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The Theory and Analysis of Drama

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-42383-0 - The Theory and Analysis of Drama
Manfred Pfister
Frontmatter
More information

F P

Wenn man nur endlich aufhören wollte,
vom Drama im allgemeinen zu sprechen.

(If only people would at last refrain
from speaking of drama in general terms.)

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Preface

In one sense, the quotation from Hugo von Hofmannsthal's *Unterhaltung über den 'Tasso' von Goethe*[1] that I have chosen as a motto for the beginning of this book can be interpreted as a critical attack on it. For cannot the objection raised by the 'poet' in the *Unterhaltung*, that any attempts to talk about drama in general terms are bound to fail miserably in the face of specific plays by dramatists such as Goethe or Shakespeare, also be levelled against this book, whose title states quite categorically that it is supposed to be a general theory of drama? In its defence, though, it is fair to say that Hofmannsthal was directing his ire not at those who like to discuss drama in more general terms but at those who make unashamedly sweeping statements as to what drama should be. In this sense, then, I do not feel that this objection can apply to the present study because, although my intention has been to establish a systematic general theory, I have tried to avoid falling into the trap of making normative and prescriptive value judgements. Furthermore, my interest has not been in drawing up a comprehensive definition of drama as a whole but in putting together a detailed and sophisticated description of its structures and textualisation processes.

The underlying aim of this introductory study is therefore not, in the first instance, to be scientifically or theoretically innovative but rather to integrate what is already known into some sort of comprehensive system and to make it more accessible to readers by inserting bibliographical references at the appropriate places. At the same time, though, I hope that the considerable influence exerted by communication theory and structuralist ideas on this system will also stimulate the specialist into renewed reflection on a systematic poetics of drama. Nonetheless, my plan to write this book with a particular readership in mind and to provide an introduction to practical analysis meant that I was obliged to abandon the idea of substantiating my own efforts methodologically or theoretically and of situating them within the context of the unabating methodological debate. In the context of this book I consider it to be far more important to develop the most coherent, systematic and workable sort of metalanguage possible for analysing and describing dramatic texts rather than indulging in the construction of various metatheories.

Since this book is intended to be a more general introduction, I also felt I

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had to exclude a systematic analysis of the specific problems associated
with tragedy, comedy and tragi-comedy, and also the historical approach
to drama together with its various genres and subgenres, in favour of a
study of the universal structures and textualisation processes in the drama-
tic mode. An introduction to the analysis of drama cannot also be a history
of drama, but it can prepare the ground for such a history if its descriptive
models are accessible to the literary historian in such a way that he or she is
then able to grasp and describe the diachronic relations that link the
various structures and functions in a dramatic text. Of course, this does
not mean that I have not tried to integrate specific historical texts or
structural transformations into this analysis, but when I did so I was
hoping to demonstrate their exemplary quality as structural models rather
than just provide a number of unconnected historical analyses of indi-
vidual plays. The wide typological and historical variety of the dramatic
texts that form the basis of the present study was intended both to
demonstrate the universal applicability of the theoretical models I have
employed and also to illustrate the breadth of variation in the ways the
individual structures and textualisation processes are realised. However,
this variability is predominantly described from a typological and sys-
tematic rather than from a historical and diachronic perspective.

One further limitation is the fact that it has been possible to do no more
than outline the problems associated with the communicative functions of
drama in society as a whole – these begin with the questions as to the
anthropological origins of drama and its connections with ritual,[2] but they
are also a dominant feature of the contemporary discussion of the role and
place of theatre in society – either in its systematic context or its historical
development (see below, 2.4.). This is because I felt I should concentrate
on the structures that exist *within* a dramatic text. And even here I was
obliged to exclude a number of aspects that are not specific to dramatic
texts, such as the analysis of stylistic texture, metrical and rhythmic form
and the deep structure of the 'story' presented. Instead, I decided to
concentrate on the structures of stage-design associated with particular
plays (chapter 2), the multimedial transmission of information (chapter 3),
the presentation of figure and story (chapters 5 and 6), monological and
dialogical communication (chapter 4) and the structures of time and space
(chapter 7). However, within the framework of our introductory study,
much of this has had to remain sketchy and, because of the state of current
research, rather tentative.

