulders. . . .
 She lov'd me for the dangers I had pass'd,
 And I lov'd her that she did pity them.⁶

The handkerchief is no mere love token, thoughtlessly bestowed:

That handkerchief
 Did an Egyptian to my mother give.
 She was a charmer, and could almost read
 The thoughts of people. . . .
 There's magic in the web of it

⁴Ibid., 4. 2. 111-14.

⁵Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lectures on Othello*, in *Shakespeare Criticism: A Selection (1623-1840)*, ed. D. Nichol Smith (London: Oxford University Press, 1946), p. 268.

⁶Shakespeare, *Othello*, 1. 3. 141-68.

A sibyl that had numb'ed in the world
 The sun to course two hundred compasses,
 In her prophetic fury sew'd the work;
 The worms were hallowed that did breed the silk;
 And it was dy'd in mummy. . . .⁷

At the end, when he realizes the full horror of what he has done, he asks to be remembered "as I am":

Nothing extenuate. . . .
 Of one that lov'd not wisely, but too well;
 . . . of one whose hand
 (Like the base Indian) threw a pearl away
 Richer than all his tribe; of one whose
 subdu'd eyes,
 Albeit unused to the melting mood,
 Drops tears as fast as the Arabian trees
 Their med'cinable gum.⁸

It is tempting to make an allegory of this story of a "free and open"⁹ Negro, a chaste woman at the heights of a corrupt society, and an insouciant Florentine devil¹⁰ --but there is no need. The people themselves, on their human level, transform the pity and fear of the audience. The levels of civilization, so delicately balanced in Othello, are stripped away expertly by Iago, layer by layer --at first by seeming carelessness, later by lying accusation. Othello is "swept by an uncontrollable passion which is not from the mind at all and only a little from the

⁷Ibid., 3. 4. 50-69. ⁸Ibid., 5. 2. 342-51.

⁹Ibid., 1. 3. 391.

¹⁰Before attempting to murder Iago for revenge, Othello cries out:

I look down towards his feet--but that's a fable.
 If that thou be'st a devil, I cannot kill thee.
 (5. 2. 286-87.) As for the "Florentine" part, Italians still look upon inhabitants of that cultured city as too smug, too supercilious for their own deserving.

heart, but principally from the bowels."¹¹ Iago, of a jealous nature himself--he suspects both Othello and Cassio of having "done my office . . . 'twixt my sheets"¹²--knows exactly what will work on the man. Brabantio has already planted the seed in his parting curse:

Look to her, Moor, if thou has eyes to see,
She has deceiv'd her father, and may thee.¹³

When in the brilliant central scene Iago has softened the Moor enough so that he dares speak more plainly and broach this matter, that she has not married into "her own clime, . . . complexion, and degree," Othello, who has answered each inference openly up to this point, shows the depth of his disturbance by changing the subject, not even acknowledging that it was spoken.¹⁴

Shakespeare celebrates life here in the zest of his incredibly subtle and varied characterizations, not only of Othello and Iago, but of Desdemona, Roderigo, Emilia, Brabantio, and Cassio. Yet, through the middle of the play, we seem to be in the presence of fools or villains--to the extent that Thomas Rymer, in his famous and foolish challenge, ends by calling it a farce: "Never was any Play fraught, like this of Othello, with improbabili-

¹¹Margaret Webster, Shakespeare Without Tears (Greenwich, CN: Fawcett Publications, A Premier Book, 1955), p. 178.

¹²Shakespeare, Othello, 1. 3. 379-80.

¹³Ibid., 1. 3. 292-93.

¹⁴Ibid., 3. 3. 230-40.

ties."¹⁵ The effect of the play, however, does not hang on the question of what day it is and how much time has gone between to allow the accusations and the attendant events to have actually taken place. The real celebration of this tragedy of "ancient terrors and primal drives"¹⁶ is in our realization that the hero Othello, who has allowed Iago to destroy him by exposing and aggravating his passionate nature, is able to recover himself and become nobler in the face of his despair. He approaches the murder as a sacrifice to the gods of justice:

It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul.
 . . . Yet I'll not shed her blood,
 Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow,
 And smooth as monumental alabaster.
 Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men.¹⁷

After the murder, when confronted with the evidence of his wife's innocence, his first reaction surges up out of the mysterious depths of hell:

O ill-starr'd wench!
 Pale as thy smock! When we shall meet at compt,
 This look of thine will hurl my soul from heaven,
 And fiends will snatch at it.
 . . . O cursed slave!
 Whip me, ye devils,
 From the possession of this heavenly sight!
 Blow me about in winds! roast me in sulphur!
 Wash me in steep-down gulf of liquid fire!

¹⁵ Thomas Rymer, A Short View of Tragedy, in The Critical Works of Thomas Rymer, ed. Curt Zimansky (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956), p. 134.

¹⁶ Alvin Kernan, Introduction to Othello, in The Complete Signet Classic Shakespeare, ed. Sylvan Barnet (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972), p. 1090.

¹⁷ Shakespeare, Othello, 5. 2. 1-6.

O Desdemona, Desdemona! dead!

Though he has been foolishly playing the "honourable murderer," when he finally realizes the extent of his wretchedness--and of his guilt--

O fool! fool! fool!

he is most gloriously a man, and the hero that we in the audience celebrate fully with Shakespeare.¹⁸

Shaw's comment, that the play "is pure melodrama," that "there is not a touch of character in it that goes below the skin"¹⁹ can be turned against him, without accepting the exaggeration. There is a ritual quality in all of this that transcends even character. We in the audience participate vicariously in the rites that link us with our origins in savagery and allow us to transcend them, as the Greeks participated in actuality in the Dionysiac procession.

Desire Under the Elms

Writing a generation later than Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller seemed to want to speak for all modern playwrights when he argued in his critical essays that the lowly are subjects as fitting for tragedy as the mighty. But he overextends--and therefore weakens--his argument when he claims that the great tragedies of the Greeks and the

¹⁸Ibid., 5. 2. 272-81; 5. 2. 294; 5. 2. 323.

¹⁹George Bernard Shaw, "Othello: Pure Melodrama," in A Casebook on "Othello," ed. Leonard F. Dean (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1961), p. 135.

Elizabethans, and the premises upon which they rest, hold no relevance for us. His statements will be quoted at the end of this chapter, in the discussion of Death of a Salesman.

Eugene O'Neill had already clearly accepted the potential for tragedy in the common man. His interest in dealing dramatically with man's primitive religious instinct, still alive in the twentieth century, has been noted in the first chapter. But he, unlike Miller, appears also to have done his homework:

I mean the one true theatre, the age-old theatre, the theatre of the Greeks and Elizabethans, a theatre that could dare to boast--without committing a farcical sacrilege--that it is a legitimate descendant of the first theatre that sprang, by virtue of man's imaginative interpretation of life, out of his worship of Dionysus. I mean a theatre returned to its highest and sole significant function as a Temple where the religion of a poetical interpretation and symbolical celebration of life is communicated to human beings, starved in²⁰ spirit by their soul-stifling daily struggle. . . .

Many modern authors have found the Greek stories interesting, but perhaps, understandably, seduced by their power, they have failed to make them their own. Whether the products of their efforts have become "farcical sacrileges" or not, they remain curious museum pieces, for the most part.

O'Neill succeeded in Desire Under the Elms because

²⁰Eugene O'Neill, quoted in Oscar Cargill, N. Bryl-lion Fagin and William F. Fisher, O'Neill and His Plays, Four Decades of Criticism (New York: New York University Press, 1961), pp. 121-22.

he wrote a tragedy in the classical "mode," eschewing, however, the familiar classical characters and trappings. His plot is essentially a retelling of the Hippolytus legend, as employed by Euripides and later by Racine. There are also echoes of the myths of Oedipus and Medea. But nowhere in the play are any of these characters named, or even alluded to. The play is set in New England in 1850, and there it stays. O'Neill gains power from the resonance of the great ancient stories in this play; and fortunately, he also gains a kind of discipline often lacking in his others. The structure is tight, the style is lyrical, and without his usual wordiness.

In order to accomplish the feat of bringing this legend into the twentieth century, of course, Euripides had to be substantially overhauled. Racine had already demonstrated how to deal metaphorically with the ancient mythology. In Phèdre, the gods are still named (though they are not present onstage, as in Euripides), but they are not so much objects of worship as extensions of Phèdre's own psychology: her fears, her dreams, her premonitions. When, as Hamlet, she contemplates suicide, her fears are of what awaits her after death. The judgment of the underworld, however, is not "what dreams may come/ When we have shuffled off this mortal coil," but very specifically, her father and grandfather:

My ancestor [Zeus, father of Minos]
Is sire and master of the gods; and heaven,
Nay all the universe, is teeming now

With my forbears. Where then can I hide?
 Flee to eternal night. What do I say?
 For there my father holds the fatal urn,
 Put by the Fates in his stern hands, 'tis said.
 Minos in Hades judges the pale ghosts.
 Ah, how his shade will tremble when his eyes
 Behold his daughter there, confessing sins--
 Crimes yet unknown in hell! What wilt thou say,
 Father, to see this hideous spectacle?²¹

Even though it's "all in the family," however, her worries are not essentially different from Hamlet's.

The process gets "secularized" still further by O'Neill, with help from Jungian psychology. The elms brood over the house throughout, as if they were themselves characters:

Two enormous elms are on each side of the house. They bend their trailing branches down over the roof. They appear to protect and at the same time subdue. There is a sinister maternity in their aspect, a crushing, jealous absorption. They have developed from their intimate contact with the life of man in the house an appalling humaneness. They brood oppressively over the house. They are like exhausted women resting their sagging breasts and hands and hair on its roof, and when it rains their tears trickle down monotonously and rot on the shingles.²²

The elms become a living embodiment of the dead mother who dominates Eben as a kind of Oedipal symbol. Indeed, here is another significant change from the original legend. It is not the father who obsesses the Hippolytus figure here, but the mother. The woman he sleeps with (This too

²¹Racine, Phaedra, pp. 214-15.

²²Eugene O'Neill, Desire Under the Elms, in Drama in the Modern World: Plays and Essays, ed. Samuel A. Weiss (Lexington, MA: D. D. Heath & Co., 1964), p. 253. As stage directions, this paragraph appears in italics in the original. The punctuation has not been reproduced here, nor will it be in other longer passages from italics in this discussion.

is an innovation: it was not in the interest or the conventions of Euripides or Racine to present the story carnally.) is not his mother. Still, the woman is present everywhere: in his memory, in her ghostly apparitions at the house, in the brooding elms, and in Abbie. Jung's explanation of the Oedipal relationship--significantly different from that of Freud--is pertinent here:

The Oedipal conflict in Jung consisted of this simultaneous longing for death and renewed life in the womb of the mother. The mother was a symbol of both the death and renewed life, and the longing for her was ambivalent. In support of this Jung found that the image of the mother divinity in religious mythology had a dual aspect. On the one hand, she appeared in a demonic or destructive form; on the other, in a benevolent or life-giving form.²³

Eben's satisfaction and his destruction are hopelessly, helplessly, tied together in the same act, with and through the same person. When he realizes this, he flies into a frenzy, but soon comes to an understanding of it, and resigns himself to his fate and his punishment. The "gods" have prevailed, even though we have never left the strictly realistic realm of modern psychology.

