

Chapter 1

Woman's theatrical space

The momentous move from the outdoor theatre of classical times to the indoor auditorium in the Renaissance and after has been echoed by the evolution of the theatrical space. The scene has shifted from the open air, the front of the palace, the street, the piazza, into the state-room, the parlor, the kitchen, the bedroom, narrowing down the scope and infringing on the privacy of intimate relations. Some contemporary playwrights have gone further, deconstructing the familiar naturalistic room to form a non-mimetic interior or abstracting space altogether. This book is an interpretation of both the perceptual and conceptual configurations of the theatrical space as defined by the play and executed on stage in performance.

Seen from a feminist point of view, the articulation of the theatrical space is an expression of woman's position in society. Her relative confinement in traditional societies to the seclusion of her home puts the onus of the action on the man, thus making him into an active agent of time, and her into an element of space. The Odysseus story is archetypal: while Penelope waits at home, freezing time by unraveling each day's work, Odysseus wends his way home, moving from one adventure to the next. The central thesis of this book is that the changing spatial conventions of the theatre are faithful expressions of the growing awareness of the specificity of gender differences and the changing attitudes to woman and her sexuality.

My discussion is limited to those plays and theatrical traditions in which the question of woman is paramount. I shall be tracing one particular line of development from classical to Renaissance theatre, and from there to naturalistic and modern drama. The medieval theatre represents an exemplary 'alternative' tradition, meriting a separate, extensive treatment of its multifarious forms and genres. The absence of the theatre building in the Middle Ages highlights the problematic relationship between the space of the theatre and everyday space. There has been some excellent research into this specialized topic both in English and French, most notably perhaps by Elie Konigson.¹ For these reasons, there will be here no separate treatment of the medieval theatre.

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Replacing traditional analyses in terms of plot and character, the investigation of the theatrical space leads directly to an understanding of the particular philosophical framework and *Weltanschauung* expressed by the play. In order to analyze plays from this uncommon angle (rather than track the causality of the chain of events or psychologize the characters), it is necessary to make a few basic distinctions and develop an appropriate terminology.

The first distinction is that between *theatre space* and *the theatrical space*. Theatre space is an architectural concept. The given theatre space is the shell or the hulk within which each performance creates its own theatrical space. The performance may take advantage of an existing space such as a hillside or a public square; or make use of a converted building such as a church or a hangar; or take place in a specialized architectural space such as an open-air theatre or a closed auditorium. All these are fixed spaces, the dimensions and parts of which have been predetermined by the chosen site of the production or by an architect.

Unlike the theatre space, the theatrical space is created anew by every production. Every performance defines its own boundaries in relation to its own space-time structure. It is only within these circumscribed limits that its inner logic can function. These boundaries are set up by each production within a given theatre space. The theatrical space is an autonomous space which does not have to submit to natural laws. Liberated from the universal co-ordinates, the theatrical space stands apart from the everyday space that surrounds it and in which the spectators and even the architectural space of the theatre itself belong. The theatrical space is an organized space, qualitatively different from everyday space, much in the same way that the sacred space, as shown by Ernst Cassirer and Mircea Eliade, is qualitatively different and cut off from profane space.²

The autonomous nature of the circumscribed theatrical space is especially apparent when the magical or supernatural achieve a certain reality and naturalness within its boundaries. The medieval stage employed theatrical illusion to represent biblical miracles. Unfettered by natural time, space and causality, the plays were free to roam between Paradise, earth and Hell, the Creation of the world and the Last Judgement.

The self-conscious and even self-proclamatory shrinking of space in Shakespeare's *Henry V* is well known: the chorus asks the audience to use its imagination to traverse the Channel from England to France and to visualize the clash of two mighty armies within the 'wooden O'. In Michel de Ghelderode's *La Mort du Docteur Faust* (1925), there is a partition across the stage: on the left-hand side of the stage is a twentieth-century street, from which characters enter the right-hand side of the stage, to find themselves in Doctor Faust's sixteenth-century study.³ In fact, it is the miraculous aspect of theatre, its freedom from physical restraints, that has traditionally been one of the sources of its special attraction. It is only in the

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naturalistic theatre that the theatrical space tries to fool the audience into believing that it is essentially analogous to everyday space.