The primary texts that I selected as specific illustrations of the various
structural types were chosen from the corpus of all existing dramatic texts,
but the criteria affecting their selection did not always seem entirely
consistent. I was concerned, on the one hand, to assemble a supranational
sample with the broadest possible historical and typological base – stretch-

ing from the tragedies of ancient Greece to the experiments of the contemporary avant-garde – and in doing so I tried to restrict myself to the most representative works. On the other hand, my freedom of choice was hampered by the extent of my by no means encyclopaedic familiarity with world dramatic literature. If I have repeatedly had to have recourse to the works of Shakespeare, then this does not merely reflect my own interests but is also determined by the hope that these are the plays most likely to be familiar to a wide circle of readers.

The detailed and analytical table of contents – a close-knit framework for dividing up the various sections according to their positions in the structural hierarchy – and the index of names are intended to assist the reader and to make it easier for him or her to look things up later on. This is also the reason for the numerous cross-references integrated into the text which, together with the analytical table of contents, rendered a subject-index unnecessary.

After all these preliminaries, I should now like to express my thanks to those who not only made it possible for me to work on this book but also positively encouraged me to do so. My most profound gratitude must go to my much-respected teacher, Professor Wolfgang Clemen, in whose seminars on Shakespeare I first learnt how dramas should be read. I should also like to thank the students who participated in my own seminars on drama and with whom I tested, discussed and developed many of the ideas that ended up in this book. Their constructive criticism enabled me to correct those aspects of it that were too vague, ambiguous, or one-sided. To name them all is impossible, but those concerned will no doubt recognise the passages I am referring to.

Last, but by no means least, Professor Ernest Schanzer, a close friend and highly esteemed philologist who dedicated the last ounces of his working energy to criticising and improving this book, and who can no longer receive my thanks. It is therefore to his memory that I should like to dedicate this book.

Translator's note

Unless otherwise indicated, the translations of passages from works by non-anglophone authors are my own. Source-editions for English translations other than my own are given in section II of the bibliography.

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A note on the English edition

This book was first published in Germany more than a decade ago. At that time, in 1977, it was a pioneering work in its attempt to bridge the gap between drama and theatre studies and to devise a model for a coordinated analysis of the various levels of verbal and non-verbal communication in a dramatic text performed on stage. It soon became a standard work on the subject in university courses all over Germany, where its impact has been felt in almost all relevant studies published since then. Its continued success in German-speaking countries – the English translation coincides with the fifth edition of the German original – and the positive response from many colleagues and students encouraged me to prepare this version for a wider readership abroad.

This new readership has prompted several changes. Many passages which draw upon rather remote samples of German drama have had to be discarded or, more often than not, to be replaced by more accessible English examples, and many references to less important or by now out-dated German academic studies have had to be omitted. On the other hand, the new upsurge in theatre semiotics both in- and outside Germany over the last decade has changed the critical climate so decisively that some of my original points have had to be reconsidered or at least rephrased. The most important contributions to this exciting and stimulating, even if at times technically cluttered, discipline have been included in the updated bibliography and integrated into the footnotes; a full-scale semiotic revision of my book, on the other hand, would have made it too unwieldy for the average reader looking for practical analysis rather than self-conscious theorising. I am still happy for it only to be generally sympathetic towards a semiotic approach, rather than going the whole technical way.

Finally, the translation of this book did not just involve translating from German into English, but meant the reworking of a Continental structuralist discourse into the terminologically less standardised idiom of English criticism. This is an extremely difficult and unrewarding task, and I am deeply grateful to my friend and translator Dr John Halliday for having undertaken it. He has grappled bravely with my knotty prose and has gone a long way towards de-teutonising it. Next to him, my gratitude is due to Iris Hunter, who has copy-edited the book with painstaking precision and admirable perseverance.

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