Realism and naturalism, though present, are inade-

²³ Leonard Chabrowe, Ritual and Pathos: The Theatre of O'Neill (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1976), pp. 111-12. O'Neill admired Jung, but not Freud. As he said later, in regard to Strange Interlude, "The book that interested me the most of all those of the Freudian school is Jung's Psychology of the Unconscious. . . . If I have been influenced unconsciously, it must have been by this book more than any other. [But] I would say that what has influenced my plays the most is my knowledge of the drama of all time--particularly Greek tragedy--and not any books on psychology." Quoted in Louis Scheaffer, O'Neill: Son and Artist (Boston: Little, Brown, & Co., 1973), p. 245.

quate, however, to explain the forces at work on this New England farm. Eben has a strong mystical sense of the supernatural, as do the others. His mother "still comes back--stands by the stove thar in the evenin'." He knows, well before he sees him, that his father has returned: "he's gittin' near--I kin feel him comin' on like yew kin feel malaria chill afore it takes ye."²⁴ The extraordinary tour de force of the central part of the play is "extra-sensory," and it is acted out in mime:

In the next room EBEN gets up and paces up and down distractedly. ABBIE hears him. Her eyes fasten on the intervening wall with concentrated attention. EBEN stops and stares. Their hot glances seem to meet through the wall. Unconsciously he stretches out his arms for her and she half rises. Then aware, he mutters a curse at himself and flings himself face downward on the bed, his clenched fists above his head, his face buried in the pillow. ABBIE relaxes with a faint sigh but her eyes remain fixed on the wall.²⁵

Both Abbie and Eben are caught in these Dionysiac powers in a way that transcends even their physical attraction. They are aware of the power from the beginning, though Abbie at first chooses to express it as a taunt:

(She laughs a low humid laugh without taking her eyes from his. A pause--her body squirms desirously--she murmurs languorously.) Hain't the sun strong an' hot? Ye kin feel it burnin' into the earth-- Nature--makin' thin's grow--bigger 'n' bigger--burnin' inside ye--makin' ye want t' grow--into somethin' else--till ye're jined with it--an' it's your'n--but it owns ye, too--an' makes ye grow bigger--like a tree--like them elums. . . . Nature'll beat ye, Eben. Ye might's well own up t' it fust's last.²⁶

²⁴O'Neill, Desire, pp. 256, 259. ²⁵Ibid., p. 268.

²⁶Ibid., pp. 264-65.

Abbie and Eben celebrate life in the figure of the child they share, a symbol of their love for each other. Speaking of the ultimate domain of Eben's dead mother, the sacrosanct parlor where Abbie has chosen to consummate this love, she says, "We made it our'n last night, didn't we? We gave it life--our lovin' did."²⁷ When the child becomes in Eben's eyes no longer a symbol of love, but merely of Abbie's access to possession of the farm and the dead stones which surround them (for an earlier brief moment, her own intention), she destroys it. Thus, she keeps the rough, earthy power of their love alive through the tragic act of the murder of the child. It is this love which sustains them in the face of their loss, of their own impending execution (or death in life imprisonment), and even in the face of Ephraim and his cold, hard God.

New Englanders especially were dismayed that one of their fellows seemed to be mocking Puritanism in this play. One critic pronounced it "better than The Scarlet Letter" in that regard.²⁸ Another with a sense of humor said, "These people--unlike the people in everyday life . . . talk freely of shameful things fit only to be printed in the Bible."²⁹ Some have even seen the father as the

²⁷Ibid., p. 272.

²⁸Louis Bromfield, quoted in Jordan Y. Miller, Eugene O'Neill and the American Critic: A Bibliographical Checklist, 2nd ed. (Hamden, CN: Archon Books, 1973), p. 272.

²⁹Scheaffer, O'Neill, p. 126.

main tragic figure in Desire Under the Elms,³⁰ but surely that is a misreading, for there is no real vitality in Ephraim; he is a dried-up symbol of old age, linked everywhere with the cruel stones of the farm. When we first see him, "his face is as hard as if it were hewn out of a boulder." In the last scene, he has no pity for his son or wife: "I got t' be--like a stone--a rock o' jedgment!"³¹ He thinks again of his plan to destroy the farm, to leave nothing but death behind him. When Abbie had reminded him earlier, "Ye can't take it with ye," Ephraim had replied:

But if I could, I would, by the Eternal! 'R if I could, in my dyin' hour, I'd set it afire an' watch it burn--this house an' every ear o' corn an' every tree down t' the last blade o' hay! I'd sit an' know it was all a-dying with me an' no one else'd ever own what was mine.³²

His three marriages, each one in turn, only made him "lonesomer 'n hell," for they "never knowed me." He even confuses himself with God, who is "lonesome" too:

God's in the stones! Build my church on a rock--out o' stones an' I'll be in them! That's what He meant t' Peter! . . . Stones. I picked 'em up an' piled 'em into walls. Ye kin read the years o' my life in them walls . . . fencin' in the fields that was mine, whar I'd made thin's grow out o' nothin'--like the will o' God, like the servant o' His hand. It wa'n't easy. It was hard an' He made me hard fur it.³³

³⁰Frederic I. Carpenter, for example, who explains: "His New England theodicy--both historically and psychologically true--gives Ephraim a towering stature, and an inward reality far greater than that of his sons or relations. It is an embodiment of the hubris of Greek tragedy, but it is also an embodiment of the highest heroism of modern man." Eugene O'Neill (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1964), p. 106.

³¹O'Neill, Desire, pp. 261, 280. ³²Ibid., p. 266.

³³Ibid., pp. 268, 282, 266.

Ephraim does not suffer, nor does he celebrate life--with the exception of the frenzied dance he does when he thinks the child is his. Even then, he does not recognize that he is only an object of mockery, as his neighbors watch him "silently, with cold, hostile eyes."³⁴

Ephraim does not understand the earthy, but transcendent power that surges through Abbie and Eben. He cannot save himself. At the beginning, Eben is like his father and brothers in the greedy contest for possession of the land and the money it represents. Had he remained thus caught, he would be no better than Willy Loman. But Abbie saves him by loving him, destroys him and herself by killing the child, but brings them both to a tragic summit Ephraim cannot even imagine. The fact that they both take responsibility for it, in defiance of the cruel Puritan God, gives them a singular kind of morality all their own:

EBEN: I'm as guilty as yew be! He was the child o' our sin.

ABBIE: . . . I don't repent that sin! I hain't askin' God t' fergive that!³⁵

"Moral" may seem an odd word to use of murderers, but I am forced to agree with the critic Jay Ronald Meyers: "To be sure, O'Neill uses an outrageous metaphor [but] the greed of the Cabots is baser than incest and even child-murder."³⁶ In the starkness of this play, in its decision

³⁴ Ibid., p. 274.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 281.

³⁶ "O'Neill's Use of the Phèdre Legend in *Desire Under the Elms*," *Revue de la littérature comparée* 41 (January-March 1967): 124.

to face absolutes, even absolute evil, O'Neill has approached the territory of Clytemnestra and Macbeth.

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? caused something of a minor explosion when it opened on Broadway in October of 1962. It was enormously painful, enormously "filthy,"³⁷ as one on the Pulitzer Prize committee labeled it, and yet enormously popular, first with the New York audiences and then around the world. Critics found George and Martha "vulgar, petty, vain, jealous, spiteful, sadistic, weak, self-pitying, oversexed and desexed, a neurotic middle-aged couple with a juvenile fixation,"³⁸ and they were insulted that, by naming his characters as he did, Albee seemed to be indicating that somehow they represent us all. The fact that they were also "understanding, witty, forgiving, warm, and courageous" did not assuage the fury of some of them, the most notable and "particularly virulent" of whom were the influential Richard Schechner and Robert Brustein.³⁹ Since then, the play has variously been labeled

³⁷C. W. E. Bigsby, who quotes Wendell V. Harris, in the Introduction to Edward Albee: A Collection of Critical Essays (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1975), p. 3. The play was denied the prize, and John Gassner and John Mason Brown, who had nominated it, resigned from the Pulitzer committee in protest. Michael E. Rutenber, Edward Albee: Playwright in Protest (New York: Drama Book Specialists, 1969), p. 97.

³⁸This list and the next, summarized by L. E. Chabrowe, "The Pains of Being Demystified," Kenyon Review 25 (Winter 1963): 146.

³⁹Foster Hirsch, Who's Afraid of Edward Albee?

a tragedy, a comedy, and a satire--but for reasons that are somewhat ambivalent in analysis.⁴⁰ "Few playwrights can have been so frequently and mischievously misunderstood, misrepresented, overpraised, denigrated, and precipitately dismissed."⁴¹ To continue this chapter, I will explain the ways in which I think the play should be seen as tragic.

Edward Albee's language in Virginia Woolf is stunning, and at times stunningly obscene and cruel. It was a reaction to his forbidden words (for no really obscene action takes place onstage) that perhaps first stirred the negative criticism. But is the language--or the concept--any worse than the way everyone's hero Hamlet deals with his mother?

Nay, but to live
In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed,
Stew'd in corruption, honeying and making love
Over the nasty sty! . . .

Modern Authors Monograph Series, no. 4 (Berkeley: Creative Arts Book Co., 1978), p. 9.

⁴⁰ Richard E. Amacher calls the work a tragedy because the couple have lost their illusions and the audience pities them. He sees only a "bleak prospect" ahead for them, however. Edward Albee, Twayne's United States Authors Series, no. 141 (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1969), p. 108. Harold Clurman calls the play a comedy, but mainly because of its humor. He finds that when Albee "seeks to introduce 'hope'" at the end, it is unconvincing. "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" in The Naked Image: Observations on the Modern Theatre (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1966), p. 21. Thomas E. Porter, on the other hand, calls it a satire, but is unable to deal with the last scene in his scheme, where, he says, it "ceases to be satire," and seems headed toward a ritual marriage. Myth and Modern American Drama (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1969), pp. 246, 242.

⁴¹ Bigsby, Introduction, p. 1.

by no means . . .
 Let the bloat King tempt you again to bed;
 Pinch wanton on your cheek; call you his mouse;
 And let him, for a pair of reechy kisses,
 Or paddling in your neck with his damn'd
 fingers,
 Make you to ravel all this matter out.

He is no less hard on himself:

Am I a coward?
 Who calls me villain? . . .
 'Swounds, I should take it! for it cannot be
 But I am pigeon-liver'd and lack gall
 To make oppression bitter, or ere this
 I should have fatted all the region kites
 With this slave's offal. Bloody, bawdy
 villain!
 Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless
 villain!
 O vengeance!
 Why, what an ass am I! This is most brave,
 That I, the son of a dear father murder'd,
 Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,
 Must (like a whore) unpack my heart with words
 And fall a-cursing like a very drab,
 A scullion!⁴²
 Fie upon't!

Why are we not shocked by this? Because it is in blank verse? Because Hamlet is dressed in Renaissance velvets? Because it is a "classic"--one whose words we know about as well as the Lord's Prayer and therefore pay about as much attention to as well?

The critics who find only violence and sexuality in Albee are missing the point, as they would be if they had said the same thing of Shakespeare. And as they did in several of the past centuries, of Catullus, described by Tennyson, who certainly was not "into masochism," as the

⁴²William Shakespeare, Hamlet, Ribner ed., 3. 4. 91-94, 181-86; 2. 2. 556-74.

"tenderest of Roman poets."⁴³ Catullus might be speaking for both George and Martha, when he says in his most famous lyric:

I hate and love. Why I do it? you might ask.
I don't know, but I feel it and am in torment.

This torment often takes the form of unreasonable fury in Catullus (as it does also in Albee's "New Carthage"):

Tell my girl to enjoy herself with her lechers,
I hope she may manage three hundred at one time,
Not loving any properly, but leaving all of them
With ruptured arteries.

