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I

ON TEARS AND LAUGHTER

DELMONTE. I play everything, classical and modern plays, tragedies and comedies.

ISABELLE. And you never get them muddled, mix them up at all?

DELMONTE. Never used to in the old days! Comedy was comedy and tragedy was tragedy! But with the plays we get served up nowadays, of course...

JEAN ANOUILH, *Dinner with the Family*

FORM OR FORMULA?

García Lorca is reported by his brother as saying, 'If in certain scenes the audience doesn't know what to do, whether to laugh or to cry, that will be a success for me.'[1] Such a statement by a playwright could not easily have been made in any century but our own. We know that several great plays from the past have called for an equally vacillating response from their audiences, yet not until now, confronted by a prolific line of modern plays which refuse to be pigeon-holed as comedies or tragedies, are we being forced to re-think some of the long-accepted categories which have traditionally helped us to evaluate the play.

Over recent years, comments from critics have grown increasingly ambivalent and paradoxical, and we now flounder in the near-meaningless terminology of the farcical tragedy and the pathetic comedy, the *drame comique* and the *pseudo-drame*, the 'charade' and the 'extravaganza'. The term 'tragicomedy' was equivocal enough in the past. On the other hand, the enigma is far from resolved when a contemporary writer, Ronald Peacock, states forthrightly, 'In the midst of more intricate details of aesthetic analysis it is well to state a simple truth. Drama must be one of two things: either comic or

[1] Francisco Lorca, introduction to *Three Tragedies of Federico García Lorca*, trans. Graham-Luján and O'Connell (New York, 1955), p. 13.

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intensely moving.'[1] It is partly to discuss how far such embarrassing words as 'comic' and 'moving' in themselves beg important questions that this book is written.

Drama, as a structure of shifting relationships between character and spectator, today ranges over largely uncharted fields of feeling; and it reveals itself in infinite variety. A traditional nomenclature is just no longer serviceable for the description or analysis of the relationships developed by Chekhov, Pirandello, Jean Anouilh, Brecht and Samuel Beckett. These are the playwrights who best exemplify a new direction in the twentieth-century theatre.

It is time to call a halt to the Polonius-like mobilization of genres and sub-genres. Our standard is still to be the intensity of the reflection and the incisiveness of the comment the play calls up. But we shall recognize that a play may legitimately refuse to be a failed tragedy or a failed comedy—because the response it wants may be of neither kind, and the forms and conventions it uses may bear no relation to either. Ambiguous plays like *Hamlet* and *Major Barbara* are unique ways of speaking, devised to satisfy the demands of their own subjects, not to conform to preconceived patterns of thought or feeling explored elsewhere.

As early as 1775, Goethe saw the distraction of caring for form when it was merely fashion: 'It is well nigh time that people ceased talking about the form of dramatic compositions, about their length and shortness, their unities, their beginning, middle, and end, and all the rest of it; and that we now begin to go straightway to their contents, which hitherto, it seems, have been left to take care of themselves.'[2] We are but a step away from Coleridge. His reiterated demand was for our awareness of the relevance of the part to the whole, for our appreciation of the total pattern as it takes shape from within the work itself. The creative impulse which fixes the unity of the piece may take no account of fashion.

Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* is an angry pamphlet play about a half-comic, hot-headed individualist, Dr Thomas Stockmann, who

[1] R. Peacock, *The Art of Drama* (London, 1957), p. 189.
[2] Goethe, quoted by B. H. Clark, *European Theories of the Drama* (Cincinnati, 1918), p. 339.

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sacrifices everything in his fight against 'the compact majority'. It narrowly misses tragedy, and Ibsen admitted that he was not sure whether the play was comedy or drama: 'It partakes of the nature of either, or lies half-way between.'[1] *An Enemy of the People*, as is well known, was written in haste as an urgent personal statement: this accounts for its polemics, and also for its uncertain form, which Ibsen did not preconceive. He was instinctively tilting against the formal frontiers of drama in his imaginative effort to find a public analogy for his private battle.

Or consider *The Silver Tassie*, O'Casey's play about the callousness of war, which he calls uncomfortably a 'tragicomedy'. It develops from farce to tragedy, adopting in turn the conventions of pseudo-realism and expressionism, in order to smite us with the grotesque ironies of the last act in which we see young Harry the ex-footballer soldier sitting helplessly in a wheel-chair. As O'Casey felt the need to regulate our response in the audience, so he called into play first one, then another, expedient. Only the vehement drive of the play's theme fuses its several parts. We must recognize a distinction between form and formula.