The theatrical space is a composite creation of the play, *mise-en-scène*, acting, choreography, scenery, lighting, etc., as well as the given theatre space. Together, these elements form the theatrical space in which the action of the play unfolds. The play-text has a unique, privileged position in pre-determining the spatial parameters of all productions. But it must already have taken into account the other components: the theatre in which the play is to be performed for the first time or the general features of contemporary theatre buildings, their potential and their limitations, existing theatre conventions and how these may be stretched or circumvented, the available technology and acting style. In a sense, then, the play-text itself is already to a certain extent a collaborative effort reflecting the theatrical means at the disposal of the playwright. The production will fill out and enrich the spatial conception of the play, but only the performance, each particular performance, will actualize the theatrical space of the piece.

The theatrical space of a performance is organized, heightened and symbolic; it is structured rather than arbitrary, calculated to be expressive and meaningful. The economy of the work of art dictates that every element be subordinated, in some degree, to the total effect or design, and this is true even of the most random-looking naturalistic play. It is this symbolic aspect of the constructed space that creates the qualitative difference between it and the contiguous everyday space.

A further distinction, central to my whole argument, is the distinction between *the theatrical space within* and *the theatrical space without*. The theatrical space within is the space on stage within our field of vision, the space in which the actors perform in front of our eyes. Along with the visible theatrical space, the play may also define spaces which, although crucial to the plot, are to remain unseen in the actual production. These are off-stage spaces, from which the characters are supposed to enter or to which they exit. Even though such spaces are not shown on stage, events of great moment may take place in them. Any such space implied by the play but not constituting part of the spectacle, i.e. not realized on stage, I shall call a theatrical space without.

Although in stage directions a character goes 'in' when he exits the stage and comes 'out' when he enters it, it suits better the nature of my argument to call the on-stage 'within' and the off-stage 'without'. This antithetical pair of terms is useful in suggesting that the theatrical space, whether seen or unseen, forms a continuum which is quite distinct from the theatre space. The within and the without are ontologically on a par, the reality of the one depending on the reality of the other. These terms are indifferent to the specific values assigned by different plays to the on-stage and off-stage spaces. Although co-extensive with the theatrical space within and without, the on-stage and off-stage spaces carry different

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connotations. They refer primarily to the stage – which is not a universal feature of all theatres – and to the actual space within which the performance takes place. By contrast, the theatrical spaces within and without refer to the universe created initially by the play and realized in performance.

Theatrical spaces without may be either close at hand, as for example an adjacent room behind a door, or far-off, as an overseas country to which a character may travel. In the Greek theatre, messengers were used in order to inform the audience of events that took place in the theatrical spaces without. These messengers or attendants, as they are indifferently called in the translations, are in fact of two different types. The one was the *angelos*, the other the *exangelos*, or the messenger who told news from a distance as opposed to the messenger who brought out what was happening in the house or behind the scenes.⁴ These nameless messengers are no more than dramatic functions that stress the distinction between the two types of background theatrical spaces without. A further distinction, conventionalized in the Roman theatre, was that between the two side-entrances, the one leading to the relatively close centre of town, the other to the far-off countryside or to the harbour from which the traveller arrives. These differently distanced spaces, organized relatively to each other, create a conceptual perspective that focuses the spectator's attention on the theatrical space within.

The theatrical space without is not defined in merely negative terms, as that space which is not visible on stage. Nor is it identical with the audience's everyday space. The space without is perceived as an extension and an extrapolation of the visible space. A character who leaves the stage is presumed to be going to some other theatrical space, not to the actor's dressing-room. A climactic event, such as a murder, may take place in this unseen place, and the agonized cries of the murdered man may reach the audience, thus providing an aural, if not a visual, perception of the theatrical space without.

The theatrical space without is carefully delimited by the play itself. The unseen space can be described in the dialogue or related in some other way to the visible theatrical space, e.g. through a connecting door. But the definition of the theatrical space without may also rely on the audience's general knowledge to supplement the sketchy information: the disruption of the studies of Hamlet and Horatio at Wittenberg and the return of Laertes to the University of Paris unleash cultural and theological associations pertinent to the central themes of the play.

The relation between the theatrical space within and the theatrical space without is close to, though not identical with, the similar distinction between *perceived space* and *conceived space*.⁵ This set of terms is useful where a less structuralist and more phenomenological approach to the plays is required. For the audience, the theatrical space within is a perceived space, directly apprehended by the senses, mainly by sight, on stage. The theatrical space without, although no less credible,

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is mainly a conceived space, not seen on stage but imagined to extend beyond the limits of the perceived space. The reality of the conceived space is assured by some sort of continuity of action with the perceived space, such as entrances and exits, and references to events outside or to the travelling of characters between the two spaces. But the two distinctions are not totally overlapping: a theatrical space without, though not seen, may also be perceived, as when sounds issuing from that space give it immediate reality or even define it further by moving across it.