Tell her not to expect my love any more,
And that it is through her fault that it has fallen
Like a flower at the edge of a meadow
When the plough passes.⁴⁴

At other times, in poems thought to have been written at the beginning of the love affair, the Roman poet can also be exquisitely tender or raucously funny.

We do not see George and Martha at the beginning of their affair, however. It has been twenty-three years of "the sewer of this marriage,"⁴⁵ and they have played

⁴³ Alfred, Lord Tennyson, "'Frater Ave atque Vale,'" in Tennyson's Poetry, ed. Robert W. Hill, Jr. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., A Norton Critical Edition, 1971), p. 450.

⁴⁴ Catullus, poems 85 and 11. The first translation is mine. The lines from poem 11 are in The Poetry of Catullus, trans. C. H. Sisson (New York: Viking Press, Viking Compass Edition, 1969), p. 29.

⁴⁵ Edward Albee, Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? in Classic Through Modern Drama: An Introductory Anthology, ed. Otto Reinert (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1970), p. 814. A psychiatrist has commented: "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? was considered unrealistic by many. I heard people say that nobody ever behaved the way those four characters did. But in my practice I have run across any

their games too long. The tenderness remains, but savagery often threatens to take over. The humor has a cruel edge --even though some of the cruelest remarks occasion only giggles from Martha, who loves her husband. But at their deepest level, they are finally only games, and we in the audience are not allowed to forget it. These are not "middle-aged types hacking away at each other, all red in the face and winded, missing half the time," as George says in a quiet moment. Nick contradicts that description, saying, "Oh, you two don't miss . . . you two are pretty good. Impressive."⁴⁶ Nick and Honey are not allowed to forget, either, that they are only an incidental part of the games; they are essentially played by and for George and Martha. Of the child, George says,

GEORGE: . . . I never want to talk about it.
 MARTHA: Yes you do.
 GEORGE: When we're alone, maybe.
 MARTHA: We're alone!
 GEORGE: Uh . . . no, Love . . . we've got guests.⁴⁷

Toward the end, frustrated by the long night and his failure to "plow" one of the "pertinent wives,"⁴⁸ Nick says, "Hell, I don't know when you people are lying, or what." And he is promptly notified of his minor role:

number of people who have been every bit as destructive, who have needed each other in just such sick ways. Virginia Woolf is in closer touch with reality than most films." Vincent Mazzanti, "The Editor's Analyst," Psychology Today, July 1968, p. 12.

⁴⁶ Albee, Virginia Woolf, p. 763. ⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 775.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 771.

MARTHA: You're damned right! 49
 GEORGE: You're not supposed to.

Thus, with the seduction of Nick disposed of as a major role in the central action or motivation, we are left to explore what is really going on in the play. The principals care nothing for the outsiders; they are secure in their own relationship. Though they talk of divorce, even of murder sometimes, it is clear that it would be as impossible for them to live without each other as it seems to be for them to live with each other. And yet, they do continue to live together. Their tenuous security is darkened by the secret illusion of their child together. But as long as it is kept secret, it remains a harmless fantasy, acknowledged as such by them both, as Albee emphasized in an interview:

INTERVIEWER: . . . Recognizing the fact that it was a symbol?

ALBEE: Indeed recognizing the fact that it was a symbol. And only occasionally being confused, when the awful loss and lack that made the creation of the symbol essential becomes overwhelming--like when they're drunk, for example. Or when they're terribly tired.

INTERVIEWER: . . . You're suggesting that George and Martha have at no point deluded themselves about the fact that they're playing a game.

ALBEE: Oh, never. Except that it's the most serious game in the world. 50

This is a point which has confused some critics, and has called forth charges that the child is "a gimmick, a trick,

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 803.

⁵⁰ William Flanagan, "Edward Albee: An Interview," Paris Review 10 (1966): 111-12.

a trap" by Schechner.⁵¹ "Truth or illusion, George," says Martha plaintively as they begin the 'exorcism.' "Doesn't it matter to you . . . at all?"⁵²

Of course, it is a matter of supreme importance to George, and to the life of their future together. Martha has told Honey about their son, in defiance of their agreement; and now that the illusion has been given a hint of public reality it can't have, it must be destroyed. It is done with a great deal of suffering and compassion. It is not revenge for the abortive coupling with Nick: that sort of thing has happened before. George sees it coming as early as Martha does, for early in the first act he refuses to let her put his hand on her breast in an embrace obviously calculated to arouse Nick. As he says later, "I don't mind your dirty underthings in public . . . well, I do mind, but I've reconciled myself to that . . . but you've moved bag and baggage into your own fantasy world now, and . . . as a result. . . ." ⁵³

George's action seems cruel. At times Martha appears to be on the brink of what she had feared for her husband; "some stupid, liquor-ridden night . . . I will go too far . . . and I'll either break the man's back . . .

⁵¹ "Who's Afraid of Edward Albee?" Tulane Drama Review 7 (Spring 1963): 8.

⁵² Albee, Virginia Woolf, p. 805. The playwright gives titles to each of his three acts: "Fun and Games," "Walpurgisnacht," and "The Exorcism."

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 786-87.

or push him off for good . . . which is what I deserve."⁵⁴
 But no matter how dominant Martha has seemed in the other
 games ("You always deal in appearances?"⁵⁵ she says sarcas-
 tically to Nick.), it is George now who is in full control.
 "Total war?" she asks. "Total," he replies.⁵⁶ But instead
 he guides her through the torment expertly, as Vergil
 guides Dante through his inferno, and he is solicitous in
 the extreme:

MARTHA: (Almost in tears) No, George; no.
 GEORGE: (Soothing) Yes, baby.
 MARTHA: No, George; please?
 GEORGE: It'll all be done with before you know it.⁵⁷

Several times along the way he asks if he can get her any-
 thing; when the ritual sacrifice is done, he offers again,
 and this time she even refuses a drink. As the play quiet-
 ly settles into its final tableau, he asks,

GEORGE: Are you all right?
 MARTHA: Yes. No.⁵⁸

The ritual has succeeded. Its purgation is complete.

For them to choose life, and to celebrate it proper-
 ly, they must choose death first, the death of the illusion.
 It has certainly been lively, but that is not the same
 thing, and George and Martha recognize that it is not.
 The celebrations of the evening, the games, the witches'
 sabbath of the Walpurgisnacht,⁵⁹ and the Latin mass for the

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 800. ⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 799. ⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 788.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 806. ⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 819.

⁵⁹ Porter quotes Stuart Atkins, a Goethe scholar, on
 the implications of this night in Faust: "The Walpurgis-

dead, in polyphonic harmony with the telling of the story of the son, have exercised their healing powers. Who's afraid of in-depth probing? "I . . . am . . . George . . . I . . . am," says Martha, for the tragic suffering has been extreme.⁶⁰ One could die as a result of it, as Lear does. But one can also live chastened and rise even higher, as Oedipus does. It is easy for me, at least, to see an Oedipus at Colonus beyond the events of this harrowing night of sacrifice and celebration.

Death of a Salesman

Death of a Salesman has been proclaimed by many, not the least vociferous of whom is Arthur Miller himself, to be the "great American drama of the mid-century,"⁶¹ the way toward tragedy in the modern age. Unfortunately, I cannot agree--although I must say I am more inclined to agree with some of the author's critical statements than I am to concur with him that their lofty ideals are embodied in this drama.

nacht is a dream sequence mirroring an inner state of moral and emotional confusion. . . . Spring rites in which the humanist might discern survivals of ancient fertility worship are viewed . . . as a cult of obscenity and bestiality, so that pregnancy and birth--the theme is traditional in the lore of witchcraft, but the emphasis given it would indicate that Faust has at least considered the possibility of Margarete's being with child--represent only ugliness and evil." Myth, p. 276.

⁶⁰ Albee, Virginia Woolf, p. 819.

⁶¹ Eric Bentley, who does not agree with the view any more than I. In Search of Theater (New York: Vintage Books, 1954), p. 84.

There may be a question, therefore, about whether this discussion belongs here with the tragedies, in the next chapter with satire, or in a chapter all to itself. But since the analysis will deal with some of the difficulties of writing tragedy in our age, it is fitting here.

Miller announced in the New York Times, about two weeks into the Broadway production, that "the common man is as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were."⁶² There is no argument there; certainly any man is as equipped to celebrate life as any other, provided he has a broad sympathy with an understanding of life in all its myriad possibilities. About ten years later, Miller continued the argument in an introduction to his collected plays. There he expanded upon his thesis in a rather confusing way, which leads one to believe he had not read Death of a Salesman in a while. But more of that later. First he takes on Aristotle and the charges of "the academy" that Loman is no hero: "I had not understood that these matters are measured by Greco-Elizabethan paragraphs" that are no longer relevant.⁶³ It is unthinkable that a man who sets out to write what he considers to be an important work of art, to "show the truth as I saw it," would not have taken more trouble to learn his business

⁶²"Tragedy and the Common Man," New York Times, 27 February 1949, sec. 2, p. 1.

⁶³Arthur Miller, Introduction to Death of a Salesman, in Playwrights on Playwriting, ed. Toby Cole (New York: Hill & Wang, A Dramabook, 1961), p. 269.

by observing those who had done it well in the past.

Perhaps he is overstating his case in order to denigrate Aristotle and his views, based, as they are, he says, on the tenets of a "slave society."⁶⁴ Had he read those Greco-Elizabethan models carefully, however, he would have discovered that these tragic men and women have reserves of strength within themselves, that are not dependent on social position. They have ambitions, dreams, and goals for themselves alone, and to try them, they are even led sometimes to defy the gods and their laws. Their ideals are not always "good," but they are not conforming, and they are not petty.

Willy Loman is a small man, in all the unfortunate senses of the word. He has lived by others' perverted American dreams--that of his brother Ben (in his imagination), "success incarnate," and that of the salesman who died "in his green velvet slippers in the smoker of the New York, New Haven and Hartford," well liked by all.⁶⁵ He has tried to transfer the dream to his sons:

WILLY: (Hanging on to his words) Oh, Ben, that's good to hear! Because sometimes I'm afraid that I'm not teaching them the right kind of-- Ben, how should I teach them?

BEN: (Giving great weight to each word, and with a certain vicious audacity) William, when I walked into the jungle, I was seventeen. When I walked out I was twenty-one. And, by God, I was rich!

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Arthur Miller, Death of a Salesman, in Masters of Modern Drama, ed. Haskell M. Block and Robert G. Shedd (New York: Random House, 1962), pp. 1028, 1039.

WILLY: . . . was rich! That's just the spirit I want to imbue them with!⁶⁶

Anyone in the audience by this point might be forgiven if he starts to become suspicious that perhaps he is not meant to accept this philosophy so eagerly as Willy does, considering the losers that Biff and Happy have become, on their father's model. Indeed, during the course of the play, Biff does realize the shallowness of it all, and even Miller in the essay describes his basically satiric direction in the play as "the wage of [Willy's] sin, which was to have committed himself so completely to the counterfeits of dignity and the false coinage embodied in his idea of success."⁶⁷

Miller goes on to say, however--and this is where we part company--that Willy "was agonized by his awareness of being in a false position, so constantly haunted by the hollowness of all he had placed his faith in," that he killed himself.⁶⁸ Where is this to be found in the play? What realization has Willy come to that the dream has tarnished?⁶⁹ "We never told the truth for ten minutes in this

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 1031.