Eliot's *The Family Reunion* is a more deceptive example. It is too easy to see this play in the pattern of tragedy: it invites our sympathy with a central figure, Harry, Lord Monchensey, who cannot understand his agony of mind; this 'hero' in human suffering traces a course through and beyond a universal human predicament; it incorporates elements of the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus, deriving its energy from the Greek concept of the curse, merged with a Freudian concept of heredity; Harry's impulse towards 'atonement' may even be taken as an equivalent to that intangible, the cathartic effect of classical tragedy. Audiences might be forgiven for faintly hoping to apply standards acquired from Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* or Shakespeare's *King Lear*.

Second thoughts confirm that these elements of the 'tragic' are quite lost in another pattern which makes a stronger impression. This pattern is marked by differing manners of speech, by indicative

[1] Ibsen, letter to Jonas Lie, 1882, quoted by J. Lavrin, *Ibsen: an Approach* (London, 1950), p. 85.

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action on the stage, by contrasting levels of characterization. These present an argument on two levels: the world of Harry and Agatha, his favourite aunt, is set against the lower level of the family chorus. The chorus persists vividly throughout the play even when not speaking as a formal group. It does not have the traditional function of explaining, anticipating, exciting, but, in a new way, it ironically accentuates the spiritual problems of Harry. The family is the negative to Harry's positive. Here is one view of an older generation who live and move in a narrow orbit of the past, who

> tighten the knot of confusion
> Into perfect misunderstanding,

who are 'ridiculous in some nightmare pantomime', who do not 'understand'.

In organizing this second pattern, Eliot has done more than write the 'tragedy' of Harry, Lord Monchensey: he has, perhaps inadvertently, written the melancholy comedy of those whose 'ordinary day isn't much more than breathing'. Amy, his mother, and the aunts and uncles together take our attention as much as Harry does, and Eliot has written neither tragedy nor comedy. The tensions between the two constituents present us with a *tertium aliquid*, and the author rightly calls *The Family Reunion* 'a play', simply. Central to the play, as to *The Cocktail Party*, is the conception of the monstrous discrepancies between human minds.

More recently, the attack on Anouilh's play of St Joan, *The Lark*, is rooted in the wish to see the play as tragedy when it was conspicuously intended to be nothing of the kind, any more than was Shaw's *Saint Joan*. It is not considered that the 'scaling-down' process of Anouilh's treatment is important for our fresh response to a well-worn theme, and to help us to recognize man as a creature doing evil and doing good, created by God, as Anouilh says in the person of Joan, 'in that contradiction to make his difficult way'. Joan is presented to us in modest, human terms, not as the idealized saint of legend, nor as a Shavian and rationalized symbol; to say this, of course, does not mean that she is not also a fit subject for tragedy or for comedy in other hands. Is this humanizing treatment of Anouilh's

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really an attempt to introduce 'a form of realism which belongs to bourgeois comedy and drama, and which is completely out of place in this context and has no relevance to the theme'?[1] Within a patently simple theatrical convention, with the trial presented detachedly as a play-within-a-play, thus having a far from naturalistic impact, we are shown a Joan who is not a religious mystic, but a child in pigtails who *might have been* beaten by her father, as a girl who *might have been* easy in the company of earthy soldiers on their own level, who *might have been* mocked by other women and seduced by men like Baudricourt. Not a mystic, not a tragic, but a naïve, Joan is offered to us by mixing her with a selfish and pompous sensualist, a good-humoured brute, a fanatical psychopath, and other types of the 'experienced' beside whom Joan's simplicity glows. The transfiguration of Joan at the final curtain is not the ascension of Joan to heaven, but the coronation of the Dauphin; it is not there to send us off happily, not a misplaced attempt at a tragic irony, but an irony to impress upon us the presence of the mystery, the phenomenon of Joan, like 'the phenomenon', as Anouilh remarks in a programme note, 'of a daisy or of the sky or of a bird', of a lark uncaged.

The argument against *The Lark* is reinforced by formal preconceptions about tragedy which are commonly held:

> Who ever heard of jesters or clowns at the foot of the Cross at the moment when the world rent itself in an eternal wound? Clowning and tumbling can certainly be moving homages to God, but they cannot take place at the foot of Calvary. The death of a saint, a hero or a myth-maker is part of the revelatory process of the very essence of life through death, and in order to be effective it can only take place in a setting of austere grandeur, which may include irony but not snivelling or tearful jocularity. A tragedy must have a style, a form or ritual which cannot include barracks life.[2]

But clowning and tumbling *can* take place at the foot of Calvary, and in as sober a Mystery Cycle as that from York there is evidence enough that the pinners took very much to heart the idea of the

[1] J. Chiari, *The Contemporary French Theatre: the Flight from Naturalism* (London, 1958), p. 189.
[2] *Ibid.* pp. 194–5.