Roughly analogous categories are suggested by Michael Issacharoff, who distinguishes between architectural, scenographic and dramatic spaces, and then between what is shown and what is not shown to the public, i.e. the scenic and the extra-scenic, or the visible and the invisible spaces.⁶ His architectural and scenographic spaces parallel what I prefer to call theatre space and theatrical space, whereas the dramatic space is similar to what I see as the parameters of the theatrical space predetermined by the play. In general, Issacharoff seems to me to compartmentalize the spaces created by the building, by the scenography and by the play, while the terminology I use emphasizes the interpenetration and mutual influence of the disparate elements that combine to create the particular composite space of the performance.

Issacharoff's semiotic approach leads him to differentiate further between mimetic and diegetic spaces. The first is transmitted without mediation, the second is mediated by the dialogue.⁷ On the face of it, this distinction is parallel to my own between the theatrical space within and the theatrical space without. The theatrical space within is directly perceived on stage, whereas the theatrical space without is, in the typical case, verbally referred to in the dialogue. But Issacharoff's distinction involves him in the problem of what he himself sees as an intermediary case: that of a character on stage speaking of the perceptible, referring to the setting, the furniture or the props. It would seem that here the on-stage space is at once both mimetic and diegetic. These terms are thus unhelpful in making the central distinction between the visible and the non-visible theatrical spaces, between the space realized on stage and that imagined as extending off-stage.

The antithesis between mimetic and diegetic is the theatrical equivalent of the narratological dichotomy between telling and showing.⁸ But the perception of what is being shown on stage, in the theatrical space within, is sensuous and direct also when bolstered with words. Even in the absence of a visible setting, when the characters point at or refer to non-existent objects on stage, the theatrical effect is to conjure up those elements or the positions they are supposed to occupy, so that their relative placing creates a continuous, perceived space. The phenomenological approach that views the theatrical experience as a totality which is created through the interplay of word, gesture, choreography, scenery, lighting, etc., seems to

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provide a more cogent terminology for the analysis of the various manifestations of space in the theatre than the semiotic approach that separates between the messages conveyed by the different 'languages'.

The division of the theatrical space into a within and a without, a visible space and a non-visible space, in itself constitutes an inherent elementary structure and a basic tension that demand to be interpreted by the playwright. The opposition between the seen and unseen spaces is most readily interpreted in terms of the everyday opposition between outdoors and indoors. In the open-air theatre of classical times, the *skene* at the back of the stage was often seen as representing the front of a house. The shut-off theatrical space nearby was understood to be the inside of the house. The action took place in the outlying, visible area in front of the *skene*, which took up its meaning as a specific outdoors in contradistinction to the indoors behind the *skene* wall.

Following the advent of the indoor theatre, the polarity of within/without as outdoors/indoors is reversed. In drawing-room drama, the theatrical space within, in which the action unfolds, represents an interior, while the nearby theatrical space without, behind the scenery, is the outdoors from which the characters enter the house.

I shall be focusing on those forms of theatre in which the spatial relations of within and without are conventionally paired, directly or conversely, with the outdoors and the indoors. The most demonstrative examples will be drawn from classical theatre on the one hand and nineteenth-century realistic theatre on the other hand, where the unity of place guarantees the fixity of these relations, often directing our attention to their problematic nature. My other examples will include both plays that accept one of these scenic conventions as well as plays which move from one locale to another. Although some of the latter plays are not so singularly devoted to the question of the home, they too explore, in varying degrees, its significance in theatrical terms, scenically and thematically, in the characterization as in the plot.

The structural division of space into the interior and the exterior of the house carries with it social and cultural implications. Gender roles are spatially defined in relation to the inside and the outside of the house. Traditionally, it is the woman who makes the house into a home, her home, while the world of commerce, war, travel, the world outside, is a man's world. As Simone de Beauvoir noted, 'man is but mildly interested in his immediate surroundings because he can find self-expression in projects'; whereas for woman, the house is the centre of the world, 'reality is concentrated inside the house, while outer space seems to collapse'.⁹ From the spatial point of view, the world of man and the world of woman meet on the threshold. Thus, the very shape a play gives its theatrical space is indicative of

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its views on the nature of the relationship between the sexes and on the position of woman in society.