⁶⁷ Miller, Introduction, p. 272. ⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Miller continues lamely, "That he had not the intellectual fluency to verbalize his situation is not the same thing as saying that he lacked awareness." (Ibid.) With all respect, I must insist that in a drama, it is exactly the same. We have only the words to work with; from them, we may infer the symbolism, the subtext (also of no help here), but we should not be expected to interpret by use of extrasensory perception what the author thinks is going on in his play.

house!" screams Biff, and then dissolves in Willy's arms in tears. Instead of listening to and comprehending the significance of the truth he has just heard, Willy's reaction is, "that boy is going to be magnificent!" To which Ben adds, encouraging Willy's final plan, "Yes, outstanding, with twenty thousand behind him."⁷⁰ And so the suicide is not a noble sacrifice, as with Racine's Phèdre, to "restore" the "purity" to the heavens she has defiled,⁷¹ it is for the money, nothing more--in the hopes that Biff will finally succeed with the same false dream as he has not done in the past.

One might even be able to forgive a man for false dreams, if he had captured our sympathy. But Willy Loman is not only small, he is disagreeable and mean. He is quarrelsome with everyone. Both sons receive the brunt of his impatient attacks; to Charley, whom he says is "the only friend I got,"⁷² he is downright insulting. His insufferable treatment of his boss results in his being fired from his job. but it is with his faithful, patient wife that he is finally found to be most unforgivable. Three times within the first two pages, he snaps at her for no good reason:

⁷⁰ Miller, Death, p. 1052.

⁷¹ Jean Racine, Phaedra, in Jean Racine: Five Plays, trans. Kenneth Muir (New York: Hill & Wang, A Mermaid Dramabook, 1960), p. 225.

⁷² Miller, Death, p. 1043.

LINDA: You didn't smash the car, did you?
 WILLY: (With casual irritation) I said nothing happened. Didn't you hear me?

LINDA: I just thought you'd like a change--
 WILLY: I don't want a change! I want Swiss cheese.
 Why am I always being contradicted?

LINDA: Well, after all, people had to move somewhere.
 WILLY: No, there's more people now.
 LINDA: I don't think there's more people. I think--
 WILLY: There's more people.⁷³

All right, so he's had a bad day. He has been forced to lie about almost hitting "a kid in Yonkers,"⁷⁴ and he has returned home without having sold anything. But toward the end of the first act, when he is happy, exuberantly planning the venture of the boys into the world of sporting equipment, Linda only wants to join in the family conversation:

LINDA: Isn't that wonderful?
 WILLY: Don't interrupt. What's wonderful about it?

LINDA: Maybe things are beginning to--
 WILLY: Stop interrupting!

LINDA: Oliver always thought the highest of him--
 WILLY: Will you let me talk?
 BIFF: Don't yell at her, Pop, will ya? . . .
 LINDA: Willy--
 WILLY: (Turning on her) Don't take his side all the time, goddammit!

LINDA: I'll make a big breakfast--
 WILLY: Will you let me finish?⁷⁵

All this in two pages of text asks us to strain our powers of sympathy beyond what is possible. Of course, it is realistic. All of us have yelled at our spouses or chil-

⁷³ Ibid., pp. 1020-21. ⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 1028.

⁷⁵ Ibid., pp. 1034-35.

dren at times. But by no stretch of the imagination can I say, for myself anyhow, that I felt "heroic" about it.

Willy has been shown to be a liar about his reason for returning. He is also self-contradictory in countless ways: about whether or not Biff is a lazy bum, about the value of his traveling around all those years to get experience, about who named Howard, about the worth of the Chevrolet automobile, to name a few. In fact, Miller uses Molière's old device of presenting the contradiction closely enough to the original statement that no comment is even necessary to gain a comic effect. "It would take little effort for a comic playwright to make Willy Loman the satiric object of ridicule and contempt," says Normand Berlin.⁷⁶ Of course, the same might be said of any hero. But what is Miller's intention here? We have not been encouraged to laugh at Willy at other times: is he now to be considered humorous, or merely pathetic?

It is true, that in a warm speech to the whores, Biff praises his father:

Miss Forsythe, you've just seen a prince walk by. A fine, troubled prince. A hard-working, unappreciated prince. A pal, you understand?⁷⁷

But one wonders how to take these sentiments, when we have already heard Biff call him a "stupid, selfish. . . ," and shortly we will hear, "You fake! You phony little

⁷⁶ The Secret Cause: A Discussion of Tragedy (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981), p. 146.

⁷⁷ Miller, Death, p. 1047.

fake!"⁷⁸ Framed in such a way, what are we to make of "prince"? Miller is sending crossed signals, and it is difficult to understand his reason for it. He could have left out the most extreme unpleasant characteristics, or tried to deal with them differently, if he had been aiming to present to us an admirable, heroic portrait. But in Death of a Salesman, where is the "sense of personal dignity" that he claims to be at the base of modern tragedy? We would all agree that the value one places on himself does not (or at any rate, should not) come from money. But Willy has no other value--and no dignity. The extent of Arthur Miller's (perhaps inadvertant) achievement in the satiric genre may be understood when one considers that the Russians made an unauthorized film of the play in 1961, called You Can't Cross the Bridge, "presumably sponsored to illustrate American decadence."⁷⁹

For satiric it is. The man and his principles are condemned by his every action. If the audience feels anything of pity at the end, it must be for the long-suffering Linda. But fear? Fear that the same thing could happen to us? No way. The play itself undermines any possibility that we could follow Willy with any self-respect. Fear that we have witnessed the workings of the

⁷⁸ Ibid., pp. 1025, 1049.

⁷⁹ Haskell M. Block and Robert G. Shedd, Introduction to Death of a Salesman, in Masters of Modern Drama (New York: Random House, 1962), p. 1019.

unalterable laws of the universe? That is even sillier. The cosmos does not deal in economic dreams, perverted or otherwise. In fact, why blame all this on Americanism at all? Does Willy's dream mesh in any way with that of Thomas Jefferson or any of the other Founding Fathers?

CHAPTER IV

SATIRE

This chapter began already in the discussion of Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman, which, despite claims of the author and some critics that it is a tragedy, was found to be satiric. Discussion of four other satires will complete the thesis. Though my own preference for tragedy and comedy may be obvious, I have tried to choose strong plays here, so that the analyses will rise above mere negative comment.

Troilus and Cressida

Shakespeare commentators, when they approach Troilus and Cressida, often treat it with a mixture of dismay and a sense of betrayal. How could "our man" do this to us? We thought we knew what he was about, and suddenly we find ourselves in a world we do not recognize! As Virgil K. Whitaker concludes, "Shakespeare often tells us what we can or should be. Here he tells us what, unfortunately, we all too often are."¹ As if to warn us at the outset (but with absolutely no apologies for his be-

¹ Introduction to The History of Troilus and Cressida, in William Shakespeare: The Complete Works, ed. Alfred Harbage (New York: Viking Press, 1969), p. 979.

havior), the poet begins with a prologue that starts out friendly enough, and seems to be dealing with the same problem as the more famous "O for a Muse of fire" speech in Henry V--how to put a whole war onstage:

Can this cockpit hold
The vasty fields of France? Or may we cram
Within this wooden O the very casques²
That did affright the air at Agincourt?

But suddenly the familiarity slips away. What this new prologue says is essentially: "screw you" out there, if what you are about to see is not to your taste:

Like, or find fault; do as your pleasures are:
Now good or bad, 'tis but the chance of war.³

Perhaps we have not heard correctly? --the playwright has always in the past, in prologue or in epilogue, solicitously courted our approval. But immediately afterwards the hero of the piece appears. He speaks of love,

I tell thee I am mad
In Cressid's love. Thou answer'st "She is fair"!
Pour'st in the open ulcer of my heart
Her eyes, her hair . . .

and war,

Peace, you ungracious clamours! peace, rude sounds!
Fools on both sides, Helen must needs be fair⁴
When with your blood you daily paint her thus!

Ulcers? Fools? At Ilium? We begin to sense that we are in for a rough evening of it.

²William Shakespeare, Henry V, Ribner ed., Prologue, 1, 11-14.

³William Shakespeare, Troilus and Cressida, Ribner ed., Prologue, 30-31.

⁴Ibid., 1. 1. 48-51; 1. 1. 85-87.

As Coleridge remarked, with commendable restraint, "there is none of Shakespeare's plays harder to characterize."⁵ Some critics who have tried to do it have found themselves bordering on Orwell's Newspeak: "a tragedy deliberately thwarted by the savagery of its comic insight."⁶ The problems of Shakespeare's original Folio editors have already been mentioned in the first chapter. Modern editors, although many of them claim that it is his most "modern" play, are equally confused about its place in the canon. Of the dozen or so collected works I surveyed, half have it with the tragedies, half with the comedies. Bertrand Evans, who opts for comedy, spends twenty pages scolding the playwright with terms like "mismanagement" and "opportunity missed."⁷ As if poor William would have done something else if he had only been able to think of it.

It will be my contention that Shakespeare knew exactly what he was doing. The play is from his great middle period, after all. It is not surrounded by the endless Henry VI plays and Titus Andronicus, not by Pericles and Henry VIII, but by Hamlet and Measure for Measure.

[Its] quality is one of energetic experimentation

⁵Samuel Taylor Coleridge, quoted in Discussions of Shakespeare's Problem Comedies, ed. Robert Ornstein (Boston: D. C. Heath & Co., 1961), p. 1.

⁶J. C. Oates, "The Ambiguity of Troilus and Cressida," Shakespeare Quarterly 17 (Spring 1966): 150.

⁷Comedies, pp. 167-85.

--experimentation not of the amateur, unsure of his materials, nor of the craftsman temporarily exhausted. [Rather it] reminds one of a study by Michelangelo, boldly and completely rendered in some places, lightly blocked in elsewhere . . . sometimes obscure but never tentative.⁸

What he was doing was satire. It is not a celebration of life, in opposition to what the sciences tell us are the basic motives of the universe; rather, it is a play that is caught up in those very motives of entropy, inertia, irrationality, and death. "Like" it, as the prologue says, "or find fault; do as your pleasures are." As he knows, the most maddening thing about it is that nowhere can we fault him for not showing us the truth.

Entropy is familiar enough to us today. We may remember Yeats's famous line, "Things fall apart: the center cannot hold."⁹ The great set speech of Ulysses (62 verses) on "degree" deals with the problem philosophically, as he warns the squabbling Greek generals that if their opportunities are slipping away, it is because they have renounced their obligations:

Degree being vizarded,
 . . . when the planets
 In evil mixture to disorder wander,
 What plagues and what portents, what mutiny,
 What raging of the sea, shaking of earth,
 Commotion in the winds! . . .

⁸Daniel Seltzer, Introduction to The History of Troilus and Cressida, in The Complete Signet Classic Shakespeare, ed. Sylvan Barnet (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972), p. 1001.

⁹William Butler Yeats, "The Second Coming," in Reading Modern Poetry, ed. Paul Engle and Warren Carrier (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman & Co., 1968), p. 130.

O, when degree is shak'd . . .
The enterprise is sick!

He urges that they take action, for "Troy in our weakness stands, not in her strength."¹⁰ Troilus too knows the "evil mixture" by the end of the play. He stands with Ulysses and Thersites, balanced between disbelief and nausea, as he watches Cressida surrender herself to Diomedes--and not for the first time, apparently: "I had your heart before; this follows it," he says of Troilus' love token to her. Our youthful hero at first weakly claims it cannot be the same woman:

This she? No, this is Diomed's Cressida!
If beauty have a soul, this is not she. . . .

But his world is slipping away beneath him.

