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Andrew K. Kennedy

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## Six dramatists in search of a language

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# Six dramatists in search of a language

Studies in dramatic language

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## For my Mother and Judy

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ΟΡΕΣΤΗΣ

φεῦ φεῦ. τί λέξω; ποῖ λόγων ἀμηχανῶν  
ἔλθω; κρατεῖν γὰρ οὐκέτι γλώσσης σθένω.

ORESTES:

God, what can I say – when words fail?

I can no longer curb my tongue.

Sophocles: *Electra*, 1174–5

For by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words  
thou shalt be condemned.

Matthew, 12.37

It is not words that shake me thus. – Pish! – Noses, ears,  
and lips: – is't possible? – Confess!

Othello, IV, i, 41–2

Ravenous, the word tried its great lips  
On the earth's bulge, like a giant lamprey –  
There it started to suck.

But its effort weakened.

It could digest nothing but people.

Its era was over.

...

Ted Hughes: *Crow* (*A Disaster*)

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My wife's typing converted into sense a manuscript she alone could decipher.

A.K.K.

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## PREFACE

This study of the problems of language in modern English drama combines two critical approaches:

(1) dramatic theory – chiefly an inquiry into ideas relevant to dramatic language;

(2) practical criticism – testing the texture of the dialogue in the work of six dramatists on a linguistically informed but ultimately evaluative basis. The aim of this study is to avoid the schematisation to which the first approach is prone, when not constantly guided by renewed experience of particular works; and, conversely, to avoid the simplifications that so often go with the attempt to discuss nothing but the ‘words on the page’, particularly a dialogue sequence out of context.

Although any concentration on language in drama may seem a highly specialised interest, the present study is written out of a concern for drama as a whole. This is probably implicit in the tenor of the argument itself. More explicitly, certain methods of discussion follow from such a concern. First, in the more theoretical sections, I wished to focus on language as one of several interacting elements in drama, under pressure from changing formal and human needs; I was only indirectly concerned with the linguistic, philosophical or cultural points at issue. Secondly, in the specific dialogue criticism I have tried to remain aware of and, whenever possible, give an account of the structure as well as the texture of dialogue. I have offered critical

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readings only after attempting to experience each play as a whole – often in performance. Thirdly, after much reflection, I have preferred a dramatist-centred chapter division to a design based on stylistic categories, so as to preserve a greater sense of organic unity: the value of seeing the way one dramatist wrestles with the language in each play, and in the interrelated parts of his total work.

I had hoped, when first thinking about methods used in this study, to bring together approaches from three areas of inquiry: aesthetics, dramatic criticism and stylistics. But this has proved to be too ambitious. Although I have tried to fuse my awareness of these three areas, I have finally centred my discussion on drama, strictly rationing the discussion of general aesthetic questions ('representation' and 'expression' for example) on the one hand, and the use of the more rigorous methods of linguistic description on the other. Whenever one is forced to choose between methods, one discovers for oneself a hierarchy of levels: the dramatic function of language was the primary level, controlling the study of style, which in turn controlled the more detailed study of linguistic structures.

In general, I could only find use for stylistic methods that helped in understanding the specific dramatic effects of language, and which examined 'the expressive and suggestive devices which have been invented to enhance the power and impact of speech'.<sup>1</sup> For example, I found that Anselm Atkins' line-by-line study of Lucky's speech instantly illuminated an aspect of Beckett's dramatic language; while the description of tape-recorded samples of everyday conversation made by two linguists, Crystal and Davy – and which I was eager to test in my study of Pinter – turned out to be too space-consuming and microscopic for my purposes.<sup>2</sup> There are some linguistic methods which just do not seem to be promising – for example the statistical analysis of the peak usage of three-letter as against four-letter words at the beginning of each line of a play, a method that has been

<sup>1</sup> Quoted from Valéry by Stephen Ullmann, 'Style and Personality', *Review of English Literature* (April 1965), pp. 21–31. The whole essay leads to this conclusion. See also Graham Hough, *Style and Stylistics* (London, 1969), pp. 53–8; and R. Wellek and A. Warren, *Theory of Literature* (1949), repr. Harmondsworth, 1963, pp. 174ff.

<sup>2</sup> See below: p. 140 and p. 168, n. 8 respectively.

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commended for the study of dramatic speech.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps in the course of the next half century or so a synthesis between rigorously descriptive and value-bearing methods will be achieved, or carried to a point that seems out of reach now.<sup>4</sup>

In the selection of drama for detailed study I have been guided by a number of considerations. In the first place, I have limited myself to English-language drama (with Beckett as an exceptional bilingual and cross-cultural writer whose plays, when not written in English in the first place, have been translated by Beckett himself with first-hand authenticity and freshness). It seems clear that in criticism so dependent on texts, the use of either translated or multilingual dialogue is unsatisfactory. In Eliot's words: 'in so nice a problem it is much safer to stick to one's own language' (*Selected Essays*, p. 37). The exclusion of Irish and American drama was more arbitrary: it was one way of avoiding 'infinity of inquiry'. The central emphasis on English drama is, then, a matter of economy and stylistic commonsense; it does not imply a belief in the special value of studying a 'national' area in modern drama where the cross-fertilisations, from several literatures, must be kept constantly in mind. My historical and critical bearings are, wherever relevant, taken from European drama as a whole.

The six dramatists studied in detail were chosen with two chief criteria in mind: intrinsic interest and special relevance to this study. The general interest is given in the introductory section of each chapter, while the subsequent section headings define specific approaches to the writer's dramatic language. (Chapter 6 has no such subdivision.)

The concentration on six dramatists inevitably meant excluding interesting and relevant work by many other dramatists. For example: Christopher Fry's verbal abundance; Ann Jellicoe's orchestration of a primitive, syllabic language in *The Sport of my Mad Mother*; Wesker's dramatisation of a social 'language gap' in *Roots* and other plays; the shift from naturalism to various kinds of post-Brechtian theatricality in Whiting's *The Devils*, Bolt's *A Man for all Seasons*, and Shaffer's *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*. Recent English drama, which – in the work of Stoppard,

<sup>3</sup> C. B. Williams, *Style and Vocabulary, Numerical Studies* (1970), pp. 147ff.

<sup>4</sup> I return to some of the critical tasks and problems in my Conclusion, pp. 237–48.

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Bond, Storey and others – has begun to stretch our awareness in drama, could only be included in the general discussion. No criticism can aim at being comprehensive. I could only hope to reflect, within the limits of one selection, a concern for all drama.

A.K.K.