'Women', wrote Virginia Woolf, 'have sat indoors all these millions of years, so that by this time the very walls are permeated by their creative force.'¹⁰ The near-identification of the woman with her house is so old that it is part of our linguistic heritage in the Indo-European languages, built into the very words we use. In *Le Vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes*, Émile Benveniste pointed out that the Greek word for legitimate wife, *dámar*, is derived from two roots, **dam-* (Latin *domus*), house, and **-ar*, to order or arrange, hence 'she who administers the house'. The woman is the dame in charge of the *domus*, the mistress of the house.¹¹

As to the house itself, Benveniste distinguishes between two different aspects of *domus*: house as family residence and house as building. It seems that the original force of the word was exclusively social and that the material sense was grafted on as a consequence of contamination between two homophonic roots.¹² In English, these two senses are easily distinguishable as home and house.

Benveniste derives a whole phenomenology of doors, of opening and closing one's door to someone or showing someone the door, that defines the physical and emotional limits of the house. The door becomes the symbol of either separation or communication (depending on whether it is closed or opened) between the circumscribed and secure space of the house and the hostile and alien world outside. This symbolism assumes mythical and religious dimensions, as evidenced by Eliade's description of the primordial fear of the outside as a 'chaotic space, peopled with demons and phantoms'. De Beauvoir sees the home in similar terms, as a 'refuge, retreat, grotto, womb' that 'gives shelter from outside danger'.¹³

The opposition between outdoors and indoors is often invested in the theatre with these atavistic values, interpreted dramatically as the fragile security of the home separated only by a door from the menacing outside. Seeing the within and the without in terms of the outdoors and the indoors immediately transforms the theatrical space into a gender-charged environment, naturally fitted for acting out the drama of man and woman. The question of the theatrical space thus becomes the question of woman.

Traditionally, the house has been associated with woman's social place, but it can also be seen to stand for her body and her sexuality. Thus, for example, it was a commonplace in the Renaissance that 'the best way for a woman to keep a good name was for her never to leave her house'. The virtue of chastity was assured by the woman being closed off, immured in her house, while the open door and the open mouth were taken to signify sexual incontinence.¹⁴ In the theatre, the contrast between interior and exterior space, between house and outside, is eroticized, and the seemingly innocent plot aimed at gaining access into the house takes on almost explicit sexual overtones of penetration. The doors and windows of the house, as

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ways of entrance and of communication, assume in this context a heightened significance as bodily orifices.

From the male point of view, the action is directed at entering female space. Conversely, from the woman's point of view, and especially in modern times, the problem is how to escape the restrictive space of her house. Woman's emancipation finds its theatrical expression in an actual, physical act of leaving the house. The representation of the theatrical space within as the outdoors, the male space, lends itself naturally to a plot the goal of which is man's conquest of the house. Reversing the scene so that it represents the female indoors tends to change the drift of the action in the opposite direction, to woman's struggle to sever her bonds and abandon the house.

The articulation of the theatrical space within as the outside or the inside of a house is widespread but by no means universal, and not all plays deal with the problematics of house and home. But, in the many instances in which the question of woman is addressed directly or indirectly, the ideological positions of the society and of the playwright shape the contours of the theatrical space. Thus, the abstract conception of woman's place in society finds concrete expression in the spatial relations materialized on stage, whether realistically represented by scenery or merely indicated by word and gesture.

The interaction of house and gender yields a variety of relations between woman, man and house. In broad strokes, woman is seen in relation to her house as its mistress, prisoner or escapee. Man meets woman on the threshold, or when he succeeds in entering her house (elopement sometimes follows), or, in more recent drama, when he makes the house his own, usurping woman's space. The house itself begins as a household, chiefly a productive economic unit; it progresses into the bourgeois home as a family dwelling; it breaks apart with the final obliteration of the house as a unique female space. The original household is gradually pared down, losing one by one its various functions. Many of its wider economic aspects are taken out, to become middle-class male occupations. Now what remains as the core of the bourgeois home is the relationship between husband and wife; hence the central place of sexuality. But this sexuality is repressed and hidden behind a façade of gentility. In contemporary times, sexuality is open but it becomes dissociated from home and family, thus emptying the house of its last residual content.