Cressid is mine, tied with the bonds of heaven.
Instance, O instance! strong as heaven itself:
The bonds of heaven are slipp'd, dissolv'd,
and loos'd.¹¹

The world is a different place from when their love was fresh and new.

Or is it? We in the audience have seen what Troilus did not. In her first soliloquy,

But more in Troilus thousandfold I see
Than in the glass of Pandar's praise may be.
Yet hold I off. . . .
Men prize the thing ungain'd more than it is,¹²

Cressida echoes Shakespeare's bitterest sonnet:

¹⁰Shakespeare, Troilus, 1. 3. 83-103; 1. 3. 137.

¹¹Ibid., 5. 2. 82; 5. 2. 135-36; 5. 2. 152-54.

¹²Ibid., 1. 2. 267-72.

Th' expense of spirit in a waste of shame
 Is lust in action . . .
 Enjoy'd no sooner but despised straight;
 Past reason hunted, and no sooner had,
 Past reason hated, as a swallowed bait,¹³
 On purpose laid to make the taker mad.

Troilus, of course, did not hear either the soliloquy or the sonnet. But surely he heard himself say, at the highest moment of anticipation:

I am giddy; expectation whirls me round.
 Th' imaginary relish is so sweet
 That it enchants my sense. What will it be
 When that the wat'ry palates taste indeed
 Love's thrice-repured nectar? Death, I
 fear me.

And he heard Cressida respond (in prose): "They say all lovers swear more performance than they are able."¹⁴
 Death? Disappointment? Are we sure this is a love scene?

The morning after Pandarus has led them to a bed with the smirking admonition, "press it to death,"¹⁵ their scene deliberately invites comparison with the same point in Romeo and Juliet, where Shakespeare had written one of the most exquisite aubades in literature:

JULIET: Wilt thou be gone? It is not yet near day.
 It was the nightingale, and not the lark,
 That pierc'd the fearful hollow of thine ear.
 Nightly she sings on yond pomegranate tree.
 Believe me, love, it was the nightingale.
 ROMEO: It was the lark, the herald of the morn;
 No nightingale. Look, love, what envious streaks
 Do lace the severing clouds in yonder East. . . .
 Let me be ta'en, let me be put to death.

¹³Sonnet 129, Ribner ed., p. 1721.

¹⁴Shakespeare, Troilus, 3. 2. 15-19; 3. 2. 77-78.

¹⁵Ibid., 3. 2. 196.

I am content, so thou wilt have it so.¹⁶

Troilus, on the other hand, can hardly wait to get away.

TROILUS: Dear, trouble not yourself; the morn is
cold. . . .

CRESSIDA: Good morrow then.

TROILUS: I prithee now, to bed.

CRESSIDA: Are you aweary of me?

TROILUS: O Cressida! but that the busy day
Wak'd by the lark hath rous'd the ribald crows,
And dreaming night will hide our joys no longer,
I would not from thee. . . .

CRESSIDA: You men will never tarry.
O foolish Cressid! I might have still held off,
And then you would have tarried.¹⁷

It never was the world of romance that Troilus thought he
was in; we have known it, even if he did not.

The heroes of war fare no better. Achilles sulks
in his tent with his "masculine whore,"

Having his ear full of his airy fame,
Grows dainty of his worth and in his tent
Lies mocking our designs. With him Patroclus
Upon a lazy bed the livelong day
Breaks scurrile jests.¹⁸

His colleague Ulysses plots against him, cynical in his
assurance of political advantage, no matter what the out-
come:

If the dull brainless Ajax come safe off,
We'll dress him up in voices; if he fail,
Yet go we under our opinion still
That we have better men. But, hit or miss . . .

¹⁶Ribner ed., 3. 5. 1-18.

¹⁷Shakespeare, Troilus, 4. 2. 1-18. Our satire has
also inspired satiric comment from the critics. George
Bernard Shaw, for example, calls Cressida "Shakespear's
[sic] first real woman." In Shaw on Shakespeare, ed. Ed-
mund Wilson (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1961), p. 195.

¹⁸Shakespeare, Troilus, 5. 1. 16; 1. 3. 144-48.

Ajax employ'd plucks down Achilles' plumes.¹⁹

Inertia and irrationality, sometimes in the guise of reason, infect all the generals. As Thersites says, "Agamemnon is a fool to offer to command Achilles; Achilles is a fool to be commanded of Agamemnon; Thersites is a fool to serve such a fool; and Patroclus is a fool positive."²⁰ But what a difference between this and what Feste tells Olivia, or what Lear's fool says of him! In this play, we accept it; "the bitter disposition of the time"²¹ has infected all. Shakespeare does not love these people, nor does he pity them. And he does not expect either response from us in the audience.

He has deliberately taken "one of the great love stories of the Western world"²² and made it nasty. He has deliberately transformed the duel of the giants Achilles and Hector, at the epic finale of the Iliad, into the savage, cowardly murder of an unarmed hero--one who, in fact, had just refused to take his own advantage when the situation was reversed. Some great critics, like George Lyman Kittredge, who usually makes more sense, have wrestled with it:

For the idea that Shakespeare has cynically degraded the heroes of the Iliad, Thersites is mainly respon-

¹⁹Ibid., 1. 3. 381-83. ²⁰Ibid., 2. 3. 56-59.

²¹Ibid., 4. 1. 48.

²²Irving Ribner, ed., Introduction to Troilus and Cressida, in The Complete Works of Shakespeare (Waltham, MA: Ginn & Co., 1971), p. 1105.

sible. But . . . nobody in the play takes him seriously. His satirical comments upon the Grecian and Trojan heroes do not express Shakespeare's opinion. . . . To the Elizabethans Thersites was simply a comic chorus. [The Homeric heroes] are still heroic, both in speech and action; and in their human imperfections they are true to Homeric portrayal. The only exception is the treachery of Achilles. That is, no doubt, a flaw, but it is a negligible detail.²³

Are we talking about the same play? Thersites may not be Shakespeare's "voice," but he certainly provides good, reliable program notes: "Lechery, lechery! still wars and lechery! Nothing else holds fashion."²⁴

It is instructive to learn that Juvenal was "much in vogue" in England during the time of writing (1600),²⁵ but we did not need to be told this in order to understand that this play is a supremely exciting example of the third genre of drama, satire.

Hedda Gabler

An interesting perspective on Ibsen's work can be gained from some remarks of Anton Chekhov:

in life people do not shoot themselves, or hang themselves, or fall in love, or deliver themselves of clever sayings every minute. They spend most of their time eating, drinking, running after women or men,

²³Quoted in Ribner, *ibid.*, p. 1107. Thersites' "simple comic chorus" deals in such imagery as the following: diseased boils (2. 1. 6), loathsome scabs (2. 1. 25), the "Neapolitan bone-ache": syphilis (2. 3. 17), lepers (2. 3. 31), whores and cuckolds (2. 3. 66), skin diseases (2. 3. 68), ruptures, catarrhs (5. 1. 17), "bladders full of impostume" (5. 1. 19), lice (5. 1. 62), and sewers (5. 1. 73).

²⁴Shakespeare, Troilus, 5. 2. 192-93.

²⁵Ribner, Introduction, p. 1106.

talking nonsense. It is therefore necessary that this should be shown on the stage. A play ought to be written in which the people should come and go, dine, talk of the weather, or play cards, not because the author wants it but because that is what happens in real life. Life on the stage should be as it really is, and the people, too, should be as they are and not on stilts.²⁶

Though one may want to quarrel with terms like 'necessary,' 'should,' and 'ought,' the kind of "advice" that Aristotle never uttered in his descriptive formulas, it will be granted that these statements are appropriate to the writer of comedy. And though Chekhov's scenes are much more controlled, more orchestrated than scenes from actual life, he was able to create a loving simulation of life in his delicate Russian adagios for a dying society. The paragraph above, however, will be of no use to the writer of tragedy. It will now be seen how Ibsen used some of the same idea--the realistic approach; but rejected most of it --the seemingly random plotting--and gave us satires.

Since people do shoot themselves, and all the rest of it, in Ibsen's plays, there has been much loose talk of his "modern tragedies" in the last hundred years. This view is further obscured by the fact that he graduated very early from the pièce bien faite formula and found in the Greeks a much more satisfying model. He "usually begins to develop his drama where other writers end theirs."²⁷ We are stunned with admiration for his achievement, since

²⁶Quoted in Brustein, Revolt, p. 142.

²⁷James Huneker, Iconoclasts: A Book of Dramatists (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1928), p. 99.

Ibsen had no familiar mythical stories upon which to build. All information received by the audience about the personalities of the characters and the background of the events must arise naturally out of the everyday situations seen onstage. And they do: he has an uncanny ability to place his characters in opportunities which will reveal the most about them.

He finds the leisure to do it convincingly through a use of motif, as in music. To take a typical instance, though it is only one of the many motivations leading to the suicide: very early in the play we discover that Hedda is probably pregnant upon her return from a six-month wedding journey. Minutes into the play, Aunt Juliane, who has seen her the previous evening, asks Tesman whether or not he has anything "special" to tell her, "any expectations?" Tesman, however, is not too bright; and after he replies that he has "every expectation of becoming a professor one of these days," a revelation which is no news to either of them, she does not press the point.²⁸ The question hangs in the air over the stage, waiting to be picked up by someone else. Within a minute or so, Hedda herself appears, wearing a "tasteful, somewhat loose-fitting negligee."²⁹ Nothing is made of it. But a couple of

²⁸Henrik Ibsen, Hedda Gabler, trans. Eva Le Gallienne, in Six Plays by Henrik Ibsen (New York: The Modern Library, 1957), p. 348.

²⁹Ibid., p. 351.

minutes later, Tesman, paying his wife an innocent compliment, tells his aunt to "take a good look at Hedda--see how lovely she is. . . . I think she's filled out a bit while we've been away." It is Hedda's response, "Oh, do be quiet. . . !" which tells us to pay attention to it. Still in the first act, poor Tesman tries again, this time with Judge Brack:

TESMAN: But what do you say to Hedda, eh? Doesn't she look flourishing? She's positively--
 HEDDA: For heaven's sake, leave me out of it.³⁰

Hedda's response is even stronger, for a child to her represents not a joy, but a trap which she will not tolerate.

The point here is that these remarks do not stand out; they come in the midst of many other remarks on many other subjects. Tesman has no idea that Hedda is pregnant (though the aunt does), nor what her reaction might be to it if she were. And we in the audience do not find out for certain until the last act, when the husband does. Even then, however, it is not a happy (or sad) announcement. It is all managed by means of the sardonic indirection so typical of Hedda when she cannot face something:

HEDDA: Then--perhaps I'd better tell you that--just now--at this time-- (Violently breaking off) No, no; ask Aunt Juliane. She'll tell you all about it.

TESMAN: Oh, I almost think I understand, Hedda.

She quashes his enthusiasm on the pretext that "the ser-

³⁰ Ibid., pp. 353, 366.

vants will hear," and ends by saying, "Oh God, I shall die--I shall die of all this. . . . It's all so ludicrous."³¹ The words carry their own prophetic weight.

The fact that Ibsen was able to manage all the events and motives leading up to the suicide of the bride a mere day and a half after her return from the honeymoon --and make it believable--is dramatically exciting. He learned his economy, and perhaps his psychology, from Sophocles and Euripides, and it paid off. But we should not be misled. He did not learn from them--or rather he deliberately rejected--their tragic view of life. Hedda does shoot herself at the end; but Judge Brack, who has the curtain line, "Good God--but--people don't do such things!"³² is with Chekhov. It is he who guides our thinking about the act, and it is hardly a remark inviting celebration. What does it all mean?