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mockery of Jesus by the soldiers who crucified him, as the Gospel suggested. It appears first as a direct sarcasm:

> I KNIGHT. And since he claimeth kingdom with crown,
> Even as a king here have it shall he.[1]

During the action of a very protracted crucifixion, the men quarrel among themselves with a fair sprinkling of comedy:

> I KNIGHT. Why chat ye so? Fasten on a cord,
> And tug him to, by top and tail.
> 3 KNIGHT. Thou commands lightly as a lord;
> Come help to haul, with an ill hail.
> I KNIGHT. Now certes that shall I do,
> Full surely as a snail.[2]

After a natural modicum of advertisement to the crowd of their skill and trade, the business of casting lots for the garments while Christ is in his agony is abruptly concluded by the leader in this way:

> 3 KNIGHT. I rede we draw cuts for this coat;
> Lo, see how soon all sides to save.
> 4 KNIGHT. The short cut wins, that well ye wot,
> Whether it falls to knight or knave.
> I KNIGHT. Fellows, ye need not take offence;
> This mantle is my gain.[3]

The real interest of this drama lies in what these apparent contradictions contribute to the theatrical experience. Anouilh is ostensibly refusing us the austere grandeur of tragedy; the author of the York play seems to be testing us by including barracks life. By oblique means these plays yield their meaning, and, unless we choose to read their attempts as ignorant structural errors and to ignore their effect on an audience, they bring sharply into question the so-called 'rules' that must be followed by the dramatist.

Before we consider the inadequacy of traditional theories of tragedy and comedy to identify and explain the characteristic tone of modern drama in general, we should remind ourselves quickly of

[1] *The York Cycle of Mystery Plays*, version by J. S. Purvis (London, 1957), p. 284.
[2] *Ibid.* p. 285.
[3] *Ibid.* p. 289.

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those great, intuitive playwrights of earlier years who have upset the theories. Notably, these are Euripides, the anonymous authors of the English Mystery plays, Marlowe and, pre-eminently, Shakespeare and Molière.

EURIPIDES, MEDIEVAL MYSTERY PLAYS, MARLOWE

It is no part of the argument to suggest that dark comedy is a new vogue, only that it has had its fullest expression in the last sixty years. It would be surprising should we fail to find a mixture of moods, comic and pathetic, and of responses, critical and sympathetic, at times earlier than the twentieth century, especially since the mixture can so well reflect the multicoloured world of society or the soul. We do in fact find the dark note making itself heard subversively at particular moments in earlier ages of the drama. How far an unstable public or private temper, an uncertain climate of opinion or an uneasiness in the spirit of the writer from disturbing personal experiences, was responsible for the troubled drama we are describing, is for others to decide. Athens' declining years, England at the turn of the sixteenth century, Molière's France under Louis XIV, Russia at the turn of the nineteenth century, and Western Europe as a whole after the two world wars seem to have in common that mood of unrest that permits a Judas drama.

Towards the end of Euripides' long life, Athens, previously confident and secure as the commercial centre of the Greek world, was a creature spent and frustrated by the exhausting Peloponnesian wars. After the fatal Sicilian expedition of 415 B.C. she was torn by factions at home. At the same time, scepticism of the old beliefs was undermining the Athenian sense of moral security; and rationalism, pervasive as scepticism is in educated society today, encouraged the fruition of an iconoclastic theatre, notably in Euripides and Aristophanes. With his comic eye, Aristophanes chose the way of burlesque, mercilessly satirizing the man whom one would have thought closest to his own mind.

As far as we know, Euripides, the restless Socratic questioner, chose to write largely within the given tragic form he inherited from

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Aeschylus and Sophocles, and it proved the more powerful weapon for that. Within the limits of tragedy he tried to depict the truth about the people of the old legends as he saw it. He makes a gesture, for example, towards showing two sides of Jason, towards explaining Clytaemnestra's sin, towards querying the popular religion that could find the matricide Orestes at once right and wrong. In Aristophanes' *The Frogs*, Euripides is made to explain that he taught men to talk with freedom, 'to fall in love, think evil, question all things'. And he adds,

> I put things on the stage that came from daily life and business,
> Where men could catch me if I tripped; could listen without dizziness
> To things they knew, and judge my art.