In the following chapters I show how the analysis of the theatrical space directly reveals the changing conceptions of woman's position in the family and in society. I start in chapter 2 on Greek tragedy with the basic opposition between the indoors and the outdoors and woman's place by the hearth, as mistress of the house, and demonstrate how the plot of the *Agamemnon*, the first domestic tragedy, derives from the articulation of the theatrical space itself. Chapter 3 considers the comic

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effect, in Aristophanes, of women's attempt to reverse gender roles, usurping men's outdoor space. Doors played a crucial role in Greek tragedy and comedy, but by the time of Roman comedy they became a facile convention. Chapter 4 examines the games played by Plautus' male protagonists with the stage doors in their attempts to circumvent the obstacles presented by the scenic and social conventions of woman's place indoors.

On the Renaissance stage, the door as the unique type of aperture to the house is supplemented by the window. Chapter 5 looks at the theatrical fortunes of the archetypal figure of the woman in the window as both seductress and prisoner. Chapter 6 deals with Molière's representation of the height of patriarchalism and its demise in man's futile attempt to keep the woman a prisoner in her house and achieve total control over her.

In Ibsen's drawing-room dramas, analyzed in chapter 7, the move indoors, into woman's own territory, turns out to be disappointing: the expected intimacy is replaced by a growing alienation of the woman from her house, leading her in one case to abandon her home, in another to sexual frustration and despair. Chekhov's leading female characters refuse to accept their roles as homemakers, preferring their own independence and self-fulfilment, even at the cost of the dissolution of home and family. Chapter 8 investigates the shifting prism of theatrical spaces in Chekhov's plays, in itself an expression of the disintegration of the home.

From the wreckage of the home, Pinter salvages the basic notion of the room as a place of refuge, in which the woman still tends the stove, providing food and warmth. Chapter 9 investigates Pinter's theatrical spaces, non-mimetic yet hyper-realistic rooms. Chapter 10 deals with the experimental theatre of Beckett and Handke. Beckett's theatrical spaces are seen as abstract, symbolic and metaphysical. On this level of abstraction, the question of gender and its direct spatial expression are of no interest. Rejecting mimesis, Handke constructs in his theatre a solipsistic world. With him the theatrical space has reached a critical stage which is paralleled by the contemporary feminist crisis, the unresolved tension between woman, man and home. Some contemporary women playwrights return to more mimetic spaces in order to uncover the kernel of the problem: the place of the child. The Coda glances briefly at this present-day shift from the woman's space to the child's space.

Chapter 2

Indoors and outdoors

The introduction of the *skene* building at the back of the acting area was of paramount importance to the development of the Greek theatre. The self-enclosed circle of theatre separated the performance from the audience, in the same way that the sacred space of ritual was set apart from its surroundings. The *orchestra* with its central altar commemorated these primitive origins of the theatre. But the frontality or linearity of the *skene* introduced a differentiation within the theatrical space itself. Not only did its façade form a backdrop to the action on stage and provide the actors with a convenient entrance door, but it also served as a visual barrier, separating the space in front from the space behind.¹

The articulation of the theatrical space in the *Agamemnon* seems to have been created in response to this novel development in theatre design. Already Flickinger showed the influence of the changing physical conditions of the theatre of Dionysus, discovered in Dörpfeld's excavations, on the localization of dramatic action. In the earlier plays of Aeschylus, in the absence of a backdrop, 'the scene is laid in the open countryside with not a house in sight and with no scenic accessories except an altar, tomb, or rock'.²

Many classical scholars, from Wilamowitz to Oliver Taplin, believe that 'the *skene* was an innovation of the last ten years or less of Aeschylus' life'.³ The scholarly controversy over the introduction of the *skene* building, which involves the dating of Aeschylus' plays, highlights its unique and incontrovertible role in the *Oresteia* as a whole, and especially in the *Agamemnon*. If indeed the *skene* had just made its appearance in the theatre, then Aeschylus' use of it in the *Agamemnon* is truly revolutionary, attesting to an almost instantaneous recognition of the theatrical potential of the new architectural element. By attributing a particular meaning to what was in reality the outside wall of the dressing room, Aeschylus drew it in 'as part of the world of the play itself'.⁴

The dramatic genius of Aeschylus is revealed in the assigning of a simple, almost natural, meaning to the neutral façade of the stage building at the back of the stage, making it into the front of Agamemnon's palace. The use of the *skene* as a house-front was to harden into a convention carried over from the Greek theatre to Rome,