There are other Dionysiac symbols in Hedda Gabler, in addition to the conception of a child. But they too are infected, shot through with "the ultra-violet light of Ibsen's satiric glance,"³³ and turned against Hedda. Abundant hair is an ancient fertility motif, which the playwright employs in the same repetitive way as the pregnancy. Thea has it: the stage directions tell us that "her hair is unusually fair, almost white-gold and ex-

³¹Ibid., p. 417.

³²Ibid., p. 428.

³³Robert M. Adams, "Ibsen on the Contrary," in Modern Drama, ed. Anthony Caputi (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1966), p. 346.

tremely thick and wavy"; Hedda does not. Hers is "an agreeable medium-brown, but not especially abundant." To her, Thea Elvsted is only "the girl with that irritating mass of hair"³⁴ from their provincial school days. Thea's hair blends with Lövborg's in yet another motif of Dionysus:

HEDDA: At ten o'clock he will be here, with vine leaves in his hair.. Flushed and fearless! . . . He'll be a free man forever and ever.

By this, Hedda means of course that he will be free from Thea--free to submit himself again to her own frigid charms.

MRS. ELVSTED: You have some hidden reason for all this, Hedda.

HEDDA: Yes, I have. For once in my life I want the power to shape a human destiny. . . .

MRS. ELVSTED: But what about your husband?

HEDDA: Do you think he's worth bothering about! If you could only understand how poor I am; and that you should be allowed to be so rich!-- (She flings her arms round her passionately) I think I shall have to burn your hair off, after all!³⁵

Ibsen's joke on Hedda--and it is not lost on her--is that Thea the mouse has fulfilled the destiny announced by her abundant hair. She and Lövborg have created a child together, in the "remarkable" (Tesman's assessment)³⁶ manuscript. But Hedda, who is pregnant physically, feels essentially barren. She has had her time with Lövborg, a time when she was "greedy for life,"³⁷ and she has rejected it for fear of scandal. When she feels herself trapped in the final scene, with only the distasteful ex-

³⁴Ibsen, *Hedda*, pp. 356, 351, 355.

³⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 395-96.

³⁶*Ibid.*, p. 400.

³⁷*Ibid.*, p. 389.

pectation of a triangular affair with Brack to occupy her days, she does not break out and seek a new life as Thea had found the courage to do. She opts for death.

Is she a tragic heroine, as Phèdre is, in her sacrifice to restore the "purity" of her grandfather's universe? Far from it. The word 'ridiculous' dominates Ibsen's notes on the play:

This is the enormous difference: Mrs. Elvsted "works for [Lövborg's] moral improvement." But for Hedda he is the object of cowardly, tempting daydreams.

Then comes the burlesque note: both T. and Mrs. E. are going to devote their future lives to interpreting the mystery.

Life becomes for Hedda a ridiculous affair that isn't "worth seeing through to the end."

CONCLUSION: Life isn't tragic. . . . Life is ridiculous. . . . And that's what I can't bear.

Men--in the most indescribable situations how ridiculous they are.³⁸

Does the play actually bear out the intentions expressed in the author's notes for it? According to Caroline Mayer-son it does: Hedda "wears the mask of tragedy, but Ibsen makes certain that we see the horns and pointed ears of the satyr protruding from behind it."³⁹ In the play's final "burlesque," Thea has recovered remarkably quickly

³⁸ "Notes for Hedda Gabler," in Robert W. Corrigan, The Modern Theatre (New York: Macmillan Co., 1964), pp. 336-38.

³⁹ "Thematic Symbols in Hedda Gabler," in Ibsen: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Rolf Fjelde, Twentieth Century Views (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, A Spectrum Book, 1965), p. 138.

from the death of her lover and the father of their "child." And Tesman, who has scarcely been touched by Hedda, who spent his honeymoon with Norway's social "catch" of the season in "a lot of dirty bookshops . . . making endless copies of antiquated manuscripts," is in the next room doing what he does best: "sorting out and arranging other people's papers."⁴⁰

There will be no such epilogue to this story as there is with Charles Bovary:

The voluptuousness of his grief was, however, incomplete. . . . One day . . . he met Rodolphe. . . . Charles was lost in reverie at this face that she had loved. He seemed to see again something of her in it. It was a marvel to him. He would have liked to have been this man. . . .

Rodolphe noticed it, and he followed the succession of memories that crossed his face. . . . There was at last a moment when Charles, full of a sombre fury, fixed his eyes on Rodolphe, who, in something of fear, stopped talking. But soon the same look of weary lassitude came back to his face.

"I don't blame you," he said. . . .

He even added a fine phrase, the only one he ever made--

"It is the fault of fatality."⁴¹

Tesman is not (even) Charles--who himself is on a level only slightly above comatose. "A man who longs for his half worn-out slippers on his wedding trip is hardly a fit companion for a woman who amuses herself by playing with pistols."⁴² Once the scandal of the demise of General

⁴⁰Ibsen, Hedda, pp. 373, 425.

⁴¹Gustave Flaubert, Madame Bovary, trans. Eleanor Marx-Aveling (New York: Washington Square Press, 1943), pp. 369-70.

⁴²Orley I. Holtan, Mythic Patterns in Ibsen's Last Plays (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1970), p. 87.

Gabler's daughter dies down, and it will very quickly, life will plod forward. Hedda's death will have made very little impression. It will certainly not be the one she perhaps intended--for herself or for Lövborg. Before she heard the real circumstances of his shabby death, she had said,

There is beauty in this. . . . Ejlert Lövborg has made up his own account with life. He had the courage to do--the one right thing.

Afterwards, she is repelled:

How horrible! Everything I touch becomes ludicrous and despicable! --It's like a curse!⁴³

In the end she gives in to the curse.

These deaths are not the fulfillment of something; they are simply the end, final and dismal. And the life which continues is no better. Ibsen has as often been compared to Dostoevsky as to the Greeks. We have the Ivans, the Raskolnikovs; but where is Alyosha? Sonia? Myshkin? There is a whole level of awareness in the novels which the playwright refuses to show us. It is like driving through a glorious Alpine landscape on a day of low-hanging clouds. As Robert Brustein says, Ibsen's revolt is "total":

he is dissatisfied with the whole of Creation and not just certain contemporary aspects of it. For Ibsen's deepest quarrel is probably less with those pillars of church, state, and community who dominate his plays than with the supreme authority figure, God himself.⁴⁴

⁴³Ibsen, Hedda, pp. 421, 424.

⁴⁴Revolt, p. 40.

It is the dark, unloving, unforgiving view of the satirist.

Marat/Sade

It should be evident that the spirit of doubt, the spirit of questioning, the spirit of skepticism is at the ground of the satiric genre. Rarely in drama is this spirit found so openly as in The Persecution and Assassination of Marat as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton Under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade. The title tells us much. Here is a play within a play, written and performed by lunatics.. Since Marat and de Sade are such outspoken figures of their time, Weiss uses the occasion to fashion a debate of sorts on the subject of revolution. But 'labyrinth' may be a more appropriate word to use to describe the play's construction than 'debate,' for ideas are explored, plot elements occur, seemingly at random, and no clear pattern emerges. Some critics have said quite frankly that there are in fact no ideas here, or at least none worth mentioning. As one put it most succinctly, "if Marat/Sade is a problem play, the problem would seem to be: what is the problem?"⁴⁵

It may be just as correct to say that there are too many ideas, handled in quite an indiscriminate manner. All sides of the "problem" are given--including the overwhelming impression that it is all nonsense--and all

⁴⁵Michael Goldman, Review of Marat/Sade, The Nation, 21 February 1966, p. 222.

sides seem to receive equal weight. Weiss himself appears to have realized this after the fact, for he lamented to a New York Times reporter that the play is "perhaps too open to interpretation."⁴⁶ Possibly in an attempt to correct this, he has written at least four different endings,⁴⁷ and made several comments in interviews, all of which clarify nothing. In another Times interview, for example, on the same page he said both

the whole play for me, of course, is very personal. On the one side, I'm the individual who thinks it's hopeless to change anything in society . . . whatever we do is just doomed to be a disaster. That's the point of de Sade;

and

Personally, of course, I am for Marat because I think the things he says [his "ideal socialism"] are the right things to do.⁴⁸

As if to emphasize the latter view, he moved from Sweden, where he had lived since before World War II, to East Germany. And he has claimed that an East German production, emphasizing the ideology of the play, has more closely rendered his meaning than the world-famous Peter Brook extravaganza for the Royal Shakespeare Company in

⁴⁶Quoted in Oliver Clausen, "Weiss/Propagandist and Weiss/Playwright," New York Times Magazine, 2 October 1966, p. 131.

⁴⁷Carol Rosen, Plays of Impasse: Contemporary Drama Set in Confining Institutions (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 98.

⁴⁸Quoted in A. Alvarez, "Peter Weiss: The Truths that Are Uttered in a Madhouse," New York Times, 26 December 1965, sec. 2. p. 3.

1964. Unfortunately, Weiss should have realized that he lost his case for a socialist Lehrstück à la Brecht, if that was really his intention, before he began, simply by placing his ideas against the background of the setting he chose. The asylum wins out over all else in this play. As Wilfred Sheed says,

For flat criticism that completely misses the point, there is nothing to compare with an author's explanation of his own work. . . . Mr. Weiss is reported to have Marxist sympathies himself, but if so this is a classic case of the artist's powerful subterranean drive to subvert his own ideology--or in this case, all ideology. He has used tricks whose implications he has not been willing to understand.⁴⁹

We are reminded again how careful we must be when we listen to the author instead of to the play, when trying to determine the tone.

A final comment from the "too open" interview, I find incredibly naive. Weiss said, "The greatest danger, as I see it, is that one might come to prize an artistic work for its own sake rather than for the view it propagates."⁵⁰ Sorry. It is just that "danger" that I find to be the play's strength: for it is a fascinating medley (satura) of song, mime, poetry, doggerel, argument, threats, obscenities, grotesqueries, and just plain Artaudian noise. A true pastiche--so filled with ironies that we in the audience are never sure of our ground. One can

⁴⁹"Bathtub Nights," Commonweal, 21 January 1966, p. 476.

⁵⁰Clausen, "Weiss/Propagandist," p. 131.

not call a play so fundamentally ironic and skeptical a "celebration of life," but for a lively evening of "total theatre," there is probably nothing like it. Many have expressed sentiments like William Oliver's, of Peter Brook's production in particular, that "it was one of the unforgettable evenings of theatre that I will treasure to the day I die."⁵¹

As the play opens, we are shown the setting of the bathhouse in the Charenton asylum near Paris. It is historically true that during this period, wealthy Parisian bourgeois used to entertain themselves by driving out from the city to see the little theatricals presented by the demented patients. Coulmier, the director of the hospital, and his wife and daughter are part of the audience with us, and they take a prominent place at the edge of the stage. As we enter, the inmates gradually come onto the stage as well. In attendance also are male nurses and some nuns, played by "athletic-looking men," according to the stage directions.⁵² Coulmier rises to announce the procedure and to congratulate himself on how enlightened they--we--all are in these modern days of Napoleon and the

⁵¹ "Marat/Sade in Santiago," Educational Theatre Journal 19 (1967): 489.

⁵² Peter Weiss, The Persecution and Assassination of Marat as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton Under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade, in Classic Through Modern Drama: An Introductory Anthology, ed. Otto Reinert (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1970), p. 852.

Declaration of the Rights of Man.

Charlotte Corday enters, and we find that she is not a wild-eyed revolutionary assassin, but--at least in de Sade's production--a girl who "has sleeping sickness also melancholia."⁵³ She walks through her part like a zombie, and has to be roused from her torpor when toward the end of the play, it is finally time for her to commit her murder. Duperret, her Platonic lover, says the Herald, "brings a touch of high urbanity" to the proceedings.⁵⁴ However, he spends most of the next two hours trying to get his hands and lips on all the available (and not readily available) sexual parts of Charlotte Corday. The play is filled with ironies, which intrude just at the moment when we think we have a handle on the proceedings.

Marat the rationalist, speaks with great passion, whereas Sade, who defends passion, is considerably cooler. . . . The would-be rationalist, Marat, suffers from a skin disease that may be psychosomatic. Played by a paranoiac, he is dramatized as a paranoiac. . . . Act II opens with his imaginary Bastille Day speech, which he does not live to deliver, since he is murdered on July 13. His paranoia turns out to be justified.⁵⁵

There is a chorus which breaks out into song occasionally--apparently when the plot threatens to start making sense. For example, in the "homage to Marat":

Marat we won't dig our own bloody graves
Marat we've got to be clothed and fed
Marat we're sick of working like slaves

⁵³ Ibid., p. 855.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ruby Cohn, "Marat/Sade: An Education in Theatre," Educational Theatre Journal 19 (1967): 480.

Marat we've got to have cheaper bread
 We crown you with these leaves Marat
 because of the laurel shortage . . .
 Good old Marat
 By your side we'll stand or fall
 You're the only one that we can trust at all.
 . . . Our lovely new leaders come
 they give us banknotes which we're told
 are money just as good as gold
 but they're only good for wiping your bum. . . .
 Freedom Freedom Freedom.⁵⁶

The stage directions tell us "the unrest grows." Coulmier
 knocks with his stick and scolds de Sade for letting it
 get out of hand. De Sade does not listen to him.

Marat proclaims, "I am the Revolution."⁵⁷ It is
 the opening salvo of the debate. Basically the sides represented
 are "Marat's passionate commitment to collective
 action for social reform and Sade's sceptical withdrawal
 into anarchic individualism."⁵⁸ Sade has seen it all, has
 realized the futility of it all, and has come to understand
 life in the only way that he can make sense of it: in his
 own personal, even subconscious, even bodily terms.

Ultimately the two opponents argue each other to
 an impasse. Marat laments:

Why is everything so confused now
 Everything I wrote or spoke
 was considered and true
 each argument was sound
 And now
 I doubt
 Why does everything sound false

⁵⁶Weiss, Marat/Sade, pp. 857-59. ⁵⁷Ibid., p. 862.

⁵⁸Otto Reinert, Comment on Marat/Sade, in Classic Through Modern Theatre: An Introductory Anthology (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1970), p. 927.

while Sade concludes:

I do not know myself
 No sooner have I discovered something
 than I begin to doubt it. . . .
 I do not know if I am hangman or victim.⁵⁹

Meanwhile, we seem to have come no closer to the assassination of Marat, as it has been promised us. For a moment about a third of the way through, the thing had seemed almost ready to conclude, for Charlotte Corday had her knife poised over Marat. But de Sade stopped the action in the very next moment. Later on, it is repeated, and stopped again by a scene entitled "Interruptus"--a word which by now we realize could well be a symbol for the plot line as well as the play's sexual overtones.

But the assassination does finally come. Marat, after having been killed, rises from his bathtub and exits--or rather the actor does. While Coulmier and his family are congratulating de Sade on his play, behind their backs, there is a real revolution brewing in the bathhouse. The ending is particularly striking: all are marching, and calling "in confused but rhythmic shouts in time to the marching":

Charenton Charenton
 Napoleon Napoleon
 Nation Nation
 Revolution Revolution
 Copulation Copulation.⁶⁰

Coulmier orders the male attendants to stifle the madmen.

⁵⁹Weiss, Marat/Sade, pp. 910, 872.

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 922.

They do so with extreme violence, and de Sade rises above it all on a chair, laughing sardonically. Had he planned it all, including even this "surprise ending"? We do not know. The action simply stops. The play has self-destructed before our very eyes.

After a moment of discomfort, the audience applauds. Instead of taking a curtain call, the actors, who seem actually to have become madmen now, stare back hatefully and begin their slow, ominous applause of the audience, which finally stifles all feeling in the house except anxiety. The audience files out, having had a "total theatrical experience." As Brook himself said of his London production, "Everything about this play is designed to crack the spectator on the jaw, then douse him with ice-cold water, then force him intelligently to assess what has happened to him, then give him a kick in the balls, and then bring him to his senses again."⁶¹

Far from propagating a view, as the playwright had claimed,

this play is utterly non-partisan in a political sense . . . no one wins! The aristocrat, the bourgeoisie [sic], the proletariat, the romantic idealist, the social worker, the hedonist, or the socialist theoretician, the existential theoretician, or the anarchist . . . all of them live out the failure that is the human condition. . . . The play is an assault upon all metaphysical posturing.⁶²

⁶¹Quoted in John Elsom, Post-War British Theatre Criticism (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), p. 149.

⁶²Oliver, "Santiago," p. 489.

If, by the end, we are wondering who is actually mad, including ourselves, that is good. But no one should wonder whether or not it is de Sade. Surely he is in fact too sane. He knows the futility, as he shows in production by an uncharacteristic gesture of "putting his arm around Marat when these doubts have brought him to the same point of defeat."⁶³ And he knows the inevitability of it all as well: not only of the revolution, but of its crushing aftermath, leading nowhere but entropy, inertia, irrationality, and death.

Hurlyburly

Upon a first encounter with Hurlyburly, one is so dazzled by the language in all its rich, superfluous inanity, that he may be forgiven if he forgets that the play may be about something. A second time through, however, demonstrates that he may have been better off the first time. All the characters speak in that "mysterious patois indigenous to Southern California and, of course, to their own mental state."⁶⁴ As Bonnie complains, after having been thrown from a moving car--her own--by Phil, "I am not so dumb as to be ignorant of the vast hordes of creeps running loose in California as if every creep with half his screws loose has slid here like the continent is

⁶³ Henry Hewes, "The Weiss/Brook," Saturday Review, 15 January 1966, p. 56.

⁶⁴ Edith Oliver, "Off Broadway: Voices Over," New Yorker, 2 July 1984, p. 82.

tilted."⁶⁵ Perhaps Phil is the only "creep" among this cast, but all certainly have screws loose, psychically as well as verbally. The language is a shimmering, fast-paced combination of the trite, the educated, and the obscene. In the first minute, we hear a combination of all three in one neat phrase at the end of a ramble. Phil's wife has said, intending to be insulting, that he and Eddie are alike.

PHIL: Whata you mean?

EDDIE: I mean, did she have a point of reference, some sort of reference from within your blowup out of which she made some goddamn association which was for her justification that she come veering off to dump all this unbelievable vituperative horse-shit over me.⁶⁶

It will also be seen that the style, especially Eddie's, is wordy and repetitive, but in a hypnotic sort of way. As John Simon describes it,

This language is curious indeed. It flows in great, clear or turbid torrents from almost all characters, even from those who in reality would yield only a trickle, and it varies relatively little from person to person. But even if it is only variations on a single voice, no matter. It compels. It compels through quasi-meanings that accumulate slowly and meticulously like silt, through syntax that doggedly piles clause upon clause, phrase upon phrase, as if afraid that total extinction lurks at the end of every sentence.⁶⁷

The characters themselves are not unaware of it. As Dar-

⁶⁵David Rabe, Hurlyburly (New York: Grove Press, 1985), p. 112.

⁶⁶Ibid., p. 6. Italics mine.

⁶⁷"Slow Thinker, Fast Talkers," New York, 17 December 1984, p. 71.

lene concludes, hopeless of getting a straight answer from her sometime lover, "I don't have time. I mean, your thoughts are a goddamn caravan trekking the desert, and then they finally arrive and they are these senseless, you know, beasts, you know, of burden." Bonnie, the balloon dancer, is more straightforward, but just as prolix. As Phil "sidles up" to her in the first moments after her arrival, she asks, "Is this particular guy just being ceremonial here with me, Eddie, or does he want to dick me?"⁶⁸

Interviewed by the New York Times, David Rabe claimed that none of us should be too smug about the California setting: "A lot of what's dark in the play doesn't come from California. . . . It comes from being in the world today, being barraged with information--philosophies that aren't philosophies, answers that aren't answers, one pharmaceutical solution after another."⁶⁹ I am not so sure that I want to agree that this is my world, but it is clear that it is Eddie's world, and it is slowly doing him in. As Bonnie tells him, "You know, if your manner of speech is in any way a reflection of what goes on in your head, Eddie, it's a wonder you can tie your shoes." And the tendency is catching. As the long second act is disintegrating, we hear this exchange:

⁶⁸ Rabe, Hurlyburly, pp. 46, 95.

⁶⁹ Quoted in Samuel G. Freedman, "Rabe and the War at Home," New York Times, 28 June 1984, sec. 3, p. 13.

MICKEY: You think it might be wise or unwise to pay attention to the implications of what we're saying here?

EDDIE: Who has time?

MICKEY: Right. Who has time?

EDDIE: It's hard enough to say what you're sayin',⁷⁰ let alone to consider the goddamn implications.

All this makes for a very entertaining, though somewhat overlong, evening.

In an "Afterword" on the play, Rabe has said, "in an effort to articulate . . . the overall pattern," that "Eddie, through the death of Phil, was saved from being Mickey."⁷¹ This is clearly an "afterword," however; for it is not borne out by the play itself. Or at least, if Eddie represents what it is to be "saved," the play makes us wonder whether or not it might be better to remain lost. He may have been "overwhelmed by a grief and tenderness that he is utterly unprepared for," he may be "finally faced with himself, the emotion breaking through the anesthetic,"⁷²--probably what Rabe had in mind--but the result onstage is only further anomie. He spends too many minutes in the last scene trying to decode Phil's suicide note by making an anagram out of it, and he ends alone (Mickey has lost his patience by this time) in a long, blistering monologue to Johnny Carson, who, not being in the room with him but on television, is not listening.

⁷⁰Rabe, Hurlyburly, pp. 124, 129.

⁷¹Rabe, Afterword to Hurlyburly, Grove Press ed., p. 175.

⁷²Oliver, "Voices," p. 83.

When Donna, the "CARE package" of the first act, reappears unexplainably, he can only confess to her, "I don't know what of everything going on pertains to me and what is of no account at all."⁷³ And the play stops, simply because it is late and Eddie and Donna are both too tired, even for sex.

Eddie is not just quietly disintegrating; in the second act, now having switched from cocaine to alcohol apparently under the directive of Darlene, he has also become mean. He systematically drives off all of his friends, one by one. "You're a practicing prick," says Mickey. "Even if you are as smart as you think you are, you have some misconception about what that entitles you to regarding your behavior to other human beings." As much as we might comprehend Eddie's problem, we have to agree. Artie says, "Your body has just gone into shock from all the shit you've taken in, so you're suffering some form of virulent terminal toxic nastiness. Nothing to worry about." Bonnie, as usual has, if not the last word, the most colorful: "you're hardly a viable social entity at the moment, that's what I think."⁷⁴ Mickey, on the other hand, is shown to be decent. He gives Darlene back to Eddie after one night--though Eddie, in his "para-fucking-noia" (Darlene's diagnosis) accuses him of "the

⁷³Rabe, Hurlyburly, pp. 30, 162.

⁷⁴Ibid., pp. 105, 104, 107, 123.

fact that you had a low opinion of her and what you really wanted was to fuck the bubble-brain Artie had brought us." It is Mickey who cares about how his roommate is taking Phil's death:

MICKEY: How you doin', Edward?
 EDDIE: I don't know. You?
 MICKEY: Okay. (Starting for the stairs)
 EDDIE: Oh, I'm okay. I mean, I'm okay. Is that what you're askin'?
 MICKEY: Yeah.
 EDDIE: Yeah, shit. I'm okay.
 MICKEY: Good.

Mickey will only stand for so much of the anagram game, however, and when Eddie finally yells, "Fuck you. Get out of here," he does.⁷⁵

The play has broken in half, with the advent of serious concerns.

It crash lands at midpoint. . . . Suddenly, those characters in any remote touch with their anguish start to emote about "desperation"--and as they do, the speeches buckle and the tears flow in the manner of a John Cassavetes male menopause film.

Still, as reviewer Frank Rich continues, there is enough here to repay the sturdy viewer:

In one of the evening's snappiest lines, [Bonnie] announces, "Doom and gloom have come to sit in my household like some permanent kind of [domestic] appliance." Be grateful that only the second half of "Hurlyburly" illustrates exactly what she means.⁷⁶

The answer, of course, to Rich's problem--and to Rabe's--is simply not to take any of it seriously.⁷⁷ The play

⁷⁵Ibid., pp. 139, 158, 146, 159.

⁷⁶Review of Hurlyburly, New York Times, 22 June 1984, sec. 3, p. 3. The play reference: p. 94.

⁷⁷Rabe goes to a great deal of trouble in the

hangs together better if we keep the tone fixed at the level of nonsense which began it. Mickey seems correct to ignore Eddie at the end. Much as Eddie tries to fathom "the procedures by which this cosmic shit comes down,"⁷⁸ the terms 'accident' and 'destiny' (in Phil's suicide note) represent mutually incompatible ideas. And if he had gone further into his dictionary, he would have found something about 'purpose,' and 'destination,' in the definitions of 'destiny.' Mickey's earlier definition of it may be "flip,"

MICKEY: The hand of destiny again emerging just enough from, you know, all the normal muck and shit, so that, you know, we get a glimpse of it.
 BONNIE: Whata you mean, Mickey? What's he mean?
 EDDIE: It's a blind date.⁷⁹

--but it is no worse than Eddie's (and Rabe's) confusion. 'Destiny' is a strong word; it should mean more than "the way things go," as the playwright would have it:

not only did the play have no "spokesman," but it progressed on the basis of its theme--that out of apparent accidents is hewn destiny. It consisted of scenes in which no character understood correctly the nature of the events in which he was involved . . . with each character certain about the point of the event in which he was involved, and no two characters possessing the

"Afterword," quoting from Jung's Mysterium Coniunctionis, to give some substance to all this talk about destiny and karma. What Jung says is true. What Rabe says in the play is there for us to see. But it is not convincing that the two elements form any recognizable bond in Hurlyburly. Director Mike Nichols must have agreed, though Robert Brustein has accused him of cutting the "purpose" out of the play. "Painless Dentistry," New Republic, 6 August 1984, p. 27. I would have cut more than Nichols did.

⁷⁸Rabe, Hurlyburly, p. 80. ⁷⁹Ibid., pp. 98-99.

same certainty, while beneath these abundant and conflicting personal conceptions was the event whose occurrence moved them on to what would follow, where they would each be confidently mistaken again.⁸⁰

Mickey himself, the character whose opinion Rabe tells us we are not to respect, has tried the author's viewpoint, and has been scorned:

EDDIE: "It happens"? On a friend's death, you absolutely ransack the archives of your whole thing and come up with "It happens." . . . You need some help, Mickey. Common sense needs some help.⁸¹

The alternative, and therefore to my mind the better way of approaching the play, is to accept its initial satiric tone of banter, and continue it, even when the players delude themselves that they are becoming serious. Eddie's darkness is, after all, found to have been "biodegradable" by the morning after. The friends--even the women who have been so variously and so inventively mistreated--do return. Bonnie appears to speak for all of them when she says, "I mean, my life in certain of its segments has just moved into some form of automation on which it runs as if my input is no longer required."⁸² It is the life they have chosen.

Rabe may be right when he says that no one character is "spokesman." But he could have added that no one is even making sense of it all. They are certainly not in any condition to do so, being "involved," as they

⁸⁰ Rabe, Afterword, p. 177.

⁸¹ Rabe, Hurlyburly, p. 154. ⁸² Ibid., pp. 106, 97.

are, "in a wide variety of pharmaceutical experiments." They have been overwhelmed by the "new" California motives of entropy, inertia, irrationality, and death, and have accepted them as their own. Eddie accused Mickey of being "just too laid back for human tolerance." But the play shows us that this is maybe the only possible defense in a world where the characters see themselves as "just background in one another's life. Cardboard cutouts bumping around in this vague, you know, hurlyburly, this spin-off of what was once prime-time life."⁸³

To end this chapter, we should perhaps let Rabe bring Aristotle back into the discussion:

See, I think that in the real theatrical tradition that split [between comedy and drama] doesn't exist as strongly as people think it does. It's an invention of Aristotle rather than of dramatists. I mean, certainly in a lot of Shakespeare's tragedies, there are very funny, lively moments.

I'm not a big fan of Aristotle. I think he really did everybody a lot of harm. He interposed himself between the creative act and the thing itself. People actually sit around and say, "Did Shakespeare write tragedies?" I mean, that's truly nuts. . . .

My impulse has been to try to put as much variety of emotion as possible into a play. You know, like a carnival or a roller-coaster ride. To me, the more one play can hold, the better.⁸⁴

One need not accept his judgment of Aristotle--who nowhere spoke against mixing some comedy with one's tragedy--to realize that the playwright is describing the process of

⁸³ Ibid., pp. 95, 105, 115.

⁸⁴ Quoted in Samuel G. Freedman and Michaela Williams, eds. "The Craft of the Playwright: A Conversation between Neil Simon and David Rabe," New York Times Magazine, 26 May 1985, pp. 37-38.

composing a medley: (satura), which is the basic formal principle of the dark genre, satire.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

This study of dramatic genres has led to some conclusions that may be considered a bit surprising to some. It is generally assumed, for example, that the religious, as a powerful force in drama, essentially died with the Greeks, or perhaps with the medieval mystery plays. That opinion I would counter with my own view, however, by saying that such a definition of the term "religious" is too narrow. Broadly understood as a "celebration of life" in all its infinite variety and excitement, the religious can be found in many different styles of drama, from the much-admired classics of the Renaissance period to the latest sensation of this year's Broadway season. And I would add that the religious spirit, considered in this way, can be found much more powerfully in the plays I have just discussed in the chapters on comedy and tragedy than it can in the pallid modern "chancel dramas" which set out deliberately to be religious in a particular denominational sense.

Celebration of life is involved in both comedy and tragedy, as has been demonstrated. To celebrate life truly does not involve simply a dramatic depiction of

all the entertaining things, all the "fun" things that life has to offer--especially to the exclusion of anything that might be regarded as painful. Such a view would contribute little toward the profound truths that the really stunning playwrights from Aeschylus to Molière, Shakespeare to O'Neill and beyond, have taught us to expect of great drama.

Comedy of course usually does present happy events, often leading to a marriage and the promise of the continuation of the kind of life we have just witnessed and enjoyed on the stage before us. But tragedy celebrates life just as optimistically--the downfall of the hero notwithstanding. For in tragedy we celebrate the indomitable spirit of man in all his glory: his striving, his excelling against crushing odds. The revelation of--but let Shakespeare say it, since as usual he says it best--

What a piece of work is a man! how noble in reason!
how infinite in faculties! in form and moving how
express and admirable! in action how like an angel!
in apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the
world, the paragon of animals!¹

The suffering and death shown in tragedy do not negate, but rather they serve to enhance Hamlet's view. Man's glory is nowhere so beautifully revealed as when he is seen to be fighting a noble enemy of equal or superior power, whether it be the dark gods, as with Prometheus or Job, or the dark side of his own nature, as with Othello

¹William Shakespeare, Hamlet, Ribner ed., 2. 2. 299-303.

or Albee's haunted couple in New Carthage.

It is often said that tragedy is essentially an optimistic genre, while comedy is pessimistic. Perhaps just as often, that statement is repeated, but with its terms reversed. I have tried to demonstrate in this thesis that that confusion probably arises as the result of a more profound confusion: that much of what we have been accustomed to labeling as comedy in the past may in fact be better regarded as satire. If my analysis of the genres is accepted, it must then be acknowledged that it is the satiric which is the basically pessimistic genre, while both comedy and tragedy can be seen sharing the opposite, the optimistic approach, for the reasons stated in the previous paragraph.

The satirist sets out not to celebrate, but to censure. Sometimes he writes in the censorious vein because he thinks that by doing so he is taking the first steps in pointing out the way toward reform. Sometimes he is censorious simply because he is in a bad mood, either temporarily or congenitally. But whatever his ulterior motives, his tone is often dark, and always critical. The life he depicts on the stage is caught in the forces that govern the natural universe, according to our colleagues in the sciences--entropy, inertia, irrationality, and death--and man's spirit is not allowed to rise above these forces, as it must do in comedy and tragedy. A character may briefly attempt to pull himself out of his discouraging

trap, by dazzling everyone with his brilliantly witty view of his surroundings (Bonnie in Hurlyburly), by affecting a cool philosophical skepticism in the face of the most outrageous events (the Marquis de Sade in Marat/Sade), even by attempting a rebellion against the crushing forces (Hedda Gabler). But the difference between these characters in satire and those of comedy and tragedy is that the pessimistic, satiric playwright shows his characters finally caught and defeated by the very forces they are trying to rise above. They can never find the strength (or the good luck) that we in the audience want to celebrate. The tone of these dramas is one of defeat, not victory.

This tone is especially predominant in the drama of the last hundred years. Also characteristic of the last hundred years is a decline in theatre audiences. I do not think the two are unrelated. Though the introduction of television and many other forces are also important factors in explaining the dwindling numbers of people who attend the "legitimate theatre" each year, I cannot help but wonder how much of the decline is also due to the twentieth-century fashion in drama of this dark, relentless, sociological probing--basically the satiric mode. How often can we bear to be shown how wrong we are, or how we deserve to be punished, or ridiculed, or how much life is like an inescapable trap--before we want to run away from such talk, or simply refuse to listen to it? The truth we can bear, if it is the whole truth. But it

has been demonstrated in the chapters above that satire is notoriously one-sided. The heights are not probed: only the depths.

Some praise this as "realism," and point to the same approach in some of the other arts. But realism is an odd word to use in demonstrating half truths. Is life really darker now, more difficult, more depressing, than at other times in history? I doubt it. Our problems are different from those of other ages, but I would seriously question whether they are worse than others. For all our pride in the explosion of knowledge in the twentieth century, we must still be considered extraordinarily parochial in our view of history, if we think ours is the only "age of anxiety," as W. H. Auden names it. And we act a bit like spoiled children if we consider our peculiar brand of "realism" to be the only bona fide way of seeing the universe. In spite of a Persian Empire many times their size threatening to overwhelm them, fifth-century Athenians found cause to celebrate life. Renaissance Florence flourished at a time when the Black Death, which had killed over half the population in the summer of 1348, could have returned at any moment. The England of Shakespeare and Elizabeth I faced the combined Catholic might of Europe, plotting to exterminate it. Still, these men found in life something to celebrate. It is time we remember more often how to do that ourselves.

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