A little later we hear,

> I mingled reasoning with my art,
> And shrewdness, till I fired their heart
> To brood, to think things through and through;
> And rule their houses better, too.[1]

In some of his plays Euripides is at moments within an ace of creating something of dark comedy by his modernity, and its presence may account for the arguments that have surrounded him in the past.[2] Thus although his first extant play, the *Alcestis*, was probably a type of satyr-play, as Gilbert Murray argued,[3] we can recognize its contradictory nature. In it the story is told of the loyal wife Alcestis, who agrees to die in lieu of Admetus, not the best of husbands. Meanwhile Heracles, receiving hospitality in the palace of Admetus, has apparently got himself roaring drunk at the very time when Alcestis' funeral procession is moving off. So much so that the butler makes a complaint about him; but also, in order to shame him, the butler has told Heracles all about Alcestis. This information not only sobers the reveller, but inspires

[1] Aristophanes, *The Frogs*, trans. G. Murray (London, 1908), pp. 72–3.
[2] These positions are reviewed by A. R. Thompson, *The Dry Mock* (Berkeley, 1948), ch. 8.
[3] See the Introduction to *The Alcestis of Euripides*, trans. G. Murray (London, 1915).

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him to go and rescue her forthwith, and thus the play ends as a 'comedy'.

The *Helen*, of *c*. 412 B.C., is a high comedy, satirical to the point of undermining the glory of the Trojan War itself, hallowed repository of the greatest among the Greek legends. The *Ion*, of about the same time, tells of the princess Creusa who was seduced by the god Apollo and bore him the child Ion. This child is exposed to die, only to be saved by Hermes. The play ends with a conventional recognition scene between mother and son, but in the meantime Apollo the seducer has been smoothly debunked.

The wit in this author was working against the greater single-mindedness of his famous predecessors, but also towards a greater resourcefulness in drama. As Murray suggested so long ago, 'Greek drama has always suffered from a school of critics who approach a play with a greater equipment of aesthetic theory than of dramatic perception.'[1]

Even more difficult to disentangle are the contradictory springs of feeling present in the popular drama of medieval times in England. We saw how the soldiers who are set to crucify Christ in the York 'Pinners' and Painters' Play' performed their task well 'in character' as broad, insensitive sadists. The guilds' actors obviously also saw their function as one of amusing their audience with horseplay, in spite of the grim seriousness of the moment. This element of near-blasphemy is common to all the medieval Mysteries. Herod, the slayer of the Innocents, is the prize clown of the show; the devils and Satan himself contribute to the fun at the very moment when the sinners are thrown into the jaws of Hell, and especially when Hell is being harrowed. Years later, in Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, 'shaggy-haired devils' were still to be seen 'roaring over the stage with squibs in their mouths'.

The reader may not need reminding of the joy evident at other, less pressing, times. The introduction of a wife for Noah in the Chester *Flood* is one of those happy opportunities for the male actor in his skirts to caricature some wifely aberrations, and in so doing unavoidably present God's chosen one as a poor pathetic creature easily

[1] *The Alcestis of Euripides*, trans. G. Murray, p. vi.

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led by the nose. Having teased Noah for as long as the farce will stretch, the wife is finally carried into the Ark by force:

> NOYE. Welckome, wiffe, in to this botte.
> NOYES WIFFE. Have thou that for thy note!
> NOYE. Ha, ha! Marye, this is hotte!

Mrs Noah's blow as she passes him, however, is abruptly forgotten as the Ark begins to float, and we hear from her no more.

Of most unusual interest, Joseph in the York Mysteries supplies a very earthy comment on the Immaculate Conception, for Joseph is the unsophisticated peasant of medieval England. He makes his entry primarily to establish for the spectator that Jesus will shortly be born, but he speaks like the old cuckold who cannot trust his young wife:

> For shame what shall I say,
> That thusgates now in my old days
> Has wedded a young wench to my wife,
> And may not well stride over two straws?[1]

So Mary for a brief instant is delightfully seen as a 'wench', with all the connotations of the word.

The story of Mak and Gyll in the notorious Second Shepherds' Play from Wakefield undoubtedly parodies the birth of Jesus in the manger. The play is jolly with the coarseness of the clowning of Mak, the *extra* shepherd who turns out to be a sheep-thief, and with the raucous groaning of Gyll who hides the stolen sheep in the cradle by her assumed childbed. After Mak's crime has been discovered and he has been suitably tossed in a blanket, it is not surprising if we are today startled to hear a ready Angel break into a 'Gloria in Excelsis'. But the play must go on. This example is in no way explicable as illuminating by contrast the holy event. Nor would one think that any 'restlessness' in the audience of this time could in this case account for such strange phenomena in the drama. These instances, however, do strongly suggest that it is natural and human for an unfettered popular audience to be willing to undergo surprising contrasts of feeling and to joke about what is deeply revered.

[1] 'The Pewterers' and Founders' Play' in *The York Cycle of Mystery Plays*, trans. J. S. Purvis (London, 1957), p. 86.

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