

FROM RHETORIC TO DECONSTRUCTION

Lecture Twelve: Drama (1)

DRAMA AS THEATRE AND AS LITERATURE

The visual representation of literature? (Frye). The text of a play: acting script and acted script. Staging: the role of the director and matter for the actors. **Meaning** and **significance** in the staging. Audience expectations influencing what part of a complex meaning is accentuated. Dangers of the “directors’ theatre”: adjusting the play to (supposed) experience of spectators, reducing, instead of broadening, its appeal.

- Consider: the porter scene (II. iii) in *Macbeth* (acted 1606) as a stumbling block for directors; Marlowe’s *Edward II* (1592): Gaveston, the King’s favourite called back from exile, King estranged from wife Isabella, revolt of the barons, etc.—the homosexual implications heightened by director; *Hamlet* (acted 1602): soldiers wearing Russian and German uniforms, III. ii—when many of the characters are on the stage before the start of the play within the play (Polonius, Gertrude, Claudius, Ophelia, Hamlet, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern)—like a banquet in a twentieth-century setting: dining room, dinner-jackets, frock-coats, etc.); updating, topicality and “abridgement” of Wilde’s *An Ideal Husband* (1895) at the cost of dulling the action.

How far can directors go? Author and director: the question of primacy. Is the following argument convincing?

To examine a play for its literary qualities alone ignores its fundamental function as blueprint for production, a theatrical event in two planes (time and space), not one. Once the ‘doing’ of theatre is reinstated, then the notion of individual authorship is also challenged, given that the ‘doing’ also requires the collaboration of the performers, director(s), technical staff, and so on, all of whom contribute to the making of the theatrical event.

Historical reconstruction of what it may have been like: the New Globe in Southwark on the original site. *King Lear* in 2001.

THE ORIGINS OF DRAMA AND THE CONCEPT OF THE TRAGIC

Origins in Greece, 6th c. BC, in festivals of (fertility god) Dionysus at Athens. Chorus of the citizens, dressed like satyrs (“tragoedia”= goat-song) singing the myths of D.; at later stage other myths substituted for those of D.; then dialogue: actors enacting the myth, chorus commenting and interpreting. Ancient tragedian Thespis introducing, in 534 BC, an actor (himself) to relieve Chorus, and to narrate parts of the myth while the Chorus was quiet, or to ask questions to which the Chorus replied—duologue leading to dialogue.

Aeschylus never used more than two speaking actors at a time; Sophocles raised the number to three; Euripides adhered to it. The Chorus as the voice of common sense, comment, premonition.

The concept of tragedy in the 5th c. a vague one: terrible events, fate, but there may be final consolation (cf. Aeschylus’s *Oresteia*—*Agamemnon*, *Choephoroe*, *Eumenides*, Orestes acquitted in Athens by a court, the casting vote on his behalf by Athena, goddess of wisdom) or ironic conclusion, and always afterwards: the satyr play (shrugging away the sense of the terrible, but making its own mockery of gods and heroes).

First theoretical study of the genre by Aristotle, who discussed **tragedy** in *Poetics*:

Tragedy: noble action of noble characters. More precisely, it is

“an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear [terror] effecting the proper purgation of these emotions” (VI).

Elements of tragedy:

- external—spectacular presentment, lyrical song, diction
- internal—plot, character, thought

Plot (mythos):

- most important; character & thought subservient to it; reason: the most powerful attractions of tragedy were *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis* and they are parts of the plot. Simple plot: an action one and continuous, the change of fortune in the protagonist's life takes place without *reversal* of the situation and without *recognition*. Complex plot: the change is accompanied by reversal, or by recognition or by both. There should be unity of action = some central idea around which the events are arranged. Misinterpreted by Neoclassical critics (the three unities—of action, time & place).
- Reversal (peripeteia): from good to bad; the result not of vice, but of some great error (hamartia) or frailty in a character (hubris).
- Recognition (anagnorisis): the protagonist's discovery of his guilt, the change from ignorance to knowledge.
- Tragic or disastrous incident (pathos): destructive or painful action.

Character (ethos): must be highly renowned & prosperous.

Thought (dianoia): every effect to be produced by speech (proof and refutation; the excitation of the feelings such as pity, fear and anger; the suggestion of importance or its opposite).

Purgation (katharsis, catharsis): traditionally seen as “a discharge of bad emotions” (the “medical” view) or “a kind of cosmic awe in the face of suffering.”

What Aristotle meant sometimes controversial; consider

- *katharsis*: the traditional view places it in the audience and argues—on the basis of evidence to be found in other works of Aristotle [e. g. *Politics*]*—*that it is attributable to the other arts as well. But a case may be made for *katharsis* being in the play—“the protagonist is purged of his guilt in the eyes of the audience” after his recognition (Oedipus in *Oedipus the King* recognizing that he killed his own father and married his own mother through ignorance; showing signs of remorse by blinding himself). The New Critical obsession with the *affective fallacy*, cf. W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley, “The Affective Fallacy,” 1949.
- *hamartia*: traditionally there is a moral dimension to it and it is not merely a piece of bad luck. Evidence in Aristotle's *Ethics*, *Physics* and *Rhetoric* suggests that he saw moral purpose in accidents of good or bad fortune. (An attitude surviving to this day—cf. calling someone “accident-prone,” or blaming the victim for the crime committed against him, etc.). But if it is possible to locate *katharsis* in the protagonist, *hamartia* is no more than misfortune.
- *anagnorisis*: traditionally within the play, but if *katharsis* is also within the play, this may be outside it: the audience's discovery of the protagonist's innocence (!).

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Aristotle on comedy

Comedy: no full treatment of it by Aristotle in *Poetics* (this part possibly lost). It is “**an imitation of characters of a lower type—not, however, in the full sense of the word bad, the Ludicrous being merely a subdivision of the ugly. It consists in some defect or ugliness which is not painful or destructive**” (*Poetics*, V).

Subsequent theories of comedy concentrate on *the ludicrous* (contrast between the “normal” and the “eccentric”) and *laughter* (the superiority of the laughter to the person who is laughed at) as essential elements. Perhaps even according to Aristotle character would have primacy over plot (he did not assign the same mythic status to comedy as he did to tragedy, cf. W. K. Wimsatt, “The Criticism of Comedy” [